

“They don’t know what it’s like to be at the bottom”: Exploring the role of perceived cultural distance in less-educated citizens’ discontent with politicians

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Abstract

Why is discontent with politicians highest among less-educated citizens? Supplementing explanations concerning a lack of resources and knowledge, we examine the cultural distance to many a politician perceived by this group. Inspired by qualitative studies mapping the worldviews of people from the lower social strata, we explore less-educated citizens’ perceptions of politicians using in-depth (group) interviews carried out in various regions of the Netherlands ($n = 26$). Our analysis indicates that this group regards politicians as culturally distant “others” and that this perception goes hand in hand with specific negative evaluations of politicians. This improves our understanding of the much-reported political discontent of these citizens. In moving beyond the often mentioned unspecific divide between the “people” and the “elite”, our analysis reveals that our interviewees: (i) consider politicians to be insensitive to the lived experiences of the “common” people, and therefore, question their legitimacy and the policies they propose; (ii) resent their communication styles, which they describe as “beating about the bush” and perceive to be emblematic of indecisiveness and a lack of integrity; and (iii) accuse them

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of superiority signaling, inspiring feelings of misrecognition and opposition. We conclude with detailing the implications of our findings for (future) research.

KEYWORDS

focus group interviews, perceived cultural distance, political discontent, political trust, populism, recognition, status

1 | INTRODUCTION

Political discontent has been increasingly studied in the last decade. Studies have for instance addressed dissatisfaction with politics (Jennings et al., 2016; Kemmers et al., 2015), populist attitudes and voting for populist parties (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019), and political distrust (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; van der Meer, 2010). Recently, the *British Journal of Sociology* has dedicated a special issue to scrutinizing the “radically unexpected” (Dodd et al., 2017, p. S3) events of the “leave” result in the Brexit referendum (Bhambra, 2017; Mckenzie, 2017) and the electoral victory of Donald Trump in 2016 (Bhambra, 2017; Bobo, 2017; Lamont et al., 2017; McCall & Orloff, 2017; McQuarrie, 2017), both of which laid bare the deep-seated discontent with politics among substantial sections of the population. These events highlight the urgency of achieving a sociological understanding of political discontent among “groups who [feel] marginalized, undermined and unrepresented by formal political forces” (Dodd et al., 2017, p. S6).

Any analysis hoping to develop this understanding must take note of the findings of studies which suggest that less-educated citizens in particular report high levels of political discontent—a pattern that is characteristic of almost all Western countries (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019; Noordzij et al., 2019; van der Meer, 2010). Attempts to understand this often invoke less-educated citizens' limited economic resources (Verba et al., 1995) and lack of political expertise and interest (Emler & Frazer, 1999), which are seen as disadvantages when it comes to participating in the political domain and grasping its complexities. However, quantitative studies on the educational gradient in political discontent show that much of it remains when indicators of economic strength and political sophistication are also accounted for (see e.g., Alabrese et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2016; Noordzij et al., 2019; van der Meer, 2010). This suggests that another approach is required.

Against this background, it is noteworthy that research on various substantive domains provides indications that the lifestyles, attitudes or worldviews of the higher social strata are perceived by the lower social strata to be unlike their own and those of the people they identify with. Examples of this can be seen in studies of: political resentment in rural voters in the United States (Cramer, 2016); the perceived social distance to judges among less-educated citizens in the Netherlands (Hulst, 2017); and the drawing of social boundaries by the lower social strata in Norway (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019), France (Lamont, 2000), and the United States (Lamont, 2000; Williams, 2017). The perceived remoteness of those in high-status positions in the eye of the lower social strata that these studies hint at has been shown to foster feelings of alienation, exclusion, and inferiority, as well as discontent and resentment (cf. Cramer, 2016; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 2000; Mckenzie, 2017; Williams, 2017). This feeds what Lamont (2018, 2019) has called the “recognition gap” and resonates with the literature on feelings of status anxiety and misrecognition among individuals who feel socially subordinated (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019), such as less-educated citizens (van Noord et al., 2019; Sandel, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2015, 2018; Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015).

While the studies above hint at the role of perceived cultural distance to those in high-status positions in general among the lower social strata, a next step is to develop more in-depth understanding of the nature and consequences of this perceived cultural distance. We do so, in particular, by focusing on (1) uncovering less-educated

citizens' perceptions of cultural distance to *politicians*, and (2) *how* this plays a role in their political discontent. This requires us to be sensitive to the multifaceted nature of the discontent with politicians reported by less-educated citizens themselves and the various ways in which their perceived cultural distance to politicians is related to it. As such, we can identify what is likely to underlie the negative associations reported in quantitative studies between measures for social or cultural status and political discontent (see e.g., Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019; Noordzij et al., 2019).

Our focus in this paper is on the Netherlands for two reasons. First, it is characterized by an exceptionally wide education gap in political discontent (Noordzij et al., 2019), making it a strategic case for unearthing the political discontents of less-educated citizens. Second, we aim to see "reality through their eyes" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 5), which is an approach used in earlier research on specific manifestations of political discontent, such as support for the Tea Party, resentment in rural areas of the United States, or "leave" votes in the Brexit referendum (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; McKenzie, 2017; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). These studies have highlighted how this is aided by interviewing people in groups comprising their family members or friends, talking to them in familiar places, and creating a safe and comfortable setting for them to express their opinions. Achieving such a setting, and fully grasping less-educated citizens' perspectives on politics, calls for research in a context the researchers have in-depth knowledge of, which applies to all authors.

Our method is described in more detail below. Thereafter, abductive-analysis principles are used to present our findings, meaning that our reflections take account of relevant insights from previous studies in the literature (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

2 | METHOD AND DATA

We conducted in-depth interviews from April to September 2019 with politically discontented Dutch citizens whose completed education did not go beyond the secondary level. Previous research shows that the education gap in political discontent in the Netherlands is primarily located between this group and another comprised of those who have completed their tertiary education (van der Waal et al., 2017). We were careful not to emphasize level of education when recruiting our participants, as studies show that doing so has a negative effect on the willingness to participate and influences the political behavior disclosed (see e.g., Hulst, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2018).

Potential interviewees were approached using a flyer outlining information on the interview procedure and the compensation given for their involvement. A few participants were recruited with the help of personal networks or those of colleagues. Others were mainly found via social media, and were contacted through, for instance, anti-institutional Facebook groups like *Gele Hesjes NL* [Yellow Vests NL]. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 18 respondents were interviewed (Charmaz, 2006), but this was confirmed with three more group interviews comprising eight people, resulting in a total of 26 respondents.

Our selection process sought to achieve a balance in relation to gender, age, and region (see Table 1 for an overview of the interviews and the respondents' background characteristics).¹ Like qualitative studies on the worldviews of those in the lower social strata and political discontent (e.g., Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012), we aimed to conduct the interviews in settings chosen by the participants (e.g., their favorite pub or their living room) that reflected their everyday social interactions. They were, therefore, asked to invite friends or family members to come with them, although two participants wanted to be interviewed alone. Our approach was successful in creating a safe and familiar interview context: all the interviewees said they enjoyed the interview and felt free to speak their mind. Many were particularly appreciative of being able to be interviewed with someone they knew personally. Overall, we were able to ensure a setting that gave the interviewees "mutual support in expressing feelings which are common to their group but which they might consider deviant from mainstream culture" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 111; see also Cramer, 2016; Morgan, 1996).

After a respondent had given their written informed consent, we began the interview with us asking them to write down their initial thoughts about politicians (cf. Carey, 1995). We then used these to start a conversation about their broader views on politicians and why they (dis)like them (cf. Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). The notion of perceived cultural distance served as a crucial sensitizing concept (Bowen, 2006), emerging in all the interviews without probing and with its elements often also being among the participants' initial associations. The second part of the interviews used a photo-elicitation technique (Harper, 2002) to show the interviewees pictures of Dutch politicians (official portraits of parliamentarians and cabinet members retrieved from the websites of the Dutch parliament and government). Our interviewees were first asked to talk about these images. They were then invited to discuss images or videos they had been asked to bring with them of a Dutch politician they like and another they dislike. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked whether they had enjoyed the interview and were compensated for their involvement.

The first author conducted the interviews and was assisted by a second researcher during most focus groups with four or more interviewees, who took notes of the interactions between them and the nonverbal communication (cf. Bertrand et al., 1992; Pugh, 2013). Each interview lasted for between 90 and 150 min and was transcribed verbatim, producing over 1,000 pages of text.

The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to code and compare our transcripts iteratively, while being sensitive to theoretical insights (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We first used open coding and assigned many codes to each fragment of transcript (Boeije, 2010). The open codes were connected and categorized (Boeije, 2010), considering concepts in the literature as well as our sensitizing concept (cf. Deterding & Waters, 2018; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In addition, we applied interpretative codes to reflect the interactions between the interviewees and the various responses and information elicited by different types of question. As a consequence, we not only paid attention to "what people say [but also to] how they say it" (Pugh, 2013, p. 54; cf. Sølvsberg & Jarness, 2019).

3 | PERCEIVED CULTURAL DISTANCE AND THE DISCONTENT WITH POLITICIANS IT INSPIRES

The belief that politicians are culturally remote from "common" people like them was a dominant perception underlying the discontent toward politicians of our interviewees: "they" (politicians) are considered to be far removed from "us", the "common" people with whom the vast majority of our interviewees identify. Politicians were repeatedly framed in terms of remote "others" who live in worlds and cliques, or at "levels", unknown to "common" people: "they" are "up there" (Monique) in "their skybox" (Esther), and are high up "on the social ladder" (Gerrit). Sylvia, who did not recognize many of the politicians in the pictures shown to her, said this was illustrative of "how far removed they [politicians] are from citizens".

While our interviewees repeatedly contrasted politicians ("them") with the "common" people ("us") and this divide was clear-cut to them, they did not clearly label those who they perceive to constitute the "common" people. This reflects Canovan's (2004, p. 247) observations on references to "the people" by both politicians and citizens, highlighting that the term is "open" and "variable". Both when asked directly or in passing, our interviewees referred to the "common people as "people around me" (Anouk), not only those who are "just normal" (Linda), "easy-going" (Gerrit), or "workers" (Harm), but also those who are "low" (Cornelis), "low to the ground" (Chantal), or the "lower part" (Ingrid). Their perception of collective identity became clearly articulated, however, in relation to their perceptions of politicians perceived to be distant to them, which suggests that our interviewees' reference to the "common" people refers to "those excluded from [the] elite" (Canovan, 2004, p. 248).

This widely shared sentiment on the remoteness of politicians clearly resembles the well-known populist rhetoric that distinguishes "the pure people" from "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), or the "parasitic elites" from "the common folk" (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 190). Nonetheless, our interviews enabled us to move beyond

TABLE 1 Overview of the interviews and the background characteristics of the participants ($n = 26$)^a

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Region ^b	Current occupation
<i>Interview 1 (location: living room; approx. 2 hr)</i>				
Chantal	Female	24	Centre: rural	Still in education
Thomas	Male	24	Centre: rural	Crane operator
Dennis	Male	31	Centre: rural	Truck driver
Maria	Female	53	Centre: rural	Unemployed
Johannes	Male	56	Centre: rural	Farmer
<i>Interview 2 (location: living room; approx. 1.5 hr)</i>				
Sanne	Female	31	Periphery: rural	Unemployed
Linda	Female	39	Periphery: rural	Horse pension employee
Esther	Female	41	Periphery: rural	Typist
Anna	Female	55	Periphery: rural	Unemployed
<i>Interview 3 (location: living room; approx. 2.5 hr)</i>				
Hendrik	Male	53	Centre: rural	Electrician
Monique	Female	53	Centre: rural	Unemployed
Elisabeth	Female	62	Centre: rural	Unemployed
<i>Interview 4 (location: university, at the request of the participant; approx. 2 hr)</i>				
Jan	Male	59	Centre: urban	Safety controller
<i>Interview 5 (location: restaurant; approx. 1.5 hr)</i>				
Peter	Male	60	Centre: urban	Debt collector; civil servant
<i>Interview 6 (location: pub; approx. 2 hr)</i>				
Jeffrey	Male	34	Periphery: urban	Sheltered employment worker
Cornelis	Male	53	Periphery: urban	Warehouse worker
Arie	Male	60	Periphery: urban	Service engineer
Robert	Male	60	Periphery: urban	Unemployed
<i>Interview 7 (location: living room; approx. 1.5 hr)</i>				
Gerrit	Male	54	Periphery: urban	Mailman
Catharina	Female	55	Periphery: urban	Elderly caregiver
<i>Interview 8 (location: living room; approx. 1.5 hr)</i>				
Pauline	Female	56	Periphery: urban	Unemployed
Ingrid	Female	60	Periphery: urban	Unemployed
<i>Interview 9 (location: restaurant; approx. 1.5 hr)</i>				

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Region ^b	Current occupation
Anouk	Female	29	Centre: urban	Reintegration employee
Harm	Male	57	Centre: urban	Mill machinist
Jolanda	Female	57	Centre: urban	Taxi driver
Sylvia	Female	62	Centre: urban	Unemployed

^aWe asked the interviewees to invite acquaintances or family members to their interview. One of these additional participants in group three and group six had followed education beyond the secondary level (which means that we interviewed a total of 28 people). These two participants are not included in Table 1, and their contributions to the group discussions are not included in the analysis.

^bCenter refers to the economically and culturally dominant region in the west of the Netherlands (so-called “Randstad”), including, for example, the seat of the government (The Hague) and the culturally hegemonic city of Amsterdam. Just like peripheral regions, the center contains both urban and rural municipalities, and the center-periphery distinction should, therefore, not be understood as a conventional urban-rural divide. It is relevant here because living in peripheral regions could inspire feelings of misrecognition.

this general divide between the “people” and the “elite”, and highlighted what this divide represents to those involved. In particular, three salient aspects were elicited from the interviewees in relation to the perceived distance between “common” people like them and politicians, who were considered to: (i) be insensitive to the lived experiences of the “common” people; (ii) have a different communication style; and (iii) signal superiority. This enhanced our understanding of our respondents’ discontent with politicians, as these three aspects were related to them: (i) questioning the legitimacy of both politicians as their representatives and the policies they propose; (ii) arguing that politicians are indecisive and lack integrity; and (iii) feeling unrecognized by politicians, arousing their opposition to them. These findings are discussed in more detail below.

3.1 | Politicians are considered to be insensitive to the lived experiences of the “common” people, which is linked to their legitimacy and policies being questioned

The first aspect of the cultural distance to politicians perceived by our interviewees was a deep-seated conviction that politicians are insensitive to the lived experiences of the “common” people. Because their own lives are on a different plane, politicians were said to be blind to the “real-lives” of the “common” people. Comments included: they “only look at their own world and everything there is in order and runs smoothly” (Anna); they “don’t know what it’s like to be at the bottom” (Monique); they belong to the “higher segment of society” (Robert); they are “invisible to the ‘common’ people” (Elisabeth); and they “don’t know ‘common’ people” (Cornelis). Many of the interviewees said that this insensitivity was deliberate: “either you’re blind to reality and don’t want to see it, or you sweep it under the carpet” (Jan). Those who shared this view discussed whether such politicians: “do have an idea” (Pauline) and “really [know] what’s going on” (Jolanda), “but they just don’t give a shit about it” (Pauline) and “just consciously [cast] it aside” (Jolanda). In other words, “they don’t give a damn” (Robert) about the people.

Our interviewees’ discussions of the perceived insensitivity of politicians to their lived experiences revealed their view that this is due to the latter’s very different lived experiences: they “don’t have a clue about how it works in the world” (Thomas), and they have little interest in bridging this gap— “[it is] only very occasionally, in the summer vacation”, that “they come to see what it’s like at places where [ordinary people] work” (Arie). Our respondents also often suggested that the different lived experiences of politicians are due to their higher completed levels of education. Illustrating this, Elisabeth discussed how the affiliates of a political party she dislikes

are all “fairly [well] educated and say so, but they are so far removed from the average Dutch person [...] who they don't talk to”. Accounts like these suggest that the descriptive overrepresentation of highly educated politicians, pinpointed by Bovens and Wille (2017) as “diploma democracy”, is noticed by less-educated citizens and feeds their belief that many politicians live lives that are far removed from their own. The fact that many politicians are highly educated makes it more likely for less-educated citizens to perceive politicians as insensitive to their lived experiences, sparking discontent. Another reason underlying different lived experiences identified by our interviewees was politicians' lifestyles: they “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” (Ingrid). Some interviewees even believed that politicians consciously avoid the life-worlds of the “common” people: they “simply just refrain from behaving like ‘common’ people” and “wouldn't be seen very drunk in a bar, [...] but many ‘common’ people are” (Jan).

The perception of politicians as blind or indifferent to the lives of the “common” people went hand in hand with a deep conviction that they are not real representatives of “common” people. The interviewees often mentioned: a discrepancy between being elected as a representative on the one hand, and actual representation, on the other (Jan); the supposed detachment of politicians from the electorate (Elisabeth); and the belief that politicians who have “studied for politics” have no intention of being representatives (Harm). The frustration over this perceived lack of representation also applied to policies. Peter, commenting on a minister who in his eyes was unconcerned about people's grievances, said the minister's attitude “illustrated precisely how people on that level think about problems in society. They're too far removed from it”. Our interviewees were also suspicious of the capability of many politicians as policy-makers, believing: they are unaware of “what happens on the shop floor” (Monique); do not learn “by doing” (Jeffrey); and live in “a totally different world from the people around here who have to plod along every day” (Esther). Similarly, Dennis stated that “after having followed a couple of studies” politicians “suddenly go into politics and tell everybody here how they should do things” and Linda said the Minister of Agriculture should “buzz off” because her policies are bizarre, with the others in this group interview agreeing that the minister is a “paper bitch” and just “doesn't get it” (Anna). This shows that politicians were perceived as basing their policies not on the experiences of the “common” people: politicians are sticklers for the rules and lack the “common sense” that one acquires through the lived experiences of the “common” people. This is in line with earlier studies in which a plea for more “common sense” accompanied the political discontent of readers of a tabloid newspaper (Kemmers et al., 2015), rural citizens (Cramer, 2016), and populist politicians (Mudde, 2004).

