Becoming politically discontented: Anti-establishment careers of Dutch nonvoters and PVV voters

Roy Kemmers*

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Jeroen van der Waal

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Stef Aupers

KU Leuven, Belgium

* Corresponding author: Roy Kemmers, Erasmus University College, Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Nieuwemarkt 1A, 3011 HP Rotterdam, The Netherlands. e-mail: kemmers@euc.eur.nl

Abstract

Popular political discontent has become increasingly salient in western countries in recent decades, as can be witnessed by the rise of populist anti-establishment parties, nonvoting and increasing distrust in politics. However, these phenomena have predominantly been treated as 'democracy's deviants', neglecting the perspectives of the people concerned. Taking an inductive approach, this article examines how ordinary citizens come to turn away from established politics. Drawing on in-depth interviews with politically discontented Dutch nonvoters and PVV voters, the article develops a three-stage 'anti-establishment career' – 'introduction', 'validation' and 'consolidation' – through which their conceptions of politics gradually change. This deviant career model takes into account the dynamics and agency involved in the process, in contrast to conceptions of discontented citizens as utterly passive and anomic. The article concludes by arguing for more cultural-sociological sensitivity in the use of concepts referring to social-political action.

In contemporary Western Europe, popular attitudes towards established politics display a growing sense of cynicism and distrust. In recent elections in countries like France (Viscusi, 2013), the United Kingdom (Hope, 2013) and the Netherlands (Kiesraad, 2012), as well as in the European Parliament (Taylor, 2014), anti-establishment parties have firmly installed themselves. The relative success of these parties reflects a broader trend of rising levels of distrust in established politics. These manifestations of political discontent cannot be fully understood with reference to the recent financial-economic crisis and the subsequent austerity policies. In fact, (populist) anti-establishment parties have been on the rise at least since the 1990s (e.g., Kriesi, 1993; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), and the debate on the decline in levels of trust in governments and politics finds its roots in the 1970s (Bovens and Wille, 2008; Crozier et al., 1975; Dalton, 2005; Pharr and Putnam, 2000).

To explain declining levels of trust, aggregate trust levels are generally related to historical processes and political or economic performance (e.g., Hendriks, 2009; Van de Walle et al., 2008). In coming to terms with the origins of this apparent 'political disaffection' (Pharr and Putnam, 2000), however, the theories that have been formulated have not found empirical corroboration, especially when it comes to longitudinal changes. In a recent cross-national study, the hypothesis that trust levels vary with a country's economic performance, for instance, is rejected (Van der Meer, 2010). At best, citizen's subjective evaluations of the economy matter (cf. Keele, 2007; Van de Walle et al., 2008). And since such '*objective* factors' did not provide satisfactory answers, Van der Meer concludes, 'we should now attempt to understand the mechanisms of political trust at the micro-level through citizens' *perceptions* of the political system' (2010: 532).

This study makes such an attempt. More in particular, the aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how citizens turn away from established politics. We do so by focusing on the micro-level as suggested by Van der Meer. Taking an inductive approach, our research question is: How do citizens become politically discontented?

Political discontents as deviant repertoires

In the political-sociological tradition, political phenomena like nonvoting, support for anti-establishment parties and political distrust have been treated as 'exotic' phenomena in need of explanation. This can perhaps be understood through the fact that they appear to fit uneasily with dominant conceptions of representative liberal democracy and the role of established political parties therein. Nonparticipation in elections is, for instance, considered 'a major dilemma for representative democracy', of which the 'goal should be not just universal *suffrage* but universal or near-universal *turnout*' (Lijphart, 1997: 1–2). Further, populist parties define themselves through their opposition to established political parties as well as by advocating radical change from those parties and politicians which are referred to as a 'corrupt elite' (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000).

Decreasing levels of trust in governments and political institutions have been interpreted as undermining democracy's stability (Almond and Verba, 1963; Crozier et al., 1975). Almond and Verba's influential argument, for instance, holds that the stability of democracies relies on a combination of citizen activity and passivity and that this balance is only maintained if politics is 'mild' and 'not intense' (1963: 483). As Vivien Hart (1978: 5) notes: '[t]he assumption that the civic culture was the basis for stable democracy defined such criticism [political distrust,

authors] from the public, accurate or not, as a destabilizing factor', rendering distrust 'misguided and anti-democratic'.

In these academic accounts, political discontents are thus not merely considered exotic, but are also considered undesirable and deviant. This is indicated by the choice of terminology: political distrust has been described as a 'dysfunction of democracy' that threatens the governability of society (Crozier et al., 1975: 161–163; cf. Putnam, 1993; Stoker, 2006). And while a more neutral approach is gaining ground (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mény and Surel, 2002; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), populism has been termed 'pathological' (Rosanvallon and Goldhammer, 2008) and 'not a promise continuous with one of the pillars of constitutional democracy, but [it] rather embodies a discontinuous degeneration of its democratic logic' (Abts and Rummens, 2007: 420).[1] Given this dominant perspective, it is not surprising that in much of the social-scientific literature these issues are not simply observed, but 'diagnosed'; they are consequently not merely phenomena in need of an explanation, but also in need of a 'remedy' (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Stoker, 2006). And with regard to nonvoting Putnam has taken this literally: 'Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself' (2000: 35). Indeed, as Mudde (2010: 1181) argues when discussing radical right-wing populism, the dominant approach is to consider it 'a pathology . . . which has only limited support under normal consequences'. In sum, discontents towards established political parties and institutions have predominantly been interpreted as deviant phenomena – as (temporary) aberrations of how things 'really' ought to be.

