

Geographies of discontent in the Nordic Region?

A Conceptual overview

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1. Introduction

The 2010s have been described by some as the age of discontent (Rhodes-Purdy et al. 2023). Not only did mass political and anti-government protests erupt throughout the decade, but a clear change in electoral behaviour was also witnessed in most western liberal democracies, including in the Nordic region (Florida 2021; Berman 2021; Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021, Meinander 2021).

While voter turnout continued to decline throughout that decade in the West, it is the significant rise in votes cast for non-traditional and in some cases new parties that is often referred to as the most distinct expression of political discontent of that period (Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Solijonov 2016). The root causes and drivers of that anti-government sentiment appear to be multiple and complex; indeed, they are a source of debate among scholars, including as to whether and how they are leading to “geographies of discontent” in certain regions.

This paper summarises that debate and serves as a conceptual overview of the topic in order to provide a better understanding of what factors, or combination of factors, are driving discontent and geographies of discontent in the western liberal democracies. After discussing the phenomena at large, this paper then zooms in on the Nordic region specifically and describes significant factors potentially driving geographies of discontent in the region.



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2. The age of discontent in western liberal democracies

The rise of discontent in the 2010s

By the end of 2016, the year of political ruptures that saw Britain leave the European Union and Donald Trump come to power as president of the United States, it could no longer be denied that the 2010s were turning into what would later be referred to as the age of discontent (Rhodes-Purdy et al. 2023). Those two events, along with the heated and polarising debates and campaigns leading up to them, surprised many. Thinkers within and outside the academic world have since thoroughly analysed those phenomena and the series of factors that may have played a part in their occurrence. Their conclusions often point to an accelerated rise in discontent and shift in political attitudes and electoral behaviour within societies since the 2008 economic crisis. (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Ford and Jennings 2020; Guiso et al. 2017). Indeed, many western states in the 2010s witnessed a steep rise in mass political and anti-establishment protests, as well as support for non-traditional political parties. According to Inglehart and Norris (2016), the average share of populist parties in national or European parliamentary elections, for example, increased from 5.1% in the 1960s to 13.2% in the 2010s in Europe. Those trends suggested a growing level of dissatisfaction among ordinary people, who are apparently increasingly frustrated with their own democratically elected governments, perceived as elitist, corrupt and detached from ordinary people's daily lives. (Guiso et al. 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). Trust levels in elected representatives and government institutions dropped significantly during the decade, and the liberal democratic model, hailed as the new world order as recently as the early 1990s, appeared suddenly, and surprisingly to some, to be under threat (Galston 2018). Most concerning perhaps were the signs that the increase in discontent did not and does not appear to be a passing trend. As Florida (2021) remarked, such discontent is brewing as a result of "a fundamental

characteristic of the wrenching economic, social and cultural transformations occurring in the nature of capitalism" (p. 4).

Understanding the root causes of discontent

The two overarching approaches explaining the rise in discontent in western democracies found in the academic literature are the economic and cultural approach, both of which are summarised below. It should be noted, however, that those models cannot always be fully distinguished from one another, given that there are many overlapping factors. That appears to be the case since the 2010s in particular, due to the complexity of the 2008 economic crisis (Torcal 2017).

The economic approach

Many scholars have noted that increasing economic insecurities and the transition from industrial to post-industrial economies are driving high levels of discontent in western democracies (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023a, O'Brien and Leichenko 2003, Guiso et al. 2017). Indeed, in recent decades, western economies and labour markets have been gradually but fundamentally transformed by structural changes. The postwar industrial order characterised by class-based political parties, the struggle to achieve full employment, decent salaries and stable jobs for everyone and equal access to welfare has increasingly been challenged. (De Ruyter et al. 2021; Sandbu 2020). Since the 1980s, processes such as automation, the rise of the knowledge economy, globalisation and global markets, as well as neo-liberal austerity policies, have undermined the expectations promised by the postwar order (Sandbu 2020). Those developments have created winners and losers in society; new socio-economic and political divides mean that higher educated, mobile groups have profited especially from increasing opportunities and income, while workers in certain industries have increasingly faced job insecurity, stagnating or declining wages, unemployment and an increase in poverty (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023a, O'Brien and Leichenko 2003). Furthermore, the 2010s not only saw wealth becoming concentrated in a thinner layer of individuals at the top of the income scale within OECD countries, but also showed that the financial and political elite and bodies could operate outside the ordinary democratic and fiscal system (Piketty 2014, Nelo-o and Goma 2018, Streeck 2016). That growing divide and inequality between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the 2010s, combined with significant and unpopular government austerity measures and cuts in public spending, appears to have triggered widespread discontent and resentment against the system and governments, which are increasingly showing signs of lacking accountability (De Ruyter et al. 2021; Gabriel et al. 2022).

The socio-cultural approach

Some scholars have argued that the rise in discontent cannot simply be explained by the economic approach. The “cultural backlash thesis” put forward and discussed by Inglehart and Baker (2000) suggests that a deeper cultural divide has occurred within the West, resulting in a backlash against progressive cultural change. Florida (2021) supplements that thesis by describing how the significant economic structural changes that have occurred in the last decades have “ripped apart the institutional and the traditional structures of class and status, and the cultural values that went along with them”. That change in social values is indeed better understood in historical perspective. In the postwar western society, as immediate material needs such as food, shelter and existential security were increasingly met, a shift towards post-material values such as self-fulfilment, independence, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism occurred in western societies (Inglehart and Baker 2000). According to Ford and Jennings (2020), the expansion of education, empowerment of women and mass migration leading to increased ethnic diversity in the West have nourished those new values and identities. Such movements, however, have triggered a backlash among once more predominant and privileged members of the population, who feel threatened by the change in cultural values and actively reject those progressive values and criticise the decline in more traditional norms (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

The role of immigration

High levels of immigration can be interpreted as a factor of discontent under both the economic and cultural approach. During the last decade, European countries have received large numbers of refugees and migrants from other parts of the world. Recent literature has found some evidence that migrants, especially when they arrive in large numbers, can serve as a catalyst to channel disappointment and fears of economic insecurity (Dijkstra et al. 2020). The timing of such immigration and the origin, skill level and number of migrants appear to be critical in terms of fuelling concerns that newcomers might take away jobs and/or diminish wages (Larsson et al. 2021; Guiso et al. 2017). From a social perspective, immigration can raise fears among native-born citizens that access to and quality of welfare will diminish due to the financial strain migrants might place on the system (Edo et al. 2019). Finally, from a cultural perspective, high levels of sudden immigration have been shown to trigger a fear among native-born citizens that their culture and community are under threat and that newcomers will dilute national or regional identity and traditional values. That cultural backlash is aggravated by native-born citizens’ stereotypes of immigrants and is more likely, the more ethnically, racially and culturally different the immigrants are. (Alesina and Tabellini 2020).

It should be noted that right-wing populist parties have played a substantial role in feeding such fears and misconceptions in most western countries by claiming that

immigration is the root cause of citizens' problems and by depicting immigrants as an economic and cultural threat. Doing so enables them to claim that the solutions to the problems in question are simple, short-term and can be addressed through anti-immigration policies (Guiso et al. 2017). Indeed, academics generