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Channelling discontent? Non-voters, populist party voters, and their meaningful political agency

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the assumption that populist parties form an efficacious exhaust valve for voters, the *channelling discontent thesis*, as it is termed here. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Dutch PVV voters and (deliberate) non-voters, I assess this thesis in a comparison between them. This analysis shows that non-voters do not lack political fulfilment on two of the three dimensions of efficacy I distinguish. On the third, it is not electoral participation, but respondents' perceptions of the locus of political power that explains differences in what I term 'meaningful' political agency. This inductively generated power-orientation theory contextualises the channelling discontent thesis, demonstrating that it only effectively applies to those citizens who share the definition of the situation the thesis assumes. I argue that these findings highlight an institutional blind spot in the study of populism and political discontents, and make a case for a cultural-sociological perspective.

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Introduction

(...) I thought there was no one who's listening anyway. And now, since Pim and Geert there are two who are listening (Interviewee Carola).

The emergence of populist political parties in Western Europe has given rise to much popular and academic debate. Many contemporary West European populist parties have a new-rightist character with anti-immigration agendas, making their influence on the quality of liberal democracy the centre of debate. On the one hand, these parties articulate the attitudes of

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significant portions of the respective populations, as can be illustrated by media ‘vox pops’ and election results, making them a classic example of legitimate democratic representation. On the other hand, their nativist anti-immigration agendas give rise to concerns about these parties’ allegiance to liberal democratic principles such as the rule of law and the rights of minorities (for example, Plattner, 2010; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

In their theoretical framework for the analysis of populism as a threat or a corrective to democracy, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) argue that this cannot be an either/or question, but that populism has some features that strengthen as well as others that weaken aspects of liberal democracy. These authors explain (part of) populism’s relation with democracy: ‘Since [democracy] is based on the periodic realization of free and fair elections, it provides a mechanism by which people can *channel their dissatisfaction* with the political establishment’ (2012, p. 17, emphasis added). Therefore, these ‘democratic benefits’ of populism comprise what will be termed here the *channelling discontent thesis*: the idea that the institutional articulation (in political parties) of popular discontents about politics and society benefits democracy and the people concerned. Discontented citizens, this line of thought argues, experience political fulfilment through voting for a party that voices their discontents, regardless of whether discontents are ‘expressed’ or (also) ‘fuelled’ (Rooduijn, Van der Brug, & De Lange, 2016; Van der Brug, 2003). This channelling discontent thesis refers to a broader assumption in classical democratic theory, one that can be traced back to de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1840/1998; cf. Lijphart, 1968, p. 170). This is the idea that political party organisations, or ‘intermediate groups [function] as channels through which popular participation in the larger society (especially in the national elites) may be directed and restrained’ (Kornhauser, 1960/1998, p. 77). This channelling function of organisations is also central to Almond and Verba’s (1963) influential theory of the civic culture as a recipe for stable democratic systems. Channelling is thus basically institutionalising popular political passions – or in this case discontents – in a rational, regulated fashion.

Whereas this theory seems compelling with regard to the level of democratic systems (i.e. nation states) at which it is formulated, it remains to be seen how it works out at the level of citizens. By extension, this theory would assert that voting for a populist party provides discontented citizens with a political ‘exhaust valve’ and a resulting sense of political fulfilment. Respondent Carola’s quote above resembles one of many that audiences have been able to see and hear in West European news and current

affairs programmes in the last two decades: ordinary citizens professing their feelings of fulfilment in connection with a populist politician who addresses issues that have, in their view, remained unaddressed for too long. It is this sense of popular political efficacy as a result of populist party voting that is central to this study.

It is, however, not self-evident that popular political discontents are satisfactorily ‘channelled’ into elections, because the populist ideology hosts an inherent anti-institutional tension. While populism has recently been analysed as a performative political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) and as a discursive frame rather than an ideology (cf. Aslanidis, 2015), the most influential definition of populism is Cas Mudde’s, who states that it is an ‘ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté generale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2007, p. 23; 2004, p. 543; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 8). It suggests that ‘the people’ wish to see their general will reflected in politics, *unrestrained* by regulations, laws, and procedures. This anti-institutionalism is a feature of populism that is widely recognised. ‘In general’, Kriesi notes (2014, p. 363), ‘populism has a strong anti-institutional impulse – the romantic impulse of directness, spontaneity and the overcoming of alienation (...).’ Its hostility towards institutionalisation can also be seen in the ways populist parties organise; Taggart argues that ‘populist parties organize themselves in ways that are in contrast to those of existing parties. One of the reasons for this is that populism has an inherent distrust of political institutions in general and political parties in particular’ (2000, p. 75; cf. Johansson, 2014). Taking this anti-institutionalist element into account, it is not at all self-evident that an ideal-typical populist citizen could be persuaded to vote for *any* party, even one that claims to challenge the establishment. Seen in this light, deliberately *not* voting is a justifiable alternative for discontented citizens. A party, after all, is bound by laws, procedures, and ‘the rules of the game’. While voting for a populist party should thus, on the one hand, generate a sense of democratic fulfilment, the necessity of rules, procedures, and compromises that such political participation brings in its wake may fuel frustrations because it makes the populist party resemble any other party.¹ Populism, in sum, may not always desire to be ‘channelled’.² This is therefore an inherent tension in populist ideology that may be negotiated by politically discontented citizens in different ways: some may attain a sense of political fulfilment from having their discontents channelled by

populist parties, while others who may abstain from voting are seemingly deprived of such an efficacious ‘exhaust valve’, but are also spared the ‘institutional frustration’ connected with it.