The dominant explanations for widespread political discontents support this assumption that these are deviant social groups. It is claimed that those discontents can especially be found among the so-called 'losers of modernization' (cf. Bornschier, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2008; Mudde,

2010). Those 'losers' – conceptualized in terms of those with a weak labor-market position and low cultural capital (Van der Waal and Houtman, 2011; Van der Waal et al., 2010) – are said to suffer from feelings of confusion or resentment because of the consequences of globalization and are hence labeled as the disgruntled social bases of democracy's deviances (e.g., Klingemann, 1968; Lipset, 1963 [1960]). Lipset already argued that extremist movements appeal 'to the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian personalities' (1963 [1960]: 178). And similar arguments have been made ever since, with an emphasis on the role modernization plays for the discontents among those social groups. In seeing these political discontents as cognitive errors resulting from an inability to deal with an increasingly complex modern society, this perspective shows its blind spot for the potential agency in how these people make sense of politics. The central tenet of this 'losers of modernization theory', in short, is that modern society's rapid developments produce insecurities among those who cannot adapt.

'Anti-establishment careers'

The problem with both analyses – political discontents' supposed deviance and the alleged loser-status of their social bases – is not (only) that they depart from normative assumptions about citizenship and democracy, but mainly that they rely on an *etic* perspective on how these people turn away from established politics. This restricts the possibility of theory formation on how the thoughts and actions of the people that are generally considered politically deviant can be understood from their own respective positions (Kemmers et al., 2015). This is remarkable, particularly since the sociology of deviance has a long tradition of studies in which a micro-level

(*emic*) perspective is found valuable to understand 'deviant behavior' without reproducing the associated labels. As Howard Becker contends:

> Discovering something that seems so bizarre and unintelligible that our only explanation is some form of 'They must be crazy' should alert us that we don't know enough about the behavior under study. It's better to assume that it makes some kind of sense and to look for the sense it makes. (1998: 28)

Deviance, from this perspective, may appear incomprehensible at first glance but becomes logical, intelligible and meaningful by taking into account the processes these individuals' 'deviant careers' go through. Such studies yielded valuable insights on how people develop these careers, and how they make sense of ideas, experiences and behaviors that are disqualified by dominant groups; it is 'an individual's movement through the deviant experience' (Luckenbill and Best, 1981: 197). We expect that taking a similar approach is fruitful in uncovering how the 'political deviants' that this study focuses on came to reject established politics, and we therefore suggest to look for the sense this makes to them.

Often relying on an inductive approach, this type of research focuses on individual biographies and the ways they are (re-)constructed. Not relying on statistical generalization, inductive research instead allows for inferences with regard to the necessary preconditions for a given type of behavior (Katz, 2001: 12). Drawing from that tradition, we examine how Dutch citizens have become politically discontented.

Recruiting respondents

Becoming politically discontented is not something that happens in a fixed direction, i.e., not every person who turns away from established political parties will vote for a populist party. There are other options available as well. Rather than signifying very particular phenomena, political discontent is conceptualized here as a broad categorization that may encompass various manifestations of dissatisfaction with established politics. In doing so we follow Gamson, who was similarly concerned with phenomena like 'distrust, alienation, dissatisfaction, disaffection', which 'fall roughly under the rubric of "discontent" ' (1968: 39). To study the way ordinary citizens account for their disaffection with established politics means attending to the way they construct their motivations on their own terms. This makes it appropriate to utilize in-depth interviews.

Since the aim of this study is to understand how discontented citizens have come to turn away from established politics, it makes sense to recruit respondents among categories of citizens that report the highest rates of distrust of politicians and political parties. A recent study by Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2011) reported that, analyzed by voting behavior, the highest levels of distrust of politics can be found among voters for Geert Wilders' right-wing populist Freedom Party (PVV, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*) and nonvoters. Therefore, we set out to recruit and conduct interviews with citizens who had either deliberately not voted in the elections, or had voted for the PVV.

Respondents were recruited online or via intermediaries who heard of the research project and knew of potential respondents, and some respondents were recruited via snowball sampling. Our sample may thus represent the more outspoken part of the larger population of nonvoters

and PVV voters. However, since it is exactly these people's reflections and ways of making sense of politics that will contribute to answering our research question, this is more an advantage than a limitation for this study. In total 18 respondents were interviewed, with interviews ranging in length from somewhat less than two to six hours. Two nonvoters are a couple and were interviewed together. Since one of the PVV-voting respondents and one of the nonvoters reported not to be discontented with established politics, these interviews have been left out of the present analysis.

The interviews were loosely structured around respondents' voting motivations, their analyses of current political affairs, the role of the media and how they have changed their minds over these issues in the course of their lives. One part of the interview inquired into respondents' life histories. Here, the focus was on where they come from, how they grew up and what (biographical) events, experiences or significant others had had a meaningful impact on them. This, in turn, allowed for the question of whether s/he has experienced any specific turning points (Plummer, 2001). The majority of the interviews took place in respondents' homes, sometimes also with their partners or children present; their (frequent) invitations to the first author to stay for dinner are indications of an atmosphere in which they felt free to speak their minds.

A well-known problem of life history interviewing (and oral history projects in general) is that it is practically impossible to assess the truth of the respondents' accounts (Johnston, 2013; Kohler Riessman, 2001). 'Any person', Goffman notes on this, 'constructs an image of his life course – past, present and future – which selects, abstracts, and distorts in such a way as to provide him with a view of himself that he can usefully expound in current situations' (1961: 150). Apart from that, respondents may choose to not talk about certain episodes of their lives,

either with or without notifying the researcher. This problem also affects this study, but not as much as it does for historical research that aims to unravel fact from fiction. The purpose of the life histories in this study, after all, is to understand the *meaning* of (established) politics for the respondent as well as their accounts of the changes therein, not to find out whether certain biographical events actually happened the way s/he reports. The interviews were conducted by the first author between September 2012 and January 2013.

Becoming discontented

To understand how our respondents came to reject established politics, we have reconstructed that process during the interviews. Their narratives are, of course, very diverse, both in content and in the time span they cover. Nevertheless, it is possible to analytically distinguish three ideal typical stages, through which these respondents 'progress' in what may be called their anti-establishment careers. The stages introduction, validation and consolidation structure the following sections and demonstrate that the process of becoming politically discontented involves a gradual shift in individuals' conceptions of politics.

In this study we approach our sample of respondents as a diverse group of discontented citizens in whom we identify *a general pattern* of turning away from established politics. Even though the specific ways in which our respondents have become introduced into their particular anti-establishment narratives vary, these differences are classified as part of the first step of their anti-establishment careers. The analysis furthermore demonstrates some differences between PVV voters and nonvoters, but a systematic analysis of those differences is not the focus of the present article.[2] This approach resembles a 'social pattern analysis' (Zerubavel, 2007; cf.

DeGloma, 2010, 2014), in the sense that we disregard the specific content in favor of the general pattern.[3]

Anti-establishment 101: Introduction

The introduction stage is the stage in which individuals are first persuaded by, or generate themselves, objections to the then-current political situation. On the basis of our interviews, we distinguish three ways in which people are introduced to such ideas. These are meant as empirical illustrations of the more general introductory stage through which our respondents acquired their anti-establishment perspectives, rather than as an exhaustive list. First of all, some people were introduced into their anti-establishment careers by a 'political entrepreneur'. Among our respondents, this entrepreneur was the late populist politician Pim Fortuyn.[4] Maria (64, PVV),[5] for instance, states that 'Pim Fortuyn has made me politically more conscious'. And Carola (44, PVV), who is now an active follower and volunteer for the PVV, states that before Fortuyn took the stage, she had never even been interested in political affairs:

> I have to admit that I've never really been concerned with politics, it was kind of far off for me. That kind of fired up in the period with Pim. Nowadays, PVV meetings and all that, I visit them all. Volunteering with handing out flyers, I'm more engaged than I've ever been. I wasn't like that at all before Pim, I didn't even vote before that.

Speaking of politics having been 'far off' and of Fortuyn as having brought 'consciousness',

their introductions are like religious conversions or 'awakenings' (DeGloma, 2010) more generally. Those who report on the pivotal influence of Fortuyn indicate that he has provided them with a wholly new perspective: in the period before, they did not vote and were not even politically interested. Willem (69, PVV) also describes his introduction by referring to Fortuyn and particularly to the accuracy of the title of his most-read book: 'eight years of Purple was a big mess indeed, he was right about that. Because I didn't go out to vote in those years. Pim made me go back to vote again.' From a general lack of interest in politics, these respondents report that Fortuyn and, in his wake, Geert Wilders, have brought politics into focus for them through these politicians' abilities to address issues established parties had left unattended, using everyday discourse that ordinary people can understand.

In other cases, however, respondents' 'awakenings' with regard to Dutch politics are not so much mobilized by a populist politician but through books or websites. These are individuals who were already interested in politics. Just three months before our interview, Mark (58, NV), for instance, came across an awareness-raising website that 'uncovers' conspiracies in politics, business life and much more. He calls himself a socialist and has been active for the Labor and for the Socialist parties, but from this website he learned that political deals are already made at the Bilderberg conference and that such secret societies – as opposed to national parliament – are the ones who are *really* in power. This profoundly changed his view on politics and society:

> I don't exactly remember how I ended up on [the website] with all those articles. Then
> you go through all that and you read the comments and the reactions and you go further
> and further until you come to the conclusion that it would be outrageous to go out to

vote! Wouldn't you be kidding yourself? That's the reason I didn't vote. . . . The people are being cheated before their eyes!

Another respondent, Ben (63, NV), had been a pastor all his life when, more than a decade ago, he read a book that fundamentally altered his view on Christianity. It was about the history of the Jewish people and Ben recounts that 'you don't finish that book dryeyed'. After reading it Ben became convinced that Christianity is more linked to Judaism than most Christians acknowledge. At about the same time, he was confronted with the fact that a mosque was being built in his home town, after which he found out 'how wrong Islam is'. This was how he began to reorient his position in relation to politics.

A third category of respondents do not refer to insights received from politicians or media, but instead report that they began to ask fundamental existential questions about their lives, their worldviews and reality in general (cf. Aupers and Houtman, 2006: 206–207). These questions led them to a personal quest for answers. Judith (46, NV), for instance, says she consciously rejected her Catholic beliefs after she experienced a 'hot summer in which I questioned everything' at the age of 24. From this summer, she 'came out as an atheist and an anarchist'. This notion of 'questioning everything' appears to be indicative of such a search, because other respondents mention similar experiences. Henry (53, PVV) had a successful career, two cars and a happy marriage, until about 13 years ago, when he decided to throw the switch. Answering the question why he gave all that up, he says:

Because, at a certain point, I realized: what am I? I'm a fine employee, a good husband, a good father and neighbor, but still I'm locked inside my own body. And that's when I thought: what am I doing? I don't allow anyone, I don't trust anyone, I'm deceiving

myself. I'm unable to be in control, I'm sweating and I can't sleep because of it. When am I actually feeling good?

What Henry describes is a sense of uneasiness with his life at that time. He decided, as he puts it, not to conform to expectations anymore and to only do things he felt good about, and those things turned out to be very different from the things he did before: 'I was able to associate with wholly different people.' Henry gave up his job and marriage for a better connection with his senses and emotions and could subsequently identify with the way Pim Fortuyn 'combined emotional intelligence with intellectual intelligence'. This resonated strongly with how he himself was changing his perspective, comparing the experience of Fortuyn's political entry as 'switching from a silent movie to color TV'.

Whereas Judith and Henry experienced a sense of existential unease with their personal lives, others report a similar feeling, but in response to societal events. The emerging financial crisis around 2007 made Gerard (53, NV) ask himself some fundamental questions: 'There's a crisis and you get stuck in your usual way of thinking, because what you're experiencing doesn't make sense anymore. That's how you get an incentive to look at things differently.' When he started looking at things in that other way, he asked himself, 'why is it that politics is unable to establish the outcome it promises?' In the process of rejecting established politics, something obviously has to happen in order for people to start changing their minds. Our respondents were mobilized or transformed, or started an investigation for 'the real truth'.

'Things that are known cannot be unknown': Validating insights

Having been introduced to their new insights, respondents delve into a world of new knowledge: they report immersing themselves in the available literature, Internet communities and other available resources. Though interrelated in practice, this process involves investigations, associating with likeminded people and learning, through their own or vicarious experience, about the role of political parties, media and other institutions.

When it comes to respondents' efforts to expand their knowledge on their respective subject matters, Fortuynists mention reading the books that Pim and related Islam-critical authors (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Geert Wilders) published. Pastor Ben (NV), who had learnt that religious institutions had distorted true faith, started reading the Bible in a different way, focused on practicing his faith in 'congregations as in [the Bible book of] Acts . . . cut off from all ecclesiastical misconceptions and deceptions'. During these investigations, respondents argue, they expanded their insights in depth and in breadth. They for instance not only come to recognize the exact ways in which established political parties and global elites are manipulating the people but they also learn, in a much more fundamental sense, that other institutions like the media, science and corporations are not neutral. As Chris (31, NV) aptly illustrates this part of his ongoing investigation: 'that's when you find out that the media are in the hands of those same main shareholders as the oil industry, the pharmaceuticals, you name it'. Wouter (40, PVV), after specifically studying the relation between Islam and Christianity, now firmly disagrees with 'the political conviction that Islam and Christianity are the same'. Scientific research, he argues, shows this is not the case. In 2008 Judith (NV) joined the Occupy movement, setting up her own local chapter with likeminded people. In their 'Occupy College', they invited speakers and did their own research and presentations. She generated many new insights on the neoliberal system, banking practices and the election law, which all validated her earlier rejection of party politics:

'in hindsight there are certain things I wouldn't have wanted to know, but things that are known cannot be unknown'. But she also learned about alternative systems, like sociocracy – a non-hierarchical system of self-government. Therefore, in this process respondents often turn from a specific political distrust towards a more generalized distrust that involves various institutions like media, education and capitalism. Dennis (39, NV), a truck driver, mentions that he has even taken more than a year off to do research and he further explains how his fields of interest have expanded: 'Indeed, nutrition, technology, society, politics, it goes in many directions'.

Respondents also started to associate with likeminded people on social media, in forums and meetings. When Ron (64, PVV) became moved by Pim Fortuyn's appeals to bring back 'human proportions' into society, he volunteered for the campaign. He says that his and all other volunteers' enthusiasm for the campaign even intensified after the murder of Fortuyn: 'I have rarely witnessed such feelings of togetherness in the Netherlands'. Mark also found likeminded people on the website that 'opened his eyes'. In their online discussions, Mark and his newfound friends developed the idea of laminating their voting passes in plastic foil, rendering them invalid. During the interview he proudly presented his as a piece of nonvoting memorabilia. And after she first attended a PVV meeting, Carola started blogs on which she posted news on Wilders as well as ridiculing photos on Islam. In reaction, she started to receive threats. But this did not stop her: 'actually, it made me even more fanatic, because if you can't even post a little picture . . .'. These associations, both on- and offline, thus not only facilitate a sense of belonging (Coleman et al., 2008), but also a form of 'affective mobilization' (Nedelmann, 1987) – a dynamic in which associating with likeminded others online furthers participants' enthusiasm (De Koster, 2010: 95–127).

