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The Consequences of Collective Discontent: A New Measure of Zeitgeist Predicts Voting for Extreme Parties

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In recent years, extreme right-wing and left-wing political parties and actors have gained popularity in many Western countries. What motivates people to vote for extreme right- or left-wing parties? In previous research, we showed that a collectively shared sense of doom and gloom about society can exist among citizens who, individually, experience high well-being. Previous research developed an operationalization of this collective societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist, which can be compared to personal experiences (van der Bles, Postmes, & Meijer, 2015). In the present research, we investigated whether this Zeitgeist of societal discontent predicts voting for extreme parties. We conducted a field study during the 2015 Dutch provincial elections (N = 407). Results showed that collective societal discontent (Zeitgeist) predicted voting for extreme parties but that personal discontent did not. Results also showed that pessimistic Zeitgeist was associated with lower education levels and tabloid-style media consumption. These findings advance our understanding of the discontents that fuel extreme voting outcomes: Global and abstract (negative) beliefs about society are more consequential than concrete personal experiences.

KEY WORDS: societal discontent, Zeitgeist, voting, extreme right-wing parties, media use, education level

In recent years, countries across Europe have experienced a surge of popularity of extreme political parties. Extreme right-wing parties, with anti-Islamic, anti-immigration, antiestablishment and/or anti-EU views, have gained strong support in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland, for example. Meanwhile, extreme left-wing parties have gained popularity in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, while more socialist-leaning factions and parties have increased their support in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In the United States, Donald Trump's views and policies are extreme by Republican standards and Bernie Sanders's are extreme by liberal standards: Both were unexpectedly successful with voters. In the referendum on whether Britain should remain

in or leave the European Union, the successful Leave campaign was led in part by Nigel Farage, leader of the right-wing populist U.K. Independence Party. In all, a broad range of parties and politicians at the extremes of the political spectrum have had a major influence on recent political developments in various countries. An important question therefore is: What motivates people to vote for these extreme right- and left-wing parties?

Although there are already many answers to this question in the psychological and political sciences, we argue that an important factor has been missing so far. Specifically, we propose that a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent with the state of society could lead people to vote for extreme political parties. In many Western countries, there is a sense that society is in decline: a global discontent with the way things are going today and where the country is headed. Previous research has developed a way to operationalize this pessimistic *Zeitgeist* and showed that it can be relatively independent from people's perceptions of their personal state of affairs (van der Bles, Postmes, & Meijer, 2015). In the present research, we conducted a field study during the Dutch provincial elections in 2015. We tested the hypothesis that a pessimistic *Zeitgeist* would predict voting for extreme right- and left-wing parties. In addition, we were interested in exploring the relationship between education level and media use and a pessimistic *Zeitgeist*.

Zeitgeist and Voting

Voting behavior has been extensively studied in psychology, sociology, and political science. Much research has been devoted to examining aggregate-level factors (for a review, see Geys, 2006) and individual-level factors (for a review, see Smets & van Ham, 2013) that explain voting behavior. While we do not dismiss the importance of these factors, we argue that meso-level factors are also important in understanding voting behavior. Voting is an action that aims to directly influence collective life in society, often on behalf of a group (e.g., on the basis of social identification with a particular subgroup, segment of society, or ideology) or an idea of society as a whole (cf. Klandermans, 2016; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren, Saguy, Mazzoni, & Cicognani, 2017). Accordingly, when voting people often act on the basis of a shared identity anchored in their perceptions about group memberships and society as a whole, rather than in interpersonal comparisons (Tajfel, 1978). Consequently, we propose that people's collectively shared perceptions of the state of society as citizens of a country should influence their voting behavior.

The idea that voters are motivated by societal-level assessments is not new, nor is it restricted to social identity approaches. Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) proposed the term "sociotropic voting" to describe situations in which voting is mainly influenced by concerns about the state of the country's economy, as opposed to concerns about people's personal economic conditions (egotropic concerns). Research has shown that sociotropic concerns influence both voter turnout and vote choice for the incumbent versus opposing parties (e.g., Killian, Schoen, & Dusso, 2008; Singer & Carlin, 2013). In the case of vote choice, the consensus in this economic voting literature seems to be that sociotropic evaluations are generally more influential than egotropic evaluations (Duch, 2009).

Importantly though, this sociotropic voting research only examines *economic* perceptions: The main question is whether voting is influenced by people's personal financial situation or their perceptions of the national economy. Economic perceptions may be important, but in view of the present political situation in many countries, the economic dimension is, we believe, too narrow a point of view. If we look at the issues that politicians of extreme parties appeal to, these include noneconomic issues such as the importance and preservation of the country's culture and religion and the desire to stem immigration. More importantly, there were several countries in which the rise of extreme right-wing parties preceded economic downturn (e.g., the Netherlands and Belgium) and several countries where economic upturn coincides with shifts to the extreme (e.g., the United Kingdom, France,

Germany). It seems that in many countries economic concerns are part of a more generalized concern for the welfare of society: a Zeitgeist of global discontent.