This article is the result of an inductive study of politically discontented citizens in the Netherlands and seeks to address this issue by comparing experiences of political fulfilment³ on the parts of populist-party voters and deliberate non-voters. Research shows that political discontents are highest among PVV voters and non-voters (CBS, 2011), so these are theoretically strategic categories to sample for research on these discontents. In the Netherlands, the populist radical-right Freedom Party (PVV, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*), led by Geert Wilders, has been the most successful populist party from 2006 onwards, continuing the legacy of the late populist Pim Fortuyn (Houtman, Achterberg, & Kemmers, 2012) with an agenda that combines anti-immigration (more specifically, anti-Islam) with anti-establishment discourse. The research question this study addresses is: *what are the differences in political efficacy between populist party voters and non-voters and how can these differences be explained?* Reflecting the inductive, theory-building character of the study, this article is constructed to alternate findings and theoretical reflection before answering the research question and addressing its implications.

Method and data

The focus of the research problem is on discontented citizens’ experiences, perceptions, and ‘definitions of the situation’, making in-depth interviews a straightforward data-collection method, as ‘individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111, emphasis in original). The aim is to find out how they make sense of politics, society, and account for their meaningful actions. To answer the research question, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 Dutch citizens who voted for the PVV or deliberately refrained from voting in the 2012 parliamentary elections. Comparing non-voters’ and PVV voters’ political fulfilment should permit an assessment of the channelling discontent thesis; after all, both categories consist of (largely) politically discontented citizens; one of these has their discontents channelled, and the other does not. Studying this negotiation between deliberate non-voting and voting for a populist party is, of course, facilitated by the Dutch electoral system of proportional representation, which sets a relatively low threshold for newly emerging

(anti-establishment) parties. In recruiting respondents, I looked for diversity within these two categories of respondents. Some interviewees were contacted through webforums and social media, where they had indicated their voting behaviour, others via informal networks, and some via snowball sampling. Since these respondents were not part of a random sample, but rather citizens who accepted an invitation to participate, they are likely to be more outspoken and politically aware, and therefore not representative of discontented citizens in general, nor of their respective categorical populations of populist-party voters or non-voters.⁴ (Table 1 provides a concise overview of the ‘sample.’

The non-voters were deliberate abstainers in the (largest) Dutch general elections for parliament. Deliberate non-voters are different from non-voters who, for example, may not vote because the weather was bad or who forgot about Election Day altogether: the respondents’ abstention therefore is meaningful social action in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1968/1978, p. 4). The sample consists of 10 deliberate non-voters in this sense and 8 PVV voters. All interviews were conducted between September 2012 and January 2013. The Dutch Second Chamber (general parliamentary) elections took place on 12 September 2012 and its campaigns, results, and consequences served as valuable topics for conversation. The radical-right populist party PVV (Freedom Party, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*) of Geert Wilders gained 10.1% of the vote and the turn-out rate was 74.6%, making the share of non-voters just over a quarter of the eligible electorate.⁵

Table 1. Overview of respondents’ names (pseudonym, as used), gender, age, and voting behaviour.

Name	Gender	Age	PVV/NV
Ron	M	64	PVV
Maria	F	64	PVV
Willem	M	68	PVV
Daan	M	21	PVV
Wouter	M	40	PVV
Carola	F	44	PVV
Henry	M	53	PVV
Tim	M	46	PVV
Theo	M	33	NV
Judith	F	44	NV
Chris	M	31	NV
Gerard	M	53	NV
Dennis	M	39	NV
Annemieke	F	39	NV
Eric	M	31	NV
Ben	M	63	PVV
Arthur	M	52	NV
Mark	M	58	NV

Most of the interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes, some in another location of their choosing, and they lasted between two and over six hours. I informed my respondents that their perspectives were underrepresented in social scientific knowledge and that our conversations were about *their* opinions, activities, and perspectives, and that there could thus be no right or wrong answers. This resulted in a generally pleasant atmosphere, frequent elaborations on their personal lives, and occasional invitations to the researcher to stay for dinner. This, along with the sheer openness they demonstrated in their answers, indicates that rapport was established (cf. Boeije, 2010, p. 62). The interviews were loosely structured around people's voting motivations, what they think is right or wrong about present-day politics, and how they evaluate the role of the media. In addition, a significant amount of time was used to talk about the respondent's biography, with a specific focus on how they attained their current perspectives on politics and society.⁶ The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the names of respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The results presented below are the product of an inductive analytic process that involves theoretical sampling and the constant comparison of cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This process started off with the straightforward assumption that populist-party voters attain a sense of political fulfilment, while non-voters do not. Upon encountering cases that contradicted this working hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 39; Charmaz, 2006, p. 103), an alternative explanation for differences in efficacy emerged inductively. This analysis is presented below in terms of a conceptualisation of political efficacy along three dimensions that was formed through connecting these emergent themes with established literature. These dimensions – collectivisation, representation, and 'meaningful' political agency – were then employed to re-read the data and compare non-voters and PVV voters, and serve to structure the results sections that follows.

Citizens' meaningful political agency

In order to be sensitive to politically discontented citizens' subjective sense of political fulfilment, we need to depart from the traditional conceptualisation of political efficacy, which refers to the 'feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process (...)' (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187), or 'judgments people hold about their abilities to perform effectively in the political domain'

(Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009, p. 1003). As a sensitising concept (Charmaz, 2006, Ch. 2) that ‘suggest[s] directions along which to look’ (Blumer, 1954, p. 7) in this study, an alternative conceptualisation is necessary because of a too-rigid focus on both ‘effectiveness’ and on ‘the political domain’. Politically discontented citizens, after all, may not regard the political domain as responsive enough, or politicians as trustworthy enough, for their actions to be able to be effective at all. Hence, their political activities may not be geared towards generating such effects. For the conceptualisation of efficacy to be open to discontented citizens’ possibilities of political fulfilment, it should focus on *meaning* instead of on *effect*, and on what people themselves define as political (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2010) instead of on the political domain in the technical sense. For this purpose, political efficacy is conceptualised here in terms of judgements people hold about their abilities to perform *meaningfully* in politics.

Collectivisation: A political sense of belonging

PVV voters, first of all, talked about being part of ‘a group of many’, or sometimes of ‘the majority’ of what they tend to refer to as common, or ‘ordinary people’. Talking about the most recent election results, or the rise of the PVV in general, these citizens interpret the expansion of the PVV’s social basis as a sign of recognition of their own and other ordinary people’s societal and political concerns. They express relief that their concerns are ‘finally’ voiced, as ‘something you have felt for a long time, but couldn’t put into words’ (Daan, 21). Respondent Maria (64), who, as many PVV voters do, sees in Wilders’ PVV a continuation of the ideology of the late Pim Fortuyn, says:

(...) I have also abstained from voting for years. It was actually when Pim Fortuyn came, that was when I thought like ‘Okay, this is clear, to the point, and exactly what I’m thinking,’ ideas I could see myself in. Not in the back rooms, but loud, clear and in the open.

In their qualitative study on how supporters of the Flemish populist party *Vlaams Belang* (VB) were transformed from individual citizens into an electorate, Kochuyt and Abts (2012) report that these supporters experienced a sense of collectivisation of their concerns for society: seeing the election results, these citizens report a feeling that they are ‘not alone’: ‘The growing number of [VB] votes holds up a mirror to loners who see that they together with many others constitute a silent majority’

(2012, p. 104, *author's translation*). Respondent Henry (53) also says that Fortuyn created an opening for ordinary people: 'He has made things clear for a lot of people in a very simple way. At first it [politics] was something for the elite and then these things started to become alive among the people.' That someone addressed their concerns made them feel part of a larger collectivity. The individual finds her multiplication in a collective, as Charles Taylor highlights this aspect of Tocqueville's theory:

Ordinary people acquire democratic efficacy, and therefore the sense of this efficacy, through a proliferation of voluntary associations. These are close enough to the base to be potentially under its control, and they have enough collective clout in the larger society to compel power wielders to listen to them. In the absence of such intermediary bodies, each individual would stand alone against state power and those who control it, utterly powerless to deflect its course and control its impact on their lives (2007, pp. 127–128).

For discontented voters, the electoral collectivity of a populist party electorate may therefore be experienced as being part of a group of like-minded people, or being part of an 'imagined political community' (Anderson, 1983/1991) of 'the people' that citizens may experience fulfilment in this sense. To put this in Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's terms: 'populism can give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites' (2012, p. 21).

Remarkably, when turning to the abstaining respondents, it became clear that a similar sense of collectivisation had accompanied their deliberate electoral inactivity. Non-voter Arthur (52) sees in the percentage of abstainers a form of affirmation of his views of contemporary politics. An artist and age-old loyal voter, he has always seen voting as a civic duty, but now he says he has had enough. When discussing the 25-or-so per cent of abstainers, he says that 'that means I'm part of a really big group of angry citizens.' And Mark (58), an unemployed process operator, is very active on weblogs on which he discusses the wrongdoings of politicians, royals, and businessmen, who come together in the Bilderberg group. He argues that the group of non-voters will have to grow in order to really make a difference: 'Twenty-four percent did not vote. That is not enough. It will only have an impact when 75–85% doesn't vote. That's when the people will get a voice (...), that's when it will be noticed.' These non-voters, therefore, consider themselves part of a larger group of dissatisfied citizens: the seemingly anonymous category of abstainers is made sense of as a more or less coherent collectivity. On the blog to which Mark frequently contributes in the comments sections, it was even posted that

‘the party of the non-voters had won the elections’ with their 25% share of the election results.

While this may seem an overly optimistic interpretation of the figures, it is only slightly different from the claim by political scientist E.E. Schattschneider in his seminal *The Semi-Sovereign People*, where he emphasises the potential power of the non-voting subpopulation:

[W]e are governed by invisible forces, for to an astonishing extent the [voting, *author*] sixty million are at the mercy of the [nonvoting, *author*] rest of the nation which could swamp all existing political alignments if it chose to do so. The whole balance of power in the political system could be overturned by a massive invasion of the political system, and nothing tangible protects the system against the flood. All that is necessary to produce the most painless revolution in history, the first revolution ever legalized and legitimized in advance, is to have a sufficient number of people do something not much more difficult than to walk across the street on election day (1960, pp. 98–99).

These deliberate non-voters, therefore, do not lag behind the PVV voters in terms of their political sense of belonging: while being part of a sizable and recognisable group does give the populist-party voters a sense of finally being heard, these non-voters appear to interpret their contribution to the election results with a similar sense of collectivisation.