Through their investigations and their associations, respondents come to realize that the established political and media institutions are unresponsive to their concerns and therefore appear to be part of the problem, instead of (helping to find) the solution. The gap between them and these mainstream institutions gradually widens: they are becoming 'outsiders' (Becker, 1966 [1963]). This becomes particularly apparent when they want to raise awareness for their concerns. In his aim to raise awareness about the threat Islam poses for western civilization, Wouter (PVV) has had meetings with a Christian political party to organize a lecture by an Islam critic, but argues that 'they don't want to hear about it' and attributes that stance to their 'political correctness'. Respondents' contacts with the media were experienced as similarly disappointing. When Henry (PVV) organized an event with international speakers that attracted quite some media attention, he learned that the role of the media consists of selection and manipulation: 'if you realize, of all the interviews I did back then, of all the footage that was shot, how much of that remained and how it was presented'. Judith (NV) has had similar experiences with what she calls the 'destructive role of the media'. Arguing that Occupy is much more than a protest movement, she says the media are not interested in the solutions they put forward, only in the size of the movement:

> Very concrete solutions have been proposed, but they are constantly ignored in the media. . . . I've talked to so many journalists who asked about that. [asking] Why don't you ask about what we're doing? [The journalist:] Yeah, but how many of you are there?

Ben (NV) has contacted both public and commercial news media because of their 'outrageously one-sided' coverage on Israel. Not receiving a response, his interpretation is that

. . . the mainstream media are in such a way controlled by the powerful, the financially powerful, that they're working towards that new world order in which everyone has to get along, because that's easier to control.

Ben gained these insights in the decade since his 'turning point': 'I have always thought that what media publish in newspapers and on the radio is true. Well, in the past 10 years I have increasingly found out that they are also very able to lie.' The way mainstream politics and media (do not) deal with the problems pointed out by the respondents makes them conclude that they are 'either super naïve or just unwilling to see' (Wouter, PVV), or there is a general problem of 'retardation' (Arthur, 52, NV), which he considers the result of the media's profit-driven tendency to lower their intellectual standards to mass demand.

Summarizing the validation stage, our respondents have further developed their newly acquired perspectives through investigations, associations and experiences. These validate their critical worldview and further propel their turning away from established politics. They come to realize 'that the institutions themselves may be the source of bias, and "throwing the rascals out" will have little effect if indeed it is even possible' (Gamson, 1968: 51). As Judith (NV) aptly concluded: 'Okay, that does it. Politics isn't the proper way to go, even if the manifesto says more or less the same things [as I think]. Then it still isn't the proper way.'

'Then I thought, now I know': Consolidating a new worldview

In a recent discussion on the concept of careers Martiniello and Rea (2014: 1087) note that 'experience learned over time by the actor reorients his or her plans and the goals he or she pursues'. Indeed, our respondents' introduction to, and subsequent validation of their new

perspectives on the workings of politics and society, culminates in them drawing conclusions from the lessons they have learned. First of all, respondents argue that they have become very cautious in how they consume and interpret news from mainstream media outlets like television and newspapers. They have learned that – depending on their orientation – mainstream media is either leftist, governed by the power elite or only interested in making money at the cost of quality. Information in general, and news reports in particular, they have discovered, should therefore be treated with suspicion.

Most of our respondents consequently report having developed strategies through which they assess the veracity of new information. These strategies however take on different shapes. Some employ the relatively uncomplicated strategy of taking into account the 'ideological color' of news producers. Willem (PVV), for instance, says he balances his news intake between the two popular newspapers *Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*, because 'to know the truth, you have to read both papers'. Ron (PVV) has developed a more elaborate triangulation tactic. In evaluating news items, he considers:

> Who is writing it, which newspaper, which journalist? Once you know that, you know who's talking. Then you look at their antagonist and if the two reports roughly correspond, you can assume it's a new fact. That's a way of collecting objective information.

Other respondents, however, have rejected mainstream media altogether. Annemieke (39, NV) says that 'we hardly watch television anymore. For us, it's just no fun anymore when we turn on the TV!' Judith (NV) similarly notes she has 'thrown the television out' because 'the kids were fed up with me commenting on every other item and the way it was depicted'.

In the consolidation of a new perspective, not only the present takes on new meanings, but the past may be reinterpreted as well. Not unlike a religious conversion,[6] respondents shed new light on pre-'conversion' events and experiences; and some radically reinterpret them by explicitly constructing 'then I thought . . . but now I know' narratives (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]: 179; Aupers, 2004; Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Snow and Machalek, 1984). When asked whether his contention that politicians are only interested in party politics and their careers instead of solving problems only applies to present-day politics, Arthur (NV) argues that 'not much has changed, it has always been like this', 'I've seen my share of cabinets . . . it's all about power and I have the feeling I see through that a bit better than I used to do'. Daan (21, PVV) also recounts how Pim Fortuyn's books have provided him with a frame of reference, enabling him to understand the subordinate role women had in the households of his former Moroccan classmates. More dramatically, for Maria and Willem (both PVV), the insights they gained about Islam have given them a totally different perspective on certain past experiences. Willem recounts a negative encounter with a Muslim and admits that he did not label it as such back then: 'No, it has really been activated by Geert Wilders, my blinkers came off. They should have come off much earlier.' Maria also reinterprets her former understanding of Muslims. From her current frame of knowledge, she finally makes sense of the Islamic migrants she worked with who committed fraud with child benefits some 30 years ago:

> If you read about [Islamic culture], then you start to understand why Moroccans are getting benefits and are not working. . . . They feel they have superiority over you. You can work for them. It's a sort of tax levy for the infidels. And when they steal, they're not really stealing, they're taking what they believe is theirs.