In contrast to the negative evaluations above, our interviewees had a positive regard for politicians they believed can relate to the “common” people. Peter expressed the view that if politicians “speak from the perspective of the people”, they “speak for me”. Similarly, there was admiration for a politician who “has both feet on the ground, [and] stands close to the ‘common’ people” (Thomas) and one who, because of his clearly visible tattoos and the fact that he seldom wears a suit, elicited the delighted comment “ah, there's still a normal one among them” (Anouk). A similar connection was felt by many to politicians who are regarded as approachable, live close by or come from places where a lot of “common” people are traditionally thought to live. In this regard, Anna believed that a state secretary who lives in Volendam, a traditional fishing village, “will have a down-to-earth view”. Such politicians were regarded as the real representatives of the “common” people. This was illustrated in the remarks of Jolanda, who said that her positive views on a politician she believes is a good representative are not based “on the things he stood for, [but on] where he came from and how he got there”. The policies of these politicians were not derided, and there was no questioning of their experience and whether their interest in “common” people was genuine. This broadly shared sentiment was particularly demonstrated by the interviewees from the peripheral province of Noord-Brabant, who most appreciated the politicians who had appearances and attitudes they regarded as “typically *Brabants* [the lifestyle of people in Noord-Brabant]”, and whose policies they consequently supported.

In summary, the first aspect of the cultural distance to politicians perceived by our interviewees was a broadly shared belief that politicians are unaware of, or indifferent to, their lived experience. This was closely linked to

their questioning of the legitimacy of politicians as representatives of the “common” people and their disregard for the policies they promote.

3.2 | Politicians “beat about the bush”, signaling their indecisiveness and lack of integrity

The second aspect of the cultural distance to politicians perceived by our interviewees was related to communication styles: many politicians “beat about the bush” (Peter); “say a lot, but actually say nothing” (Thomas); “don’t give direct answers” (Anna); have “endless discussions” (Monique); or use “academic language” (Jan). In contrast, our interviewees stated “common” people are: “straightforward, without limits” (Hendrik); “upfront” (Linda); and use “normal words [and] not much official language” (Elisabeth). These comments indicate frustration about a perceived mismatch between the communication styles of politicians and those of the “common” people. Further illustrating this frustration, Anna commented on a much-discussed victory speech given by the far-right anti-establishment politician Thierry Baudet, which contained many philosophical and historical references. Echoing comments from other interviewees, Anna said that if a politician like Baudet claims to represent the “common” people, “then [he] should also speak the language of the ‘common’ people”.

The discontent arising from perceived differences in communication styles was based on two negative evaluations. First, the interviewees’ irritation with politicians who “beat about the bush” and do not communicate in a “direct” manner was closely linked to their belief that many of them are indecisive. Tellingly, Jan preferred politicians to “just bluntly say it like it is and be done with it”. For many of our interviewees, being decisive is key to how politics should be performed. This was illustrated by Chantal, Thomas, Dennis, and Johannes, who believed that the diversity of opinions and voices in politics means that politicians are merely disagreeing with each other and so cannot achieve anything. Pauline, meanwhile, thought that politicians are “always fighting” and “whining”, which “doesn’t achieve anything”. The second negative evaluation of politicians who fail to communicate in a “straightforward” manner was that they lack integrity. That is, the interviewees were suspicious of the intentions and commitment of politicians who tell a “nice story” (Dennis), or always give the “same” answers or “dodge” answering’ (Elisabeth). Indeed, they believed that by using “double-talking” strategies (Anna), politicians try to be “sneaky” (Esther) and “shrewd” (Linda). Jolanda, Sylvia, and Harm discussed this in more detail:

Jolanda: Whenever you ask a question [...] to which they could just answer with a yes or no [...] then you get an endless reply [meaning that] you lose track of the story [...] and if you dissect it, you still don’t know the answer.

Sylvia: Then they still haven’t said anything.

Harm: No. [...].

Jolanda: They can withdraw everything, everything, because then they have used a point, an invisible one. You know? [...] And I’m just completely fed up with it. Just say what you think. Speak normal Dutch. [...] It’s got nothing to do with the normal Dutch language. [...].

Interviewer: And what does, and what does it show you? That they talk like that?

Jolanda: That they want to [...] wriggle out of everything through whatever turn. [...].

Harm: It’s also: they don’t want to say yes or no really, really loud, because otherwise you can make them accountable for it.