In many Western countries at present, there appears to be a vocal minority (and sometimes majority) that expresses a general dissatisfaction with the state of society. People are worried about the consequences of immigrants coming to their countries, the state of health care or education systems, and levels of crime and safety. Interestingly, this pervasive discontent is not necessarily connected to people's satisfaction with their personal lives. For example, 57% of Dutch people reported in 2015 that their country was heading in the wrong direction, even though 88% were very satisfied with their personal lives (Bijl, Boelhouwer, Pommer, & Andriessen, 2015). Similarly, 77% of French and 91% of Spanish people were dissatisfied with the way things were going in their country (Pew Research Center, 2014). Prior research has confirmed that perceptions at the interpersonal level (how am *I* doing) may be discrepant from perceptions at the collective level (how are *we* doing): The latter tend to be more stereotyped (Postmes, Branscombe, Spears, & Young, 1999).

Previous research proposed conceptualizing this perceived discontent at the general societal level of "us" as a form of Zeitgeist: a collective-level global evaluation of the state of society (van der Bles et al., 2015). Central to this conceptualization is the idea that people have the sense that *the nation* or *the people* are doing badly—people are pessimistic about their collective welfare. This previous research has shown that such collective-level perceptions of specific societal issues (e.g., the economy, immigration, crime) are highly correlated among each other. This suggests that there is a strong tendency for societal woes to be connected at the collective level. Even though one issue, for example the state of the economy, might be focal at a certain time, people's judgments about other aspects of the state of society are highly related to this one issue because all seem to be predicted by an underlying evaluative Zeitgeist. Negative Zeitgeist is thus a global, all-encompassing, tendency to perceive society as being in peril. In the context of voting behavior, we thus aim to extend the idea of socio-tropic voting beyond the domain of economy and propose to look at the influence of evaluations of the state of society more broadly.

Voting for Extreme Parties

In the present research, we are specifically interested in examining the role of a Zeitgeist of global discontent in voting for extreme parties, both at the left- and right wing of the political spectrum. Although one can distinguish between several kinds of extreme parties (e.g., populist, extreme right, Eurosceptic, radical left) and these distinctions are important, we are interested in the fact that most extreme parties also seem to share characteristics: They like to position themselves as antagonists of the political mainstream. They represent the idea that society is broken in some sense, and they put the blame for this on specific groups—the country's elite, immigrants, bankers, or "Europe." As a vote choice, they represent a form of protest against mainstream political parties that are usually seen as having caused or being complicit to the problems that the extreme party identifies.

Previous research seems to have mainly focused on the influence of psychological factors on voting for a particular type of extreme party (e.g., extreme right). For example, there is a growing literature showing that anti-immigrant attitudes are an important attitudinal explanation for extreme right-wing voting (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015; Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011; Ford & Goodwin, 2010; Green, Sarasin, Baur, & Fasel, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Oesch, 2008; Rydgren, 2008). Green and colleagues (2016) for instance showed that the presence of stigmatized immigrants via heightened threat perceptions increased the self-reported probability to vote for a Swiss radical-right party. Ivarsflaten (2008) showed that grievances over immigration issues consistently predicted voting for populist right-wing parties in Western Europe, whereas grievances over economic changes or political elitism were important in some countries. Cornelis and Van Hiel

(2015) studied the relative importance of antiegalitarian (e.g., social dominance orientation) and sociocultural attitudes (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism) as predictors of voting for extreme-right parties in Western Europe. Their research showed that antiegalitarian attitudes were more strongly associated with and a better predictor of extreme-right voting and that this effect was partly mediated through ethnic prejudice and anti-immigration attitudes.

Recent research has started to investigate support for extreme parties more broadly, but this is still quite rare. For example, van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, and Eendebak (2015) proposed and showed that psychological variables and processes previously associated with the political right/conservatives were more strongly related to the extremity of people's ideology than to one side of the spectrum specifically. People at both the right and left extremes reported more socioeconomic fear and were more likely to derogate outgroups than political moderates. In line with this work, we argue that investigating more global psychological factors underlying support for both right- and left-wing extreme parties could yield valuable insights that would help to explain important recent political developments, such as the strong support for extreme candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the primaries for the 2016 U.S. presidential election or the Brexit referendum vote to leave the EU. It seems that the growing support for candidates or parties with extreme positions cannot be fully explained by more proximal attitudinal explanations, even though they are important factors (e.g., anti-immigrant attitudes predict voting for parties with anti-immigration stances). We propose that a *Zeitgeist* of generalized discontent with society could be an important factor in voting for extreme parties or candidates.

As discussed above, collective judgments about aspects of society (e.g., immigration, the economy, crime) are highly interrelated, and we argue that such judgments are influenced by generalized discontent. In addition, there is likely to be considerable within-country variation in such perceptions of societal ill-being. A *Zeitgeist* of general discontent with the state of society could therefore influence voting for extreme parties. Having a pessimistic view should motivate people to seek drastic changes to the way society is being run. Extreme right- and left-wing parties not only differ from mainstream political parties on ideological stances (or the extremity of such ideological stances), but they usually distinguish themselves as antiestablishment and criticize mainstream politics. As such, voting for extreme parties (either to the right or left) can be a form of protest to express discontent and one way to achieve drastic change (see e.g., Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001 for right-wing parties). We propose that a *Zeitgeist* of collective societal discontent could therefore be an important predictor of voting for extreme parties.

So far, we continued to stress that we expect collective discontent to influence voting for both extreme-right and extreme-left parties. Even though most research has focused on voting for extreme right-wing parties, we expect that perceiving a pessimistic *Zeitgeist* influences people to vote for more extreme positions and not necessarily influence their ideology per se. Recent research showed that in terms of the antiestablishment positions of parties, radical-right populist parties and socialist and green parties were much closer to each other than to center parties, suggesting they draw on comparable political styles to attract voters (Immerzeel, Lubbers, & Coffé, 2016). This strengthens our hypothesis that a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent would impact voting for extreme-right as well as extreme-left parties.