However, not all respondents claim they look at the past from a wholly different perspective. Some narrate their pasts by claiming that they had always thought about things the way they currently do. They stress the *continuity* between the past and the present (cf. Johnston, 2013), tracing current dispositions back to traits they claim they already had in their childhoods. Chris (NV) says that as a child he 'was always asking "why this? Why that?" ' When his teacher was unable to provide the answers, he 'was already confronted with the fact that there are a lot of questions that remain unanswered'. Gerard (NV) also recounts his school life by emphasizing he has always been somewhat against the grain: 'I just couldn't help but question things and that wasn't always appreciated'. Similarly, Wouter (PVV) says he has thought about Islam the way he does for as long as he can remember. On his way to secondary school he saw a mosque being built and 'had a feeling saying hey, this is not right [and] of "Islam is not a religion, but a political ideology"'. With their accounts of their relatively recent changes of perspective, these respondents – by pointing to traits they had as a child – construct a narrative of continuity between their present and past selves. Whether this continuity is 'really' there is practically impossible to ascertain, and for the present purposes it is also not relevant.

Addressing these different narratives of self-change, people (re-)construct their biographies in 'accordance with the new or ascendant universe of discourse and its attendant grammar and vocabulary of motives' (Snow and Machalek, 1984: 173; cf. DeGloma, 2010, 2014; Goffman, 1961). Tom DeGloma's awakening narrative formula analytically outlined two '*vocabularies of liminality*' of the ways in which people narrate their trajectories to an 'enlightened understanding' (2010: 519): either via a sudden epiphany experience, or through a more stepwise process. But this formula does not explain the use of one or the other vocabulary. Erin Johnston (2013) identified a rhetoric of continuity among converts to paganism and she

theorizes that in order to understand the differences in narratives with which people construct their biographies, these should be related to their current beliefs and practices. This is informative in explaining the different 'introductions' we have identified. In our study sudden awakening narratives were employed by those who said to have played a relatively passive role in their reported self-change (emphasizing the pivotal role of politicians, books), while the more gradual continuity narrative was used by those who reported change through their own, self-initiated investigations.

Conclusion

The rising salience of political discontents in western societies, as demonstrated by the rise of anti-establishment parties, nonvoting and political distrust, has been firmly established in the literature. A dominant interpretation holds that such discontents are pathological phenomena in need of repair that can especially be found among the 'losers of modernization' who are allegedly unable to adapt to the rapid economic and cultural changes in modern societies. Starting from this argument, we set out to assess how those political deviants – selected among nonvoters and PVV supporters – came to reject established politics.

Our analysis demonstrates that our respondents' political discontent is the result of a process in which their conceptions of politics gradually changed – an anti-establishment career. We distinguished three analytical stages in that process – introduction, validation and consolidation – through which this change took place. Employing these three stages, we can thus assert that people who have rejected established politics (1) have – more or less actively – generated objections to the political establishment; (2) have further developed these insights in

depth and breadth through a combination of their own investigations, associations and (negative) experiences with establishment institutions; and (3) have consolidated their insights by implementing changes in their media consumption patterns as well as in their respective interpretations of past experiences. All in all, this process involves a profound change of their ideas on, and subsequent evaluation of, the workings of politics and society.

Discussion

Fueled by the fact that discontented citizens' meanings and motivations are generally neglected, presuming less agency than they claim themselves, our findings give occasion for two interrelated conclusions that contribute to the debate on political discontents in the contemporary West.

First of all, the passive conception of the discontented citizen disregards the fact that, as our 'validation stage' has demonstrated, these people have given form to their current conceptions of politics through *their own* investigations and experiences. From this perspective, then, they are not so much objects of abstract economic forces than they are reflexive citizens who make their own conscious decisions. The dominant macro-level perspective on political discontents (Bovens and Wille, 2008; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Van der Meer, 2010; Van de Walle et al., 2008) with which (changes in) the levels of political trust are studied has an inherent blind spot for such meaningful changes in people's stance towards politics. Not seldom informing 'cures' for political distrust, such an approach appears to be based on the assumption that these discontents are ephemeral and caused by feelings of insecurity or ignorance, making them easy targets for manipulation through policy interventions.

Second, yet related to this, is the fact that our respondents narrate their 'career paths' as an awakening, while an analysis of politically discontented citizens as 'democracy's deviants' typically assumes its opposite. Their newly acquired insights were experienced as utterly meaningful or even enlightening – a path *out of* political apathy, as some noted – and many of them addressed their issues in public or towards institutions (cf. Norris, 2002: Ch. 2). In fact, in spite of the system's unresponsiveness to their claims, many continued to pursue their political ideals. In this effort, they practiced – albeit outside the mainstream – in large part the critical reflexivity that is generally thought to be essential for democratic citizenship. Whether conceived of as a sense of involvement in political issues, contacting politicians and institutions or as discussions with family and neighbors (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Rosenau, 1974: 93), these citizens practice (at least some of) the virtues of democratic civic participation, instead of opting out of it: their political consciousness was addressed and raised, they became interested, engaged and associated.[7] Whether – and if so, how – this three-stage model holds for other manifestations of change in political convictions, is a question for future research. We would however suggest that it particularly pertains to adherents of those ideologies that construct objections to the status quo and may therefore come to (generalize those claims and) disqualify mainstream society, like, for example, anti-capitalism, feminism, anti-colonialism and radical Islamism.[8]