Representation in the public sphere

Populism often addresses issues (such as immigration, law and order, or corruption) that have supposedly been addressed insufficiently or inadequately by the established parties of the political system in question. ‘[P]opulism can represent excluded sections of society by implementing policies that they prefer’, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser note as one of its benefits (2012, p. 21). To operationalise, this aspect emphasises citizens’ feeling of being represented in public debate and the public sphere. This sense of representation is indeed what the PVV voters in the sample attest to in the interviews. Maria notes that if it were not for the PVV ‘I think I wouldn’t go out to vote. Because (...) the others say this but do that. And I still feel that the PVV, Wilders, is the only one who tells it how it really is.’ And Willem (69) states that he ‘will remain loyal to Geert Wilders, that’s just how it is.’ Tim argues that voting for Wilders has yielded results, since it has brought the immigration problem into focus:

At one point politics had just abandoned us by letting them [immigrants] in. And that should just be stopped. They’re doing it now, but they should have closed the door a bit tighter 15 to 20 years ago (Tim).

Others value Wilders' presence on the stage for more pragmatic reasons. Ron, for instance, considers himself a classic Fortuynist and is less enchanted by Wilders. And Wouter sees in Wilders an important representation in public debate of a genuine anti-Islam voice, but he does not see Wilders protecting the Christian values he would prefer seeing represented. PVV-voting respondents also identify with policies that have been proposed by the PVV, but argue that Wilders is not always given the credit he deserves. Carola says that the coalition parties that Wilders supported until 2012 have co-opted his plans:

[F]rom the beginning, they did not really want to cooperate with him. He has tried everything to make it work. He has had to make concessions and they have constantly given him a hard time. And once he was out, in the blink of an eye they cut the budget for development aid! All these issues he stands for, he had had to make compromises for, they did them anyway! And he gets the blame [for blowing up the coalition, author]! That's when I think this is just outrageous (Carola).

Regarding the PVV voters in the sample, it can be said that their support indeed makes them feel represented in the public sphere, as well as confident that actual results have been achieved. Charles Taylor illustrates this dimension of efficacy by using the gains of the historical working-class movement as a concrete example:

Just as a private in a victorious army may share in the sense of triumph even though the general never asked his opinion, so can a worker, a peasant, or small craftsman in a condition of relative class war have a sense of efficacy from the collective gains of the movement (Taylor, 2007, p. 128).

Experiencing representation in the public sphere may take shape in political institutions, as in seeing that one's issues are addressed in parliament, but also in the broader arena of public opinion and debate. Indeed, many 'new' social movements from the 1960s onwards do not engage in their claims-making for the sake of influencing state policy. They 'are not focused on the political system' (Melucci, 1980, p. 220), but rather see themselves as 'involved in struggles over the definition of meanings and the construction of new identities and lifestyles' (Nash, 2000, pp. 100–101).

Among the non-voting respondents in the sample, this sense of representation in the public sphere is – again – not absent, as might be expected. As indicated above, Mark and his online friends from his forum discuss and propagate non-voting among themselves. While this may be confined to the virtual spaces they frequent, this cannot be said

of Chris (31) and Gerard (53), who, apart from their online activities, had set up a non-voting campaign before the 2010 elections. In this campaign, they printed, and distributed throughout the country, posters that advertised their 'I don't vote' website, through which they informed visitors about how voting maintains a corrupt system in which decisions are made regardless of the outcome of elections. And these activities have yielded real results, they argue. Chris notes that he is witnessing a change in people's awareness:

Five years ago, if you posted a comment on a forum saying something anti-political, you would generate a lot of counter-reactions. And my experience is that if you do the same now, you won't get any reaction. People aren't opposing it any more, they are increasingly agreeing that this is not a democracy, that it is not our interests that are being served (Chris).

And Gerard, who posts on his own website his analyses of how the New World Order has set up democracy to make Western populations believe that they are in control, is increasingly receiving invitations to give lectures or take part in meetings in groups of businesspeople and scientists:

Regularly, I get invited for small clubs of people who think collaboratively on certain topics. Small think-tanks. With all sorts of people. For example I recently took part in a think-tank of economists. So then I was sitting among economics professors.

He sees this as a sign of increasing responsiveness to his ideas and analyses. These examples demonstrate that that these non-voters' means of raising awareness and achieving cultural change, which is often the goal of non-institutionalised politics (e.g. Nash, 2000), appear to be working very well for them. Summarising: in terms of experiencing visibility in the public sphere and in attaining results, PVV voters and deliberate non-voters do not diverge in their satisfaction with their respective decisions.

Meaningful political agency

Thus far, this study has contended that the populist-party voters do not necessarily have an advantage over the deliberate non-voters in terms of a sense of belonging to a larger collectivity and representation in the public sphere. One of the most often acknowledged benefits of populism for democracy is that it 'can mobilize excluded sections of society (...), improving their political integration', as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser note (2012, p. 21). Populism thus provides citizens with an opportunity

for meaningful political action. The spectrum of possible political activities is, however, not confined to electoral participation alone. As argued above, especially when political discontents are concerned, institutional political participation is not always straightforward: political action need not be geared towards the ‘official’ political-institutional infrastructure. Not much is known about the motivations of non-voters, but research does show that abstention from electoral participation does not unequivocally imply complete disengagement (e.g. Doppelt & Shearer, 1999; Wuthnow, 2002; Shyrane, Fieldhouse, & Pickles, 2006; Bennett, Corder, Klein, Savell, & Baiocchi, 2013; Hooghe & Marien, 2013). People can perform meaningful political activities via other means too, as will become clear below.