The Influence of Media Use and Education Level on *Zeitgeist*

In addition, we are interested in examining factors that could influence a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent. Previous research showed clear mean-level tendencies but also considerable variation in *Zeitgeist* perceptions (van der Bles et al., 2015). What contributes to variation in people's perceptions of the state of the society in which they live? The present research examines two factors: education level and media use.

We assume that the concept of “society” is an abstract representation of a country that is shared by its people; for example, for Dutch people this would be “the Netherlands.” The (most salient) content of this representation, what “the Netherlands” is and means, might differ between different subgroups in society: For one, this might be tulips and bikes; for another, this might be tolerance and individual freedom. One way to conceptualize these different subgroups is as “interpretative communities” within society (Elchardus, 2011). Education level is considered a good proxy for such interpretative communities, especially in the Netherlands where the present research has been conducted. Previous research showed that people with different education levels indicate they worry about different societal problems: They have different perceptions about which issues are most important for society and their placement on the public agenda (Bovens & Wille, 2010). This suggests that people with different education levels indeed might have a different perception of what society is in terms of its most important issues and challenges. The present research therefore aims to examine the relationship between educational level and Zeitgeist perceptions.

Furthermore, much of the information that people receive about the current state of society and its predicaments, they receive through the media. One theoretical perspective that addresses the influence of mass media on people’s perceptions of social issues and attitudes is cultivation analysis (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Originally developed to study the effects of television, the cultivation hypothesis states that “those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 337). The main focus is on the effect of people’s overall experience of a certain message system on their perceptions of the world around them and their subsequent behavior. Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2003) showed that watching (local U.S.) television news is related to an increased fear of crime, both at a personal and societal level. Cultivation analysis had been applied to newspapers as well: Arendt (2010) showed that people in Austria who spend more time reading a newspaper of which content analysis showed that it had a negative view of the EU had more negative attitudes toward the EU. In the present research, we propose that audiences of different news media that communicate different worldviews will have (slightly) different perceptions of the state of society. We expected that in the Dutch context, people who more frequently use commercial and tabloid-style media sources (i.e., including sensationalist [crime] stories) would be more likely to have pessimistic Zeitgeist perceptions.

The Present Research

The present research aimed to study the influence of people’s Zeitgeist perceptions on voting for extreme right- and left-wing parties and the relationship of media use and education level with these Zeitgeist perceptions. We predicted that people with a more pessimistic Zeitgeist would be more likely to vote for extreme parties. We also explored the influence of media use and educational level on Zeitgeist perceptions, expecting that people who more frequently used more commercial and tabloid-style media sources and had lower education levels would have more pessimistic Zeitgeist perceptions. As a final step, we aimed to test these relationships in one model: examining the influence of media use and education level on Zeitgeist, and in turn the influence of Zeitgeist on voting for extreme parties.

To these aims, we conducted a field study in the Netherlands during the Dutch Provincial Council elections that were held on March 18, 2015. We propose that this is an ideal setting in which to conduct this research: A measure of Zeitgeist has been tested and validated in the Netherlands (van der Bles et al., 2015), and importantly, the Netherlands is one of the few Western countries that has both an extreme right-wing and an extreme left-wing party with political and historical significance in society (cf. van Prooijen et al., 2015). The party at the extreme right of the political spectrum is the *Partij*

voor de Vrijheid or Freedom Party (PVV), which is characterized as right-wing populist, Eurosceptic, and has a radical anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance. The party at the extreme left of the political spectrum is the *Socialistische Partij* or Socialist Party (SP), which has its origins in a Maoist movement and Marxist principles. Both parties had an approximately equal share of votes in the last general elections in 2012, 10.08% and 9.65% respectively, which made them the third and fourth largest parties in the Netherlands. The present research was conducted during the 2015 Provincial Council elections, in which citizens elect the members of the Provincial Council. These members are affiliated with either a provincial division of a national political party or a political party specific to the province. Members of the provincial parliament subsequently elect the members of the Senate, thereby directly influencing national-level politics (which is an important part of public discourse surrounding these elections). Both the Freedom Party and the Social Party participated in all provinces in these elections. This context allowed us to investigate both extreme-right and extreme-left voting behavior.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 407 Dutch people who voted in the Dutch Provincial elections on March 18, 2015. Half of our sample was male (50.6%), and ages ranged from 18 to 87 years, with a mean of 37.94 years ($SD = 17.97$). We recruited participants in three cities in the Netherlands: Groningen ($N = 246$, a city that had a relatively high percentage of extreme-left voters in previous elections), Almere ($N = 62$, a city that had relatively high percentages of extreme-right voters in previous elections), and Oldebroek ($N = 99$, a smaller rural town). Research assistants approached participants just after they left a polling station and asked them to fill in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Written informed consent was obtained before filling in the questionnaire, and afterwards participants were thanked and debriefed. This research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee Psychology of the University of Groningen.