In contrast to the politicians discussed above, those favored by the interviewees were described as people who communicate in a manner congruent with their preference for candor, are “clear” and speak “just normal” (Thomas), and “don’t express themselves in difficult wording” (Gerrit). These politicians were perceived to be decisive and are “rarely caught” compromising their integrity (Peter). They were often described with phrases like: they “do what they say” (Jolanda); they “say what they do” (Anouk); and they are the kind of politician to “appear on television and say ‘this is how we’ll do it’” (Gerrit). More generally, adopting the language of the “common” people meant that the perceived cultural distance was reduced, inspiring the belief that such a politician is “someone who would sit next me, to put it like that” (Jeffrey). This apparent relationship between straightforwardness and a belief in the decisiveness and integrity of politicians is reflected in the seminal work by Lamont (2000, pp. 36–37) regarding how American workers evaluate others: this group said that people can achieve “trust and predictability [...] by being straightforward”, while those who “put on a façade” are regarded as “phonies”. Our interviews show the implications of this relationship with respect to perceptions of politicians, with those who are seen as anti-establishment particularly admired by many of our interviewees because of their perceived frank rhetoric. This was illustrated by Maria’s comments on late right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn: she “just had to listen” to him, and said he was “a great man”, because he was “just very clear”. Such a preference for anti-establishment rhetoric and how this is linked to communication styles is also reported by Serazio (2016, p. 191), who demonstrated in the American context how the “boorish” and “politically incorrect” communication style of Donald Trump stood in stark contrast to the prevailing more moderate language used by many politicians.

Summarizing this second aspect of perceived cultural distance to politicians, stark differences were identified by our interviewees in the communication styles of the two types of politician described above: those viewed as “beating about the bush” were regarded as indecisive and lacking integrity, while those who used the straightforward language of the “common” people were admired.

3.3 | Politicians are perceived to signal superiority, producing feelings of misrecognition

The final aspect of the cultural distance to politicians perceived by our interviewees was the belief that many of the former signal superiority and look down on the “common” people. This widely shared sentiment was voiced by, among others, Anna, Linda, Esther, and Sanne, who accused Prime Minister Mark Rutte of a deep-seated arrogance: “That’s how he comes over to me, as if he really feels superior” (Sanne); he “looks at you like you’re a worm” (Anna); this can be seen in “his whole attitude, [...] laugh” (Linda); and “eyes” (Esther). Interviewees from another group took a similar stance, using terms such as “arrogance” (Monique) and “looking down [on you]”, which Elisabeth mockingly described as “look at me being good. I know everything better than you”.

Reflecting the absence of a clearly defined collective identification among our respondents, they pointed out a wide variety of characteristics by which politicians would signal their superiority over the “common” people. A common belief was that politicians look down on them because of their political views. In particular, those who are critical of Islam (Anouk) and cultural diversity (Hendrik) said they often felt they were dismissed as being extreme or racist by politicians who are more tolerant on these matters. Such feelings, however, were also related to other characteristics associated with belonging to the “common” people: Anouk for instance said that people who have trouble finding a job are regarded as “deplorable” and people on social welfare are labeled as “wrong”. More generally, just as the lower-class interviewees of Jarness and Flemmen (2019, p. 175) explicitly opposed “the ‘smugness’, ‘flashiness’ and ‘snobbishness’” of citizens in the higher social strata, our interviewees opposed the lifestyles, appearances, and speech of many a politician when these were seen as signs of “elitist squabble” (Esther). This perception was illustrated by Gerrit, who told the story of a local politician who, because of his “attitude” and “very clear [standard Dutch] language”, was signaling that “I’m better than you”. Similarly, Jolanda, Anouk, Harm, and Sylvia discussed a politician who they believe speaks in a “snobbish” (Jolanda) manner and, as a result, makes them feel as if they are regarded with “disdain” (Harm).

The belief that politicians look down on those “below” them has important implications for understanding how our interviewees conceive their influence in the political domain. That is, the perceived superiority signaling detailed above gives rise to feelings of misrecognition in the political domain. Many of our interviewees believed that politicians consider people like them to be incompetent and, so, do not take their views seriously: they feel regarded as “simple souls” who “don’t know anything” (Anna) or as “plebs” (Dennis) who can be ignored on political matters. They also sensed that they are “laughingly disregard[ed]” and “put aside as being deplorable [...] because you don’t have an education” (Sylvia). In addition, many felt that they cannot speak their mind. As a result, “in the end, those signals [of citizens] aren’t taken seriously or incorporated” in the “top-down” policies (Peter) that many of our interviewees believed are imposed on them. This widely shared feeling of misrecognition clearly illustrates the need that our interviewees’ had for their policy preferences and life-worlds to be recognized, reflecting the “recognition gap” coined by Lamont (2018, 2019; cf. Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 2000) and illustrating its political ramifications (cf. Sandel, 2020).