When it comes to examining these respondents’ meaningful political activities, however, a divergence emerges, one that does not coincide with the distinction between non-voters and populist-party voters. When I noticed some PVV voters who *did not* and some non-voters who *did* experience fulfilment from their respective political actions, it became clear that an alternative to the channelling discontent thesis was needed. The contours of this alternative explanation thus became visible after some of the interviews appeared to contradict the channelling discontent thesis.

Power-orientation theory

This alternative explanation is here termed *power orientation* and it refers to a subjective sense of where the centre of political power is located. It is a latent – that is, not always explicit – ‘definition of the situation’ that structures individuals’ observations, interpretations, and subsequent meaningful actions, and it is often implicit in their ways of talking about politics and society, in how they refer to political power. These definitions of the power situation, or *schemas* of power (Tannen & Wallat, 1987; Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614), concern answers to questions like ‘How do political decisions come about?’ ‘Who makes these decisions?’ ‘What processes determine who will be in charge?’ and ‘Which institutions are important in these processes?’ There are two poles to this dimension. The first consists of the (conventional) position that political power is concentrated in the official legislative institutions: the government, supported by a majority of the elected representatives in parliament. This is therefore an orientation to the official, or conventional, system of politics, as it is laid down in official laws and is canonised and taught in schools.

Such an orientation is referred to here as a *transparent* power orientation. In this study, respondents who tend towards this position refer to 'The Hague' (the governing capital of the Netherlands), the political parties that operate in it, and the politicians whose faces personify Dutch politics when they talked about politics and political power. Respondent Tim gave an apt illustration of such an orientation when asked why he thinks going out to vote is so important:

Because the people you can vote for, they are going to govern your life. They will decide what your life is going to look like, now and in the future. So it's very important to think about that and, yeah, well ... (...) participate. I just think that's an obligation, you're obligated, to yourself and to society (Tim).

What Tim describes as his definition of the political situation is an example of what I have termed a transparent power orientation: political representatives who are elected in official elections legitimately decide how the government is to act.

At the opposite end of this dimension, there is the orientation that considers power to be in the hands of 'unofficial' forces. Respondents who tend towards this end of the dimension may refer to abstract market forces represented in discourse about 'neoliberalism' and 'multinationals', as Judith does when she says she was surprised to find out 'to what extent politics resembles child's play when compared to the power of multinationals and the economic sector more generally.' But people at this pole of the dimension may also refer to more explicit analyses of undemocratic coalitions, for example, offering accounts involving the Bilderberg group or the New World Order, acting to pursue their goals and interests. Since accounts like this imply unofficial forces pulling strings behind the public scenes, this end of the dimension is termed an *opaque* power orientation. Respondents at this end of the dimension only refer to the official system in order to deny its importance when compared to 'those really in charge'. When respondent Gerard, for instance, is asked why he thinks 'the power elite', as he calls it, is more powerful than ('official') politics, he says 'simply because what they do has more influence than what politics does' (Gerard).

This ideal-typical dimension turns out to be more fruitful in explaining differences in political fulfilment among these discontented citizens than the initial working hypothesis that differentiates between populist voting and deliberate non-voting. The sections below will illustrate how both power orientations 'work' to produce these differences.

'I'm not taking part in this any more': Transparent power orientations

The PVV voters in the sample who consider the Dutch governing capital The Hague as the centre of political power report experiencing fulfilment from their votes. They say that they follow political news on a daily basis and in talking about politics, they refer to the type of things the media report on when it comes to politics: what is discussed under the heading of current affairs, statements by political leaders on these issues, and the differences between them. These respondents' sense of fulfilment is illustrated by their trust in the view that Geert Wilders' ideas and proposals will alter the existing hegemony of the established parties, and that their votes will bring this future situation a step closer. Respondent Willem states that he has been active in filing complaints against misleading advertisements for over 35 years. He does this because he values honesty: 'People are being fooled, they are being deceived right in front of their noses. I support truthfulness and honesty.' In Geert Wilders and his plans, Willem recognises exactly the virtues he holds so dear: 'That's what I think is receiving due attention in Geert Wilders' [plans].' Such positive experiences also inspire further involvement: Carola received attention from Wilders himself when she started to attend party meetings. As she recounts it, this makes her feel part of a community:

And that's when you meet Geert himself and Fleur [Agema, a PVV MP, author] and just the whole group, they're just great people. And Geert, he just recognises me in one way or another. (...) He'll say, 'Hey there, nice to see you.'

Respondent Maria, who also has faith in Wilders' plans, is convinced that

Wilders is the only one who tells it like it is. And he doesn't just talk, but he acts as well. And that doesn't mean that he will deliver everything, but you can tell that he is striving for that. And I think that is just as important. Not everyone will achieve their goal in life, but striving for it may be just as fulfilling (Maria).

Maria's remark underlines the importance of how political activity may not be as *effective* as conventional politics in terms of influencing decision-making, but may nonetheless be meaningful in terms of 'giving fulfilment' to people who engage in it (Canovan, 1999).