Measures

Zeitgeist: Collective discontent. The questionnaire started with a Zeitgeist measure that has been developed in previous research: collective-level prevalence estimates of societal problems (van der Bles et al., 2015). Participants were instructed to think about the life of the average person: “What did the life of the average Dutch person look like the last 30 days according to you? Think about the conversations that Dutch people had, the things they did, the people and situations that they encountered.” Subsequently, participants indicated their estimates of the number of days over the last 30 days the average Dutch person encountered problems with the following 14 societal issues: violence, problems with the health care system, financial problems, violation of privacy, terror threat, discrimination, alcohol abuse, crime, immigrants, loitering teens, the government, indecent/antisocial behavior of others, personal enrichment/fraud, and earthquakes caused by gas extraction¹ ($\alpha = .92$). These societal issues were adapted from van der Bles et al. (2015) and selected to represent a range of issues that were salient in society at the time.

Personal discontent. We also measured personal discontent: personal-level perceptions of the prevalence of the same societal issues in their own lives. The order of these measures was

¹ This item reflects an important issue in Dutch society and politics at present: The Province of Groningen suffers from earthquakes caused by gas extraction. It was included mainly for explorative reasons and local relevance, but because it correlated highly with all other variables and had a reasonably high factor loading (.62 in CFA), we decided to keep it.

counterbalanced.² Participants were instructed to think about their personal life and asked to indicate how many days out of the last 30 they had encountered the same societal issues in their personal life as above ($\alpha = .87$).

Media use. Frequency of media use was measured in three different categories: newspapers, electronic news media (such as websites and mobile applications), and television news broadcasts. We asked participants how frequently they used various media sources on a scale from 1 (*[almost] daily*), 2 (*a couple of times per week*), 3 (*a couple of times per month*), and 4 (*hardly ever or never*) (we reversed the scale so that higher scores reflect higher media use). The media sources within the categories reflected the main sources in Dutch media (cf. van der Kolk, Tillie, van Erkel, van der Velden, & Damstra, 2013). In the analyses presented in this article, we focused on the use of three media sources that represent more commercial and tabloid-style journalism in the Netherlands: first, the online version (website and mobile application) of the newspaper “*De Telegraaf*,” which is the largest Dutch daily morning newspaper. This is a tabloid-style newspaper with a relatively large focus on entertainment and sensation and a conservative and populist style. Prior research has confirmed the distinct negativity of this newspaper (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006). We chose to focus on the online version because in general our participants reported higher use of the website and mobile application than the newspaper itself. Second, we included the free daily newspaper “*Metro*,” which is distributed in public transport, has a large focus on entertainment and sensation, and is published by the same publishing group as “*De Telegraaf*.” Third, we included the use of the “*RTL nieuws*,” which is the daily television news broadcast of the main commercial television channel in the Netherlands. A complete list of the media sources that were included in the questionnaire is presented in the online supporting information.

Political and social attitudes. We included single-item measures of several relevant constructs: satisfaction with the government, voting efficacy, self-reported political orientation (left-right), policy attitudes (agreement with two social and two economic statements), trust in politicians (two items), and trust in the current government. These scales attest to the convergent and divergent validity of our Zeitgeist measure, but they are not reported in depth in this article. A correlation table is presented in the online supporting information.³

Education level and other demographics. To measure education level, we asked participants to indicate the education level of their current or highest obtained degree. Participants were subsequently divided into three categories. People who were educated up to primary school, lower secondary-education level, and/or had junior vocational training (primary school, VMBO, MBO1 – 4; $N = 99$) were categorized as having a *lower* education level. People with a higher secondary education or higher vocational college degree (HAVO, HBO; $N = 128$) were categorized as *middle* education level. People with the highest secondary education or university degree (VWO, WO; $N = 138$) were categorized as *higher* education level. Furthermore, we asked participants to indicate their gender, age, nationality, and perceived social class.

Voting. Finally, we asked participants to indicate which party they just had voted for in the Provincial elections. At each sampling location, all options (per province) were listed, and participants were asked to select their choice (see the online supporting information for a complete list). In the present article, we focused on voting for one of two extreme parties (*PVV* at the right extreme of the political spectrum, *SP* at the left) versus voting for one of the national political parties (*CDA*/Christian democratic appeal, *Christenunie*/Christian Union, *D66*/Democrats 66,

² We tested for an order effect on these measures and found no difference in personal and collective perceptions of societal issues between different order conditions.

³ We also measured identification with the province versus Netherlands, but because of a printing error this measure was invalid.

GroenLinks/Green-Left, PVDA/Labour party, SGP/Reformed Political Party, VVD/People's Party for Freedom and Democracy).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Upon data screening, 30 participants were excluded from further analyses for not completing the questionnaire or not following instructions; one participant was excluded because of knowing the aims of this research (a colleague). All subsequent analyses are based on 376 participants. Our main variable of interest, *Zeitgeist*, was measured with 14 items. These items had in total 16 missing values, which were substituted with the respective item means (to retain participants and therefore power in the analyses).

As predicted in previous research (van der Bles et al., 2015), we expected that one latent-factor *Z* would underlie participants' responses to all 14 collective-level perceptions of societal issues, thus representing *Zeitgeist*. We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in R 3.2.3 with the *Lavaan* package to test this single-factor model. Because univariate analyses of skewness and kurtosis suggested potential violations of the assumption of multivariate normality, CFA was conducted using maximum-likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and a Satorra-Bentler scaled test statistic. We inspected the following indices to examine model fit, which is considered acceptable if: Comparative Fit Index [CFI] > .90; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual [SRMR] < .08; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] < .08 (Kline, 2011; van de Schoot, Lugtig, & Hox, 2012).