Many of our interviewees distanced themselves from the alleged superiority of many a politician, actively countering it by stressing their own pre-eminence. These interviewees spoke of how “proud” (Pauline) they are of their attitudes, perseverance, and “morality” (Jeffrey), and said that they “don’t have to be ashamed” (Ingrid) of who they are. Jarness and Flemmen (2019, p. 177) interpret the boundaries that subordinates drew between themselves and those “above” them as “a defensive need to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth against the background of one’s low position in the class structure”, and, therefore, as “reactions to feelings of inferiority” (cf. Lamont, 2000; Täuber & van Zomeren, 2013). A widely shared sentiment among our interviewees was that it is vital for politicians to signal that they are on the same “level” as the “common” people, and they clearly admired those who do so. Anouk and others in her group, for example, liked a politician who “just pulls on a pair of jeans” and started to work as a bus driver after being a Member of Parliament and State Secretary, because this showed that he “isn’t worth more than normal Dutch citizens” (Sylvia).

In summary, the final aspect of cultural distance to politicians perceived by our interviewees was the belief that many politicians have a deep-seated disdain for the political preferences, hardships, lifestyles, appearances, and speech of the “common” people. This sparked great discontent among our interviewees, who said to feel misrecognized in the political domain. This was actively opposed by distancing themselves from the claims of superiority of politicians, or was countered by stressing their own pre-eminence.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through in-depth interviews with politically discontented, less-educated Dutch citizens, we explored how perceived cultural distance plays a role in their discontent with politicians. We uncovered a clear belief that politicians are far removed from the lives of the “common” people with whom many of our interviewees identified. While this sentiment reflects the populist rhetoric distinguishing “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; cf. Oliver & Rahn, 2016), our analysis went beyond this general divide and revealed three aspects of perceived cultural distance to politicians, each with their own implications for understanding how our interviewees evaluated them. In particular, politicians were: (i) perceived to be unaware of or indifferent to the lived experiences of the “common” people, which was closely linked to the participants’ questioning of the legitimacy of these officials and the policies they promote; (ii) said to “beat about the bush”, which was viewed as being in stark contrast to the “straightforwardness” of the “common” people, and inspires discontent concerning a perceived indecisiveness and lack of integrity; and (iii) accused of having a deep-seated arrogance, as their political preferences, lifestyles, appearances, and speech were seen as superiority signaling, generating feelings of misrecognition and opposition.

Our exploration of the role played by perceived cultural distance in less-educated citizens’ discontent with politicians adds to a broader literature hinting at perceptions of the cultural remoteness of those in high-status positions from people in the lower social strata (see e.g., Cramer, 2016; Hulst, 2017; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019;

Lamont, 2000). Our findings also contribute to academic debates on cultural status beliefs. Generally, status beliefs “bias people's expectations for their own and the other's competence and suitability for authority in a situation” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 5), and are perceived to be shared intersubjectively among large sections of the population and, sometimes, hegemonic. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that this does not completely apply to the political field. The accounts of our interviewees illustrate that they are *aware* of the dominant status beliefs surrounding politicians, but do not *acknowledge* them as such. Even more so, some not only *contest*, but even also *invert* the status hierarchy in the political field: attributes that signal competence and authority in the realm of formal politics signify to them incompetence and a lack of authority.

Our findings are also relevant for theorizing related to the notion of “diploma democracy” (Bovens & Wille, 2017): a political domain characterized by a vast overrepresentation of more-educated citizens. Our results suggest that in addition to the lack in *substantive* representation of less-educated citizens because of educational differences in policy preferences (see e.g., Aaldering, 2017), the lack of *descriptive* representation of less-educated citizens in a “diploma democracy” is likely of great relevance for understanding their political discontents: a near absence of less-educated politicians makes it unlikely that less-educated citizens feel that politicians share their life-worlds, which, according to our findings, inspires discontent. A diploma democracy, thus, probably inspires political discontent among less-educated citizens via substantive *and* descriptive underrepresentation.

In addition, just as our interviewees did not provide a clear description of the “common” people (“us”) and mainly defined this group in relation to many politicians (“them”), they identified multiple signals of superiority among politicians—related to the “common” people's political attitudes, hardships, lifestyles, appearances, and speech—that motivated feelings of misrecognition in the political domain. Together, these show that having little affinity with elite culture (i.e., lifestyles, appearances, and speech) plays a vital role in feeling looked down upon. This adds to other contemporary sources of feelings of misrecognition identified in the literature, most importantly a low level of education in itself (which inspires “educationism” among more-educated citizens, see e.g., Kuppens et al., 2018) and being among the “losers” in an economically globalized world where meritocratic beliefs reign (see e.g., Sandel, 2020). Future research could systematically dissect these possible sources of feelings of misrecognition, and analyze under what conditions, and why, they inspire such feelings in the political domain and beyond.