Respondents with a transparent power orientation who abstained from voting, however, do not report the fulfilment that Maria and Willem do. Although their transparent power orientation provides them with a clear idea of where and by whom political power is performed, their abstention from participation in the elections appears to give them a sense of

powerlessness. They agree that they have, at least temporarily, turned their backs on it. Arthur says that he had been a loyal voter for all his life, but that now he has given up on politics:

The last couple of years I started thinking will I go [out to vote] or won't I? And then at the last moment I eventually did go, but now I am really through with it. We've seen such ridiculous situations in the Hague and ehm, I'm not taking part in this any more, I don't belong to these people any more, I don't feel comfortable any more with this, with these people (Arthur).

As he is not politically active in any other way, Arthur's statement displays a sense of disillusionment and resignation. And this is understandable because the only relevant political power has fallen out of favour with him. Eric is a similar kind of first-time non-voter for whom frustration has built up in the last years:

I've done my civic duty for a long time, but politicians have long neglected their duties to rule the country. For years, not since [the mid-90s]. And then I am supposed to go out to vote again ... , to make an effort for a cabinet that will probably not think about governing? (Eric).

These men are not active in other types of political involvement that might counter the establishment or in seeking alternatives, so their abstention is the only meaningful means of political action they use. As Eric summarises it, when he reacts to a commonly heard criticism of non-voters:

It's just not true that you're not taking your civic responsibility if you don't vote. Not voting is also an expression of 'I'm through with it, I don't want this any more.' This is not my government, not my representation. And that's also an expression, that's also a form of voting.

This shows that among respondents with a transparent power orientation, the PVV voters experience fulfilment from their political actions while the non-voters do not. These PVV voters are excited that things are finally changing for the better: their discontent, we may conclude, has been successfully 'channelled'. But although the non-voters report their abstention as meaningful behaviour, as signalling a clear message to the world of politics, their statements and their further inaction exude a sense of resignation, a display of powerlessness.

'A crowbar to disrupt the establishment': opaque power orientations

The PVV voters who verge towards an opaque power orientation occupy a somewhat ambivalent position. These are people whose perceptive scope

extends beyond the borders of institutional politics and for whom their votes for the PVV therefore have different meanings from that they had for PVV voters with a transparent power orientation. This becomes clear from their analyses of politics. Ron, for instance, refers to himself as an ‘intellectual PVV voter’, as someone who does not blindly follow Wilders, but sees in him a tool with which the establishment may be opened up:

[T]he intellectuals who vote for him, or the people who have a wider view on society, they’re using him, as I’m doing, as a crowbar. As a man who disrupts the system, allowing for an opportunity so that more sound people ... (...) so that change will come and that the Establishment will be, in a manner of speaking, forced by the crowbar to take different positions. Whether it’s a utopia, time will tell. I’m afraid it is. You just don’t crash into an established fortress that easily with a little crowbar (Ron).

Respondent Ben, who self-identifies as Jewish-Christian, is an example of how channelling discontent can generate its own discomfort. Since he is mostly concerned about the threat he says Islam poses for the Western world and about the European Union’s growth in political power at the expense of nation states, he welcomes Wilders’ radical opposition on these issues. The EU, Ben argues, is more and more coming to resemble the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. ‘God gave us different languages because he intended people to live in small groups,’ he argues, and he thus considers the EU the antithesis to the divine will. However, Geert Wilders does not profess the Christian values Ben would also like to see represented. This discontent with the PVV made Ben decide to vote ‘none of the above’ in the 2012 elections:

Well, I think I did that [vote for the PVV] twice and then I saw how the PVV was also a disappointment, especially its lack of a Biblical tone. They’ve never had that and politically the party is also badly organised: it’s ridiculous to continue that one-man show.⁷ And that’s when I thought I’m through with it, apparently there’s nothing I can vote for, so I will vote for no-one (Ben).

Ben, who was recruited as a PVV voter in this study, ‘admits’ that, while he has voted for the PVV several times, he has now voted ‘none of the above’ out of discontent with the PVV. This marks the ambivalence of people with an opaque power orientation towards voting: both Ron and Ben argue that unofficial forces are dominating the political landscape and that their votes for the PVV are best understood in terms of Ron’s crowbar metaphor. Both of them are active in their blogs in publishing their analyses of corruption within ‘the Establishment’ or ‘the leftist

church' (Ron), or of the (Christian) road to 'real Truth' and the dangers of Islam (Ben). Henry reports a similar ambivalence: he votes for the PVV and agrees with its party leader Wilders, but he places his real hopes for change in extra-parliamentary action. In particular, he considers new media such as blogs and YouTube 'a real power for the people in the streets' because their power is not controlled by the Establishment as mainstream media are. In this excerpt from the interview, he wonders

What if it were as big as ehm, what's it called, from Korea, that clip?

R: 'Gangnam Style?'

Henry: 'Yeah, that one, imagine that in a political sense.'

R: 'And receiving 200 million views.'

Henry: 'Do you think that could spread all over the world? Or would it be cut off somewhere down the line?'

Henry's ambivalence thus revolves around his hopes for the possibilities of uncontrolled (social) media in creating a grass-roots mass political movement, and his fear of the power of the Establishment to control what messages actually reach the people.

Abstainers with an opaque power orientation appear to be remarkably active outside electoral politics. They participate, for instance, in Occupy or in other (for instance anarchist) collectives. A week before the elections, Judith (46) organised a voting-pass-burning event, which was announced in a press release and recorded on video, thereby dramatically *performing* her abstention from the elections in public in front of an audience. The fact that she did not do this to influence institutional politics became clear when I asked her about it:

[I]t is not so much a signal to politics, because I couldn't care less if they hear about it or not. What I want is to let other people know: hear this, you don't have to accept things the way they are presented to you.