Results provided support for our prediction: A single-factor model was a good fit to the data (CFI = .93; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05; .06]). This single-factor *Z* explained on average 47.5% of the variance in the individual items, a broad range of perceptions of societal issues. In addition, we used parallel analysis to examine the number of factors Exploratory Factor Analysis [EFA] would extract, which also returned one factor. Thus, we find support for our operationalization of *Zeitgeist* as latent-factor *Z*. In the subsequent analyses, we took participants' average score on the collective-level perceptions of societal issues as representing *Zeitgeist*. On average, participants indicated that the average Dutch person encountered societal problems on 5.71 days out of the last 30 ($SD = 4.58$). This is significantly more than the average number of days people themselves indicated they had encountered problems in their personal life, which was 1.68 days ($SD = 3.22$; repeated measures ANOVA: $F(1, 363) = 281.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .44$).

Zeitgeist Predicts Voting

To investigate the influence of a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent on voting for extreme political parties, we conducted a sequential binary logistical regression analysis with *Zeitgeist*, personal discontent, and political orientation as independent variables and voting for both the extreme right- and left-wing political parties (PVV and SP) versus voting for one of the other seven mainstream parties as dependent variables.⁴ We were interested in the influence of *Zeitgeist* (Step 3) over and above people's personal-level perceptions of societal problems and political orientation (Step 2), while controlling for sampling location (Step 1). Table 1 presents the results.

The results showed that when added at Step 2, personal discontent did not predict voting for extreme parties (Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 351) = 0.22, p = .643$). Political orientation did predict voting at Step 2 (Wald $\chi^2(1, N = 351) = 5.56, p = .018$), and model fit significantly improved compared to Step 1 ($\chi^2(2, N = 351) = 6.22, p = .045$). One scale-point change towards a right-wing political

⁴ Given that logistic regression does not assume variables to be normally (or otherwise) distributed, these analyses were conducted with the original variables.

Table 1. Sequential Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of Voting for Extreme Political Parties as a Function of Zeitgeist, Personal Discontent, and Political Orientation

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	B	Wald χ^2	p	Odds Ratio			B	Wald χ^2	p	Odds Ratio			B	Wald χ^2	p
				Lower	Upper	95% CI				Lower	Upper	95% CI			
Constant	-1.71	81.45	<.001	0.18			-0.78	3.14	.076	0.46			-1.24	6.44	.011
Sample - A	0.58	2.31	.128	1.79	3.78	0.85	.61	2.38	.123	1.85	4.01	0.85	0.54	1.77	.183
Sample - O	-1.63	6.93	.008	0.20	0.66	0.06	-1.27	3.90	.048	0.28	0.99	0.08	-1.38	4.49	.034
Political Orientation							-0.29	5.56	.018	0.75	0.95	0.59	-.28	4.90	.027
Personal Discontent							0.02	0.22	.643	1.02	1.12	0.94	-0.02	0.13	.720
Zeitgeist													0.08	5.59	.018
Block χ^2	15.12**						6.22*						5.39*		
Model χ^2	15.12**						21.33***						26.73***		
Nägelkerke R ²	.077						.107						.133		

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Sequential Regression Analysis of Education Level and Use of Tabloid Style and Commercial Media Predicting Zeitgeist

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Constant	3.97***	0.95		3.42***	0.94		−0.05	1.15	
Age	0.00	0.02	.01	−0.01	0.02	−.03	−0.01	0.02	−.02
Gender	0.76	0.49	.09	0.81	0.47	.09	0.83	0.46	.09
Sample - A	1.57*	0.71	.13	0.76	0.71	.06	0.16	0.70	.01
Sample - O	0.69	0.64	.07	−1.11	0.73	−.11	−0.64	0.71	−.06
Lower Education				3.52***	0.75	.35	3.02***	0.73	.30
Middle Education				1.36*	0.56	.15	1.20*	0.55	.13
Telegraaf (online)							0.64*	0.27	.13
Metro (newspaper)							1.06**	0.35	.17
RTL News (tv)							0.53**	0.20	.14
R^2	.03			.09***			.16***		
$R^2\Delta$				.06***			.07***		

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

orientation decreased chances of voting for extreme parties with 25% (odds ratio = 0.75, 95%CI[0.59; 0.95]. When added at Step 3, Zeitgeist significantly predicted voting for extreme parties over and above personal discontent and political orientation (Wald χ^2 (1, $N = 351$) = 5.59, $p = .018$). Model fit was significantly improved compared to Step 2 (χ^2 (1, $N = 351$) = 5.39, $p = .020$). More negative Zeitgeist perceptions increased the likelihood to vote for extreme political parties, such that a one-day increase in perceived societal problems is associated with an 8.7% higher likelihood of voting for either an extreme left-wing or extreme right-wing party (odds ratio = 1.09, 95%CI[1.01; 1.16]).

Predictors of Zeitgeist

To examine whether education level and media use were associated with variation in Z, we conducted a sequential regression analysis.⁵ Starting with control variables (sample, age, and gender⁶) at Step 1, at Step 2 education level was added (two dummy variables to represent three education levels: lower, middle, and high, with the last being the reference category). At Step 3, we added three variables reflecting the use of the following media sources: *Telegraaf* online, *Metro* newspaper, and RTL television news broadcast. Preliminary analyses exploring the effects of all media sources on Zeitgeist perceptions revealed that as expected, these commercial and tabloid-style media sources were associated with more pessimistic Zeitgeist perceptions, while the use of other media sources did not have significant effects. Table 2 presents the results.