Our study opens up multiple other avenues for future research. First, quantitative studies could assess the relevance of the role played by perceived cultural distance in the discontent with politicians of the population at large. The applicability of our findings to countries other than the Netherlands could also be explored, along with how political attitudes and behavior beyond discontent with politicians, like institutional trust, support for populism, or nonvoting, are related to perceived cultural distance. Such research could also examine whether perceived cultural distance is relevant to understanding the stratified patterns in the attitudes and behaviors identified in studies that employ general status indicators, like subjective social status (see e.g., Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019) and cultural capital (Noordzij et al., 2019).

Second, our interviewees often gave notice of perceiving least cultural distance to—both leftist and rightist—populist politicians, especially because they are perceived as speaking in a direct and straightforward manner, and as less distant to the life-worlds of the “common” people. Such politicians, consequently, can capitalize on this, in addition to their ideological profile. Lamont et al. (2017, p. S166), for example, have illustrated this in case of Donald Trump, who framed himself as the “defender of ‘common men’” by echoing the needs, rhetoric, and feelings of misrecognition of the working classes (cf. Bonikowski, 2017). There are various indications that many populist politicians in European countries equally capitalize on the fact that some members of the public perceive a cultural distance to (establishment) politicians (see e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). However, our analysis also suggests that some non-populist politicians do not inspire perceptions of cultural distance among our respondents, indicating they, too, could apply this strategy. Moreover, from the perspective of voters, Carnes and Lupu (2020, p. 3, italics in original) cast “doubt on the idea that Trump *uniquely* appealed to [white] working-class Americans” and stress that this group already increasingly supported Republican presidential candidates

for the last decades, and so were also attracted to Trump's non-populist predecessors. In light of this, future endeavors could empirically assess how perceived cultural distance relates to other factors relevant for evaluating politicians, such as their ideological profile and partisan identity.

Third, our interviewees were engaged with politics to dissimilar extents. For some, this engagement was tied to their frustration concerning the perceived cultural distance to politicians. Those who were significantly involved in political matters, such as the members of two groups who were active in the yellow-vest movement, were most discontented and most likely to suspect ill will among politicians. For other interviewees, however, their perception of politicians as "culturally distanced others" led to their disengagement from politics. In her study of the "left out" in the United Kingdom, McKenzie (2017) identified similar differences between people and across places in terms of being engaged versus disengaged and feelings of anger versus sadness. Future research could, therefore, examine why some people turn a perceived cultural distance to politicians into resistance, while others disengage.

Fourth, it is interesting that a specific subset of politicians who enjoy the electoral support of the lower social strata, and claim to represent the "common" people, in fact either show clear signs of elitism, like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, or do not use straightforward language, like far-right anti-establishment politician Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands. In light of this, one avenue of future research could explore whether and how such politicians' claims of representing the "common" people serve to downplay the extent to which less-educated citizens perceive or problematize status differences (cf. Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Mudde, 2004), and how less-educated citizens negotiate between conflicting signals of cultural distance, perhaps attaching greater value to some aspects of perceived cultural distance than to others when determining their support for specific politicians.

Finally, the interviewees living in peripheral regions were often the most vocal about politicians being culturally distant to the "common" people. They were most outspoken in their frustration about the lifestyles and appearances of politicians, which were perceived as superiority signaling. This geographical variation in the frustration about perceived cultural distance echoes the geographical variations in political discontent (cf. Immerzeel et al., 2015). Future studies could explore the role of geographical fault lines in perceived cultural distance to politicians, and the resistance it inspires, by comparing the attitudes of citizens across regions that differ in their levels of (experienced) political, cultural, and economic subordination.

Overall, through our in-depth interviews with politically discontented, less-educated Dutch citizens, we were able to uncover what their perceived cultural distance to politicians looks like and how it relates to their negative evaluations of many a politician. Future studies could uncover the relevance of perceived cultural distance for such negative evaluations among the public at large, its role in the various guises and ramifications of contemporary political discontent, and how far our findings travel beyond the Dutch case.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared because they contain highly sensitive personal data.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

Our study complies with all relevant ethical regulations and research data were collected after participants gave informed consent to participate.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ As political discontent among less-educated citizens in the Netherlands is strongly linked to immigration policies that are perceived to be too permissive (see e.g., Noordzij et al., 2019), we only recruited those with a native Dutch background.

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