It is clear that Judith is someone who is very politically engaged, albeit exclusively outside the institutional domain. As a self-identified anarchist, she takes autonomy and self-responsibility very seriously and thus, when a number of asylum-seekers expressed the wish to learn the Dutch language, she started teaching them, without notifying the centre at which they were awaiting their procedures:

Well, you go and visit the centre and you have to register with someone [an inhabitant]. So I just go and visit someone, he registers me and we go and sit in the canteen and do the lesson. That's a political choice that has a lot to do with autonomy (Judith).

When respondent Mark discussed his motives for abstention, he presented his (unused) voting pass, in a frame, as a non-voting trophy to be hung on the wall, saying 'I'm proud of this.' He said that he developed the idea of doing this with his friends on the web forum he frequents. For Mark and Judith, their abstention was therefore a powerful message that was announced, performed, and documented before a real-life or virtual audience.

Other instances of politically meaningful activities these non-voting respondents engaged in had to do with work and consumption. Protesting against the waste of good products in contemporary consumer society, the anarchist couple Annemieke and Dennis had been active 'dumpster divers' for about a year. They collected two or three carloads of produce from trash containers at wholesale companies and distributed it among families on welfare. And Dennis, who works as a truck driver, has told his boss he refuses to do assignments for one of the company's customers, agricultural multinational Monsanto: 'I just don't want anything to do with it. (...) And in fact, announcing this raises some eyebrows.' His refusal is respected by his boss, as long as it does not lead to any conflicts in the work schedule. Dennis accepts the fact that he is not eligible for welfare if he were to lose his job for this reason: 'So be it. [B]ut otherwise I'd think I'd just be a hypocrite (...) while I am just absolutely opposed to that company.' Meaningful political activity, for these respondents, can cover anything but electoral activity.

Among those respondents with opaque power orientations, a feeling of political efficacy is manifested quite clearly among the non-voters, in contrast to the PVV voters. These PVV voters' accounts are characterised by ambivalence over their votes, while the non-voters are rewardingly active outside the electoral realm of politics. In sum, the channelling discontent thesis appears to be reversed among those with opaque power orientations.

Conclusion

This study has assessed the assumption that populist parties form an efficacious exhaust valve for voters, the channelling discontent thesis. By comparing Dutch PVV voters with non-voters and focusing on the meanings these citizens attribute to their (non-)votes, it has sought to answer the research question: *what are the differences in political efficacy between populist-party voters and non-voters and how can these differences be explained?*

To answer this question, I conceptualised political efficacy in a way that makes it sensitive to the political agency of politically discontented citizens by distinguishing between the dimensions of collectivisation, representation in the public sphere, and meaningful political agency. The analysis shows that PVV voters do not have a systematic advantage over non-voters with regard to the first two dimensions: non-voters do not lack a sense of belonging to a collectivity or a feeling of being represented in public debate. Examining meaningful political action, however, my respondents' accounts were sometimes actually contrary to what one would expect based on the channelling discontent thesis. This thesis, therefore, does not adequately explain differences in political efficacy between non-voters and populist-party voters.

Instead, a different dimension was inductively conceptualised that does explain these differences. This dimension I termed power orientation; it consists of the respondents' (sometimes implicit) definitions of the situation with regard to where political power is located and who the main actors are who possess such power. This dimension was conceptualised with two ideal-typical poles: a *transparent power orientation*, in which the conventional (or official) notion of politics is the centre of political power; and an *opaque power orientation*, in which the power of 'official politics' is denied in favour of shady, undemocratic forces pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Among those with a transparent power orientation, populist-party voters did report political fulfilment while non-voters did not; and among those with an opaque power orientation, the non-voters appeared to have an efficacious advantage over the populist-party voters, one that is related to their non-institutional political activities.

The channelling discontent thesis, therefore, may seem convincing at the system level at which it has been developed, but when it comes to ordinary citizens' experiences, it appears that these people *themselves* do not always share its underlying assumptions. 'Channelling discontent' as a function of populist political parties 'works' only for citizens whose orientations to power allow it to work. For discontented citizens who localise power outside the system – and such an orientation to politics is gaining ground (cf. Aupers, 2012; Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Harambam, 2017) – engaging in electoral political activity is either met with ambivalence or deemed nonsensical: parties do not appeal to them. Instead, they evade the system by engaging in meaningful activities outside the political-institutional infrastructure of voting and parties (cf. Eliasoph, 1998; Bennett et al., 2013). The power-orientation theory

presented here thus does not so much contradict as *contextualise* the channelling discontent thesis that is often mentioned as one of the benefits of populism for democracy.

These findings demonstrate the importance of taking seriously the perceptions of the people involved, not just in their (non)voting motivations, but also in the definitions of the situation that underlie such motivations. This recalls Eliasoph and Lichterman's notion of 'cultures of politics', which they contrast with different definitions of 'political culture': 'A focus on cultures of politics helps us ask how and when people decide they are doing something "political", instead of defining individuals, organizations, or issues as political, powerful or not powerful by scholarly fiat' (2011, p. 491). The present analysis has shown that among the non-voting respondents, for instance, there is a certain 'consensus' in their non-voting motivations: they all say in some way that they 'don't want to take part in this charade.' But beneath these motivations lie very different definitions of the situation, which, in their turn, fuel different actions and experiences.⁸

This study therefore sheds light on a blind spot in social theory on political discontents in which 'conventional understandings of politics as linked to public discussion and decision making in designated institutional sites' (Dean, 2014, p. 454) are taken as an exclusive point of reference. Although this practice may cause less theoretical concern in other areas of study, when studying populism or 'political disaffection' in Western democracies (e.g. Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006), significant aspects of politically relevant meaning-making and behaviour will escape this dominant framework. Related to this, the present study also emphasises the inherent anti-institutional tension in populist ideology. This insight, combined with the fact that studies by Mudde (2007; 2010) and Elchardus and Spruyt (2012) show that populist ideologies are much more widely shared than would be indicated just by the electoral bases or party programmes of the available populist parties (see also Rooduijn, 2013; Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Kemmers, Aupers, Houtman, & van der Waal, 2015), suggests that scholars of populism as an ideology would do well to look beyond the realm of institutionalised politics and delve more deeply into the varying ways ordinary citizens themselves make sense of populism. This paper's cultural-sociological analysis, with its focus on meaning, performance, and practices, is thus able to contribute to what has been termed 'an affective and aesthetic turn in democratic theory' (Coleman, 2013, p. 234; cf. Saward, 2006).

Finally, in this study, I have advanced a conceptualisation of political efficacy that is more sensitive to citizens' fulfilment from political activities that are not geared towards the institutional domain. Future quantitative research may benefit from this by designing surveys that include reference to this sensitivity to anti-establishment attitudes. Survey questions are not seldom formulated in such a way as to inquire to what degree individuals feel able to influence 'institutional' politics (Campbell et al., 1954; Hooghe, 2003; Caprara et al., 2009). Anti-elite ('populist') individuals who oppose the establishment (and may approve of an outsider – or populist – politician) are in such cases classified as inefficacious; in fact, they may have flourishing political lives with regard to this outsider politician or outside the official political realm altogether. Including such items alongside those already in use would allow the distinction between (internal) political efficacy – with an orientation towards system and effectiveness – on the one hand, and more broadly meaningful political agency – allowing for a wider range of meaningful political action – on the other. The former would then still be used as an indicator of the perceived legitimacy of the system (e.g. Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990), while the latter would allow us also to capture discontented citizens' political meanings and actions.

Notes

1. Taggart (2000, Ch. 1) uses this point to argue that populist parties have a limited growth capacity: as soon as one grows too large, it will fall apart.
2. See also Canovan's (1999) discussion of populism's appeal to the redemptive side of democracy, which is contrasted by the 'pragmatic' side that relates to consensus seeking and taking responsibility.
3. In essence, political efficacy and political fulfilment refer to the same thing. In this article, the term 'political efficacy' is used when referring to the theoretical concept and 'fulfilment' as indicating the reported concrete experiences of citizens.
4. The data collection was not intended to collect a representative sample of either discontented citizens in general, or PVV voters or non-voters in particular. Rather, it was (purposeful) theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 96–122), by which I aim at theory building and choose each next respondent based on what they can contribute to the emerging theory. In that effort, a study of the more outspoken individuals of a broader social current may be 'the best strategy to obtain "information-rich" cases that can give in-depth insight into the subject of study' (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling, 2013, p. 702) Thus, in the beginning, I aimed at as much diversity as possible;

later, I started to focus on the emerging categories that appeared theoretically most fruitful.

5. Official public Databank election results of the Kiesraad at <http://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/Na1918/Verkiezingsuitslagen.aspx?VerkiezingsTypeId=1> (retrieved 28 May 2017). Since compulsory voting was abolished in 1970, turnout rates in the Netherlands have not been high or low compared to other European countries (Blais & Aarts, 2006, pp. 41–43), and are among the top third compared with other OECD countries, according to Pew Research (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/02/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>, retrieved 28 May 2017).
6. The biographical part of the interviews deserves mentioning here because it considerably influenced the length of the interviews, but obviously also contributed to the rapport noted above. The ‘socialisation’ of the respondents into their current perspectives, is, however, part of another analysis, that answers a different research question (Kemmers, Aupers, & van der Waal, 2016). For the current analysis, it is relevant because the insights used to answer the present research question have come from also taking those parts of the interviews into account.
7. Ben refers here to the party structure of the PVV; the party has only one member (Wilders). The party has attracted criticism on this account and has even seen representatives leave because of it. Wilders and his associates generally legitimise their case by expressing a fear of hostile infiltration once membership would be opened up to all.
8. The exit-voice-loyalty framework (Hirschman, 1970) has been suggested at different occasions as possibly applicable to the analysis of non-voters in this study. Applying it in the realm of democratic theory, Warren (2011) made a case for ‘exit’ as a form of empowerment, theorising that the possibility to exit and choose an alternative option benefits the quality of democracy. The opposite of exit, he argues, is the lack of options, a monopoly. However, both Hirschman’s and Warren’s theory theorises ‘exit’ in relation to the objective qualities of the democratic system, not – as I am doing here – as a meaningful course of action based on citizens’ subjective definition of the political situation. Whether exit – either as choosing a different party or as non-voting (Warren, 2011; Schäfer, 2016, respectively) – is efficacious therefore depends on whether a citizen *experiences* either a range of alternative options, or a monopoly.

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