The results showed that when all variables were included in the model, education level and media use both independently affected people’s Zeitgeist perceptions, $R^2 = .16$, $F(9, 315) = 6.71$, $p < .001$. Compared to high education levels, low education levels ($\beta = .30$, $t(1, 315) = 4.15$, $p < .001$) and middle education levels ($\beta = .13$, $t(1, 315) = 2.20$, $p = .029$) were significantly associated with more negative Zeitgeist perceptions. In addition, readers of the *Telegraaf* online ($\beta = .13$, $t(1, 315) = 2.37$, $p = .018$), of the *Metro* newspaper ($\beta = .17$, $t(1, 315) = 3.08$, $p = .002$), and viewers of the RTL

⁵ Since univariate skewness and kurtosis analyses for Zeitgeist revealed potential problems with the assumption of normality, we also performed this sequential regression analysis with a transformed (squared) Zeitgeist DV. Results of this analysis are similar (generally stronger); we chose to report the analysis with the original DV to ease interpretation of the effects.

⁶ We also conducted this analysis with self-reported social class added as a control variable, which produces similar results. This variable contained many missing values, however, so we chose to exclude it from the final analyses to retain more power.

television news broadcast ($\beta = .14$, $t(1, 315) = 2.67$, $p = .008$) had more negative Zeitgeist perceptions. These results suggest that variation in Zeitgeist was systematically associated with differences in education level and the use of particular media sources. This is in line with our conceptualization of society as consisting of various interpretative communities that vary in how they perceive society and its problems.

We also performed this same sequential regression analysis for personal discontent to test whether education level and media use were associated with people's perceptions of discontent with their personal life. Because the distribution of personal discontent was positively skewed, we used a transformed (squared) variable in this analysis. Results showed that with all variables included, 9% of the variance in personal discontent was explained by this model ($R^2 = .09$, $F(9, 308) = 3.22$, $p = .001$). Personal discontent was significantly predicted by age ($\beta = -.19$, $t(1, 308) = -3.06$, $p = .002$), and by reading the *Metro* newspaper ($\beta = .15$, $t(1, 308) = 2.61$, $p = .009$), but not by education level or other media. Thus, having a lower education level is associated with more negative views of the Zeitgeist in society, but not with more negative views of one's own life.

Path Analyses

Finally, we combined these relationships within one model: whether educational level and media use predicted Zeitgeist and whether Zeitgeist subsequently predicted voting for extreme versus mainstream political parties. We performed a path analysis with the Lavaan package in R 3.2.3 (with weighted least squares means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation and robust standard errors to account for both the dichotomous dependent variable voting and the potential violations of multivariate normality). This model had an excellent fit to the data: CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.02 (90%CI[.00; .08]), Weighted Root Mean Square Residual [WRMR] = 0.64 (WRMR < 1 indicates acceptable fit). Figure 1 presents the results. In line with previous results, education level and media use significantly predicted Z, and Z predicted voting.

Education Level

Figure 1. Results of a path analysis of education level and use of tabloid style and commercial media predicting Zeitgeist of collective discontent and Zeitgeist predicting voting for extreme political parties. The coefficients displayed are standardized coefficients. * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Education Level

Figure 2. Results of a path analysis of education level and use of tabloid style and commercial media predicting personal discontent and personal discontent predicting voting for extreme political parties. The coefficients displayed are standardized coefficients.

As an alternative model, we tested whether education level and media use predicted personal discontent and personal discontent predicted voting for extreme parties. Arguably, perceptions of others’ problems should be of less immediate personal concern than perceptions of one’s own problems (e.g., financial difficulties, lack of safety, etc.). The model fit was poor on some indicators and acceptable on others: CFI = 0.25, RMSEA = 0.04 (90%CI[.00; .09]), WRMR = 0.71. Figure 2 presents the results. Neither education level nor media use were significant predictors of personal discontent. Most importantly, personal discontent did *not* predict voting for extreme parties. This provides direct evidence that voting is not associated with personal discontent but is associated with perceived collective discontent.

Mediation

The results of the path analysis suggested that Zeitgeist might mediate the relationship between each of its predictors (media use and education level) and voting for extreme parties. We formally tested for mediation effects for each of the predictors separately using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) with 10.000 bootstrap samples. In the analysis for education level, we used one variable with three levels (lower, middle, and high) as a predictor. Only the total effect of RTL News on voting was significant (.2702, 95%CI[.0245; .5160]); for all other predictors, the total effect was not. However, the indirect effects of all predictors via Zeitgeist on voting indicated evidence for partial mediation. The indirect effect of education level via Zeitgeist on voting was $-.1038$, Bias Corrected 95% Confidence Interval (CI)[$-.2190$; $-.0166$]. The indirect effect of reading the *Telegraaf* online was .0486, BC 95%CI [.0019; .1298]. The indirect effect of reading the *Metro* newspaper was .0733, BC 95%CI [.0068; .1889]. The indirect effect of watching RTL News was just outside boundaries, at .0563, BC 95%CI [$-.0016$; .1313]. Together, these results indicate that Zeitgeist partially mediates the effects of media use and education level on voting for extreme parties.