Not attending to the meanings of these people impairs instead of facilitates possibilities for theoretical progress as well as for advancing policy interventions: 'If social research imposes definitions on subjects regardless of the meaning that their conduct has to them', Katz (2001: 15) contends, 'it will risk perpetuating artificial stereotypes and supporting power relations ill-suited to effective policy making.' This therefore calls for a cultural sociological sensitivity in the conceptualization of citizens' political behavior. It is after all not through its deviance from a –

ultimately arbitrary – hegemonic standard that social action should be described, but through the meanings it has for the participants in social life (cf. Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2010). Concepts such as disengagement, nonparticipation and demobilization may at first sight be accurate descriptions of declining political trust or nonvoting. However, when considering the respective citizens' own meanings of their actions, the terminology may just as well be reversed: mobilization when describing nonvoting or engagement when losing trust. Hence, such terms tend to refer to some institutionalized, hegemonic frame of reference that may, *but also may not*, have meaning for those concerned.

References

Abts K and Rummens S (2007) Populism versus democracy. *Political Studies* 55(2): 405–424.

Almond GA and Verba S (1963) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Arditi B (2004) Populism as a spectre of democracy: A response to Canovan. *Political Studies* 52(2): 135–143.

Aupers S (2004) *In de ban van moderniteit. De sacralisering van het zelf en computertechnologie* [Under the Spell of Modernity: The Sacralisation of the Self and Computer Technology]. Amsterdam: Aksant

Aupers S and Houtman D (2006) Beyond the spiritual supermarket: The social and public significance of New Age spirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21(2): 201–222.

Becker HS (1966 [1963]) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York and London: The Free Press.

Becker HS (1998) *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berger PL and Luckmann T (1991 [1966]) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin Books.

Bornschier S (2010) *Cleavage Politics and the Populist Right: The New Cultural Conflict in Western Europe*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Bovens M and Wille A (2008) Deciphering the Dutch drop: Ten explanations for decreasing political trust in the Netherlands. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 74(2): 283–305.

Canovan M (1999) 'Trust the people!' Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies* 47(1): 2–16.

CBS (Statistics Netherlands) (2011) *Verkiezingen: Participatie, Vertrouwen en Integratie* [Elections: Participation, Trust and Integration]. Den Haag and Heerlen: CBS.

Coleman S, Morrison DE and Svennevig M (2008) New media and political efficacy. *International Journal of Communication* 2: 771–791.

Crozier MJ, Huntington SP and Watanuki J (1975) *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.

Dalton RJ (2005) The social transformation of trust in government. *International Review of Sociology* 15(1): 133–154.

DeGloma T (2010) Awakenings: Autobiography, memory, and the social logic of personal discovery. *Sociological Forum* 25(3): 519–540.

DeGloma T (2014) *Seeing the Light: The Social Logic of Personal Discovery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

De Koster W (2010) *'Nowhere I could talk like that': Togetherness and identity on online forums*. Doctoral dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Eliasoph N and Lichterman P (2010) Making things political. In: Hall JR, Grindstaff L and Lo M-C (eds) *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 485–493.

Gamson WA (1968) *Power and Discontent*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.

Goffman E (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Greil AL and Rudy DR (1983) Conversion to the world view of Alcoholics Anonymous: A refinement of conversion theory. *Qualitative Sociology* 6(1): 5–28.

Hart V (1978) *Distrust and Democracy: Political Discontents in Britain and America*. Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hendriks F (2009) Contextualizing the Dutch drop in political trust: Connecting underlying factors. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 75(3): 473–491.

Hibbing JR and Theiss-Morse E (1995) *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hope C (2013) Local elections 2013: Nigel Farage's Ukip surges to best ever showing, winning 150 seats. *The Telegraph*, 3 May.

Houtman D, Achterberg P and Kemmers R (2012) De wedergeboorte van de fact-free politics: Pim Fortuyn en de nieuwe tegencultuur (2002–2012) [The rebirth of fact-free politics: Pim Fortuyn and the new counterculture]. *Beleid en Maatschappij* 38(2): 179–193.

Johnston EF (2013) 'I was always this way…': Rhetorics of continuity in narratives of conversion. *Sociological Forum* 28(3): 549–573.

Katz J (2001) Analytic induction. In: Smelser N and Baltes P (eds) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Oxford: Elsevier Science. Available at: www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/katz/pubs/Analytic_Induction.pdf (accessed 31 August 2015).

Keele L (2007) Social capital and the dynamics of trust in government. *American Journal of*

Political Science 51(2): 241–254.

Kemmers R, Aupers S, Houtman D and Van der Waal J (2015) State of disgrace: Popular political discontents about the Dutch state in the 2000s. *Parliamentary Affairs* 68(3): 476–493.

Kiesraad (2012) Dutch official election results 2012. Available at: www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/

Na1918/Verkiezingsuitslagen.aspx?VerkiezingsTypeId=1 (accessed 31 August 2015).

Klingemann HD (1968) Research into right-wing radicalism. *Patterns of Prejudice* 2(3): 3–10.