Discussion

The results of this field study showed that a Zeitgeist of collective discontent predicted voting for extreme parties during the 2015 Dutch Provincial Council elections: People with more negative general perceptions of the state of society were more likely to vote for an extreme right-wing (PVV) or left-wing (SP) party compared to mainstream parties. In addition, we examined the relationship between Zeitgeist, education level, and media use. The results showed that lower education levels and using more tabloid-style media were associated with a pessimistic Zeitgeist. When the relationships between education level, media use, Zeitgeist, and voting for extreme parties were tested in one model, we found that education level and media use were associated with Zeitgeist, which in turn predicted the likelihood of voting for extreme parties.

Together, these results suggest that a Zeitgeist of collective discontent has important societal consequences: It influences voting behavior and motivates people to vote for extreme right-wing as well as left-wing parties. Moreover, the fact that tabloid-style media use and education levels predicted levels of discontent suggests that perceptions of the state of society are specific to subgroups or “interpretative communities” within society. This points to potential between-group differences in perceptions and/or experiences of societal problems in society, which has important consequences in terms of understanding public discourse and debates about what societal issues should be prioritized or tackled.

A Zeitgeist of Societal Discontent vs. Issue-Specific Discontents

The present research suggests that voting for extreme parties is influenced by a collective-level, globalized evaluation of the state of society: a Zeitgeist of societal discontent. This is a different approach from most previous research, which tends to focus on attitudes or psychological variables related to specific societal issues (for example, immigration; e.g., Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015). We argue that studying collective, global discontent can provide valuable new understandings. Our research shows that people’s collective-level perceptions of societal issues are highly interrelated and that a large proportion (47.5%) of the variance in these perceptions can be explained by a single underlying factor Z. This suggests that it is important to not only take into account issue-specific discontents, but also the shared evaluation of society underlying these discontents. Even if at a certain time one or a few issues are focal (as is the case with immigration in several Western countries at present), our research shows that this one issue is closely tied up with a broad range of other issues. People who worry that the country has a problem with immigration also worry about the economy, crime, corruption, and faltering social cohesion.

We propose that Z is a way to conceptualize this underlying general discontent: General discontent may be the origin of issue-specific discontents. If we focus on the general factor Z, we can gain insight into the diffuse sense of pessimism about society that appears so prevalent in many countries today. Thus, according to the present research, voting for extreme parties cannot simply be accounted for by specific issues such as immigration (e.g., Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015) or socioeconomic fear (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Our suggestion is that this Zeitgeist of global collective discontent with society can motivate people to vote for parties that represent a form of protest against the political mainstream. Zeitgeist thus influences a movement toward the extreme ends of the political spectrum; more specific attitudes or beliefs are more likely to influence which end people will choose.

The Difference Between Personal Discontent and Societal Discontent

Another important finding is that whereas collective-level discontent (Zeitgeist) predicted voting for extreme parties, personal-level discontent did not. This finding is consistent with research on

sociotropic versus egotropic concerns in voting (Duch, 2009; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981). The implication is that people without any personal experiences with problems such as immigration or crime can nevertheless perceive society to have major problems with these issues. It is these societal perceptions that predict extreme voting outcomes.

There is a remarkable discrepancy between the average of personal experiences and perceptions of this average. Respondents reported that they encountered problems in their daily life, on average, during 1.68 days a month. But the same respondents thought that the average Dutch person encountered these problems during 5.71 days a month: more than 3.3 times as often as their personal experience. There are a number of possible explanations for this large discrepancy. It is unlikely that it is caused simply because highly educated people were overrepresented in our sample: The discrepancy is large among highly educated as well as less educated people (even though it is larger among the latter). Another known concern in the literature is with how participants answer questions about “the average Dutch person”—again, we do not believe this makes a huge difference because of the high correlations with (for example) perceptions of the country as a whole (see also van der Bles et al., 2015). We also do not think these effects could be explained by response biases caused by focusing on negative issues only (cf. van der Bles et al., 2015, who showed comparable results for negatively worded and positively worded items).

So what *can* account for this large discrepancy between personal and collective judgments? We suggest it could be related to the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, in which perceptions of “us” at the collective level do not correspond to the aggregate of group members’ personal characteristics (Miller & Prentice, 1994). In research on pluralistic ignorance, it is often the perceived group average that is biased (e.g., the average student drinks moderately, but students themselves tend to believe they drink a lot). In case of the current research, what is biased or not cannot easily be determined. Our impression is that personal experiences reported in this research are broadly consistent with national statistics, where these exist (e.g., the levels of crime people reported for themselves are credible; the levels reported for the average Dutch person were high). But ultimately, the present research is not well suited to determining which of these is more or less “real” or realistic: Both personal and collective perceptions may be biased, for different reasons. In some sense, what is real or not real is irrelevant: Both perceptions may describe important aspects of people’s social reality, grounded in different social facts. The nature of the discrepancy is consistent with the reasoning that these two levels of perception, personal and collective, are anchored in two qualitatively different but equally relevant sources of information: personal experiences and concrete events that happened to “me” versus shared constructions and abstract images of “us” (see also Postmes et al., 1999).

A further observation about the discrepancy is that personal perceptions and perceptions of the collective are not always closely related: Many respondents who had negative *Zeitgeist* perceptions encountered very few societal problems in their daily lives. Indeed, education level was associated with Z-scores but not with personal experiences with societal problems. We believe that it would be important for future research to further study the types of knowledge and information upon which personal- and collective-level discontent are based.

Interpretative Communities, Separate Worlds?

As noted, education level and media use are associated with the level of collective discontent. We interpret this as support for the idea that society consists of multiple “interpretative communities”: subgroups of people who live in the same societal context because they have most contact with people similar to them (for which education level is a proxy) and because they consume the same media. Therefore, they are subjected to the same frames and narratives about society; a type of echo chamber, within which people share a common view of what “society” (e.g., “the Netherlands”) is and what Dutch people tend to experience.

Even though this “echo chamber phenomenon” may explain how these beliefs may emerge and be maintained, it cannot explain the rise and fall of collective discontent itself. After all, if collective discontent is restricted to specific subgroups in society, then voting for extreme parties should be a relatively constant societal phenomenon that is ultimately predicted by the size of these groups. So why does general discontent appear, in recent years, to have risen and spread?

One reason is that the discontent within one group is bound to affect other groups, as soon as people begin to communicate about it across group boundaries. After all, as soon as a discontented minority begins airing its views, this itself is evidence of disunity (especially if polarized debates ensue). The polarization that is evidenced by such debates demonstrates that society is divided and therefore validates perceptions of global pessimism about society. Accordingly, global discontent will only remain restricted to particular societal subgroups as long as this subgroup does not interact extensively with other subgroups.

Another reason why it would be erroneous to believe that the echo chamber phenomenon can explain the emergence of general discontent on its own is that, at its origin, there may well be important factors that fuel collective discontent, such as (fraternal) relative deprivation or a perceived lack of group status. It would be wrong to infer from relatively low levels of personal discontent that there are no legitimate grievances at the collective level. Again, to make progress on some of these issues we anticipate that future research should further study what knowledge and information underpins both personal and collective discontents.

Zeitgeist and the International Political Climate

Do these results generalize to other countries? While we have no direct evidence for this yet, numerous anecdotal arguments support this. A global collective discontent with the state of society appears to be present in many Western countries besides the Netherlands, and this coincides with rising support for extreme political movements on the left, the right, or both. Across many countries, the idea that the present system is not working appears to have become mainstream (even in countries where objective markers of well-being are positive). In the United States, the central plank of Donald Trump’s candidacy and presidency is the idea that America is no longer great because it suffers deep-seated problems (e.g., crime, economics, politics, and immigration). The same shared sentiments that “we” are doing badly, and “they” (the elite, or political establishment) are to blame can be found in numerous European countries: In Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, France, and many other nations, we see high levels of support for parties on the right which express distrust of, and disgust with, (political) elites and institutions. The same distrust of (political) elites appears to be fuelling support for extreme-left political parties in Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

In each of these many cases, a Zeitgeist of collective discontent with the state of society may help explain why support for extreme parties is on the rise. If the perception is that “the people” face insurmountable day-to-day problems across a broad range of issues, there is a clear need for an alternative arrangement in society. So far, international studies of discontent have not operationalized global societal discontent, focusing instead on concrete personal experiences, specific issues, and/or concrete optimism for the future (cf. Bijl et al., 2015). While all of these measures may shed light on the success of populist movements and extreme parties from nation to nation, we believe that they are not well equipped to explain the broad phenomenon of a changing zeitgeist across the board.

Implications for Measurement and Policy

As noted above, existing measures of discontent tend to be precise and accurate, targeted, for example, at people’s expectations for the future of their country. But we believe that discontent is not best captured with such concrete questions: Discontent is a vague, global sentiment. This conceptual

analysis of discontent is markedly different from other approaches (cf. Steenvoorden, 2015). To our knowledge, we are the first research team that has developed a clear strategy for measuring a vague concept. We suggest that future research should embrace our operationalization of collective discontent as an aspect of *Zeitgeist* in order to be able to better understand current developments across different countries.

One implication of this research for society, and perhaps especially for policy makers, is that it pays off to make clear-cut and consistent distinctions between personal and collective discontent and between general discontent and particular societal issues (e.g., immigration or crime). Making these distinctions clearly and consistently can help solve two potential problems. First, there is the risk that collective-level general discontent is “hijacked” for specific political agendas (e.g., when global discontent is attributed to a single issue, such as immigration concerns). Second, there is the equally thorny risk that politicians might use general discontent to “explain away” legitimate concerns that people may have about society. According to our perspective, these risks are minimized by differentiating (in research, policy analysis as well as discourse) more consistently between general discontent and specific discontents, as well as between collective- and personal-level issues.

In the same way that one’s analysis should not be confusing these different levels, we recommend that policy is targeted either at personal-level experiences *or* the collective level (we recommend never mixing the two). In all situations, it becomes more important to design policy as much as possible on the basis of concrete evidence, such as actual crime statistics. This may not be easy in an era of “alternative facts,” but it is certainly worth trying.

To conclude, this research indicates that a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent may play a key role in increasing the popularity of extreme-right and extreme-left parties in Western countries. Collective discontent about the state of society, not discontent with one’s personal life, motivated Dutch people to vote for both an extreme-right and an extreme-left party in the 2015 provincial council elections. Within society, different interpretative communities can form global opinions that the nation as a whole has a problem: This influences voting behavior more than concrete personal problems do. Combined, these findings suggest that if one wants to understand the rise in support for extreme right-wing and left-wing parties across many Western countries, vague notions such as a *Zeitgeist* of collective discontent may be useful. Our main contribution is to have taken this vague notion of *Zeitgeist* seriously, to offer a concrete operationalization and to show it predicts concrete consequences.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Part 1: Additional Methodological Information

Media Use

Voting

Part 2: Correlations Between Zeitgeist and Political Attitudes

Table 1. Correlations Between Z and Political Attitudes