Kohler Riessman C (2001) 33: Analysis of personal narratives. In: Gubrium JF and Holstein JA

(eds) *Handbook of Interview Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 695–707.

Kriesi H (1993) *Political Mobilization and Social Change in the Netherlands*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Kriesi H, Grande Romain Lachat E, Dolezal M et al. (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of*

Globalization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laclau E (2005) *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso.

Lijphart A (1997) Unequal participation: Democracy's unsolved dilemmas. *The American Political Science Review* 91(1): 1–14.

Lipset SM (1963 [1960]) *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Luckenbill DF and Best J (1981) Careers in deviance and respectability: The analogy's limitations. *Social Problems* 29(2): 197–206.

Martiniello M and Rea A (2014) The concept of migratory careers: Elements for a new theoretical perspective of contemporary human mobility. *Current Sociology* 62(7): 1079–1096.

Mény Y and Surel Y (2002) The constitutive ambiguity of populism. In: Mény Y and Surel Y (eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 1–21.

Mudde C (2004) The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 542–563.

Mudde C (2010) The populist radical right: A pathological normalcy. *West European Politics* 33(6): 1167–1186.

Mudde C and Rovira Kaltwasser C (eds) (2012) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nedelmann B (1987) Individuals and parties: Changes in processes of political mobilization.

European Sociological Review 3(3): 181–202.

Norris P (2002) *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press. Available at:sites.google.com/site/pippanorris3/publications/books/democratic-phoenix (accessed 31 August 2015).

Pharr SJ and Putnam RD (eds) (2000) *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Plummer K (2001) Getting and doing life histories. In: Plummer K (ed.) *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 119–148. Accessed through Sage Research Methods Online.

Putnam RD (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam RD (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rosenau JN (1974) *Citizenship Between Elections: An Inquiry into the Mobilizable American*. New York and London: The Free Press.

Rosanvallon P and Goldhammer A (2008) *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rovira Kaltwasser C (2012) The ambivalence of populism: Threat and corrective for democracy. *Democratization* 19(2): 184–208.

Snow DA and Machalek R (1984) The sociology of conversion. *Annual Review of Sociology* 10: 167–190.

Stoker G (2006) *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Taggart P (2000) *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Taylor I (2014) Front National wins European parliament elections in France. *The Guardian*, 25 May.

Van der Meer T (2010) In what we trust? A multi-level study into political trust as an evaluation of state characteristics. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 76(3): 517–536.

Van der Waal J and Houtman D (2011) Tolerance in the post-industrial city: Assessing the ethnocentrism of less-educated natives in 22 Dutch cities. *Urban Affairs Review* 47(5): 642–671.

Van der Waal J, Achterberg P, Houtman D et al. (2010) 'Some are more equal than others':

Economic egalitarianism and welfare chauvinism in the Netherlands. *Journal of European Social Policy* 20(4): 350–363.

Van de Walle S, Van Roosbroek S and Boeckaert G (2008) Trust in the public sector: Is there any evidence for a long-term decline? *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 74(1):

47–64.

Viscusi G (2013) Marine Le Pen's National Front wins French local by-election. *Bloomberg.com*, 14 October.

Zerubavel E (2007) Generally speaking: The logic and mechanics of social pattern analysis. *Sociological Forum* 22(2): 131–145.

---

[1] To elaborate, there are other lines of thought on populism, that consider it not a pathology, but the 'shadow of democracy' (Arditi, 2004; Canovan, 1999), or even a requirement of democratic politics (Laclau, 2005; cf. Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Cas Mudde and Cristòbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012; cf. Mény and Surel, 2002) take a (refreshingly) neutral stance vis-à-vis populism. They however take the country context as their level of analysis, neglecting the perspectives of citizens that are this article's focus.

[2] Such an analysis requires a different research question that addresses other academic debates. An article that addresses this question is currently in preparation.

[3] Because we did not set out to do social pattern analysis from the start, we diverge from Zerubavel's approach with regard to its principle that '[u]ltimately searching for general patterns that transcend any one particular context, we must thus draw on as many contexts as possible' (2007: 134).

[4] Pim Fortuyn (1948–2002) shook up the Dutch political landscape in 2002 with a populist anti-immigration agenda. He was shot dead nine days before the general elections, posthumously winning 17% of the vote for his *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* in the Dutch system of proportional representation. In the following years, the LPF dissolved because of internal struggles and Fortuyn's agenda was claimed by several new parties of which Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) has been the most successful (Houtman et al., 2012).

[5] Respondents' names are pseudonyms. 'NV' or 'PVV' in parentheses refers to the reason for their recruitment: being a nonvoter or PVV voter respectively.

[6] In the sense of 'the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of a primary authority' (Snow and Machalek, 1984: 170). The sociology of conversion is not exclusively applicable to processes of religious change, but may 'cover all cases of radical change in personal identity or perspective', as Greil and Rudy conclude after an empirical study on conversion to the worldview of Alcoholics Anonymous (1983: 25; cf. DeGloma, 2010; Johnston, 2013).

[7] The fact that our sample is skewed towards the more politically active and expressive discontented individuals of course limits possibilities for making inferences about the larger populations of nonvoters and populist party voters.

[8] We thank *Current Sociology*'s anonymous reviewers for inviting us to specify the generalizability of our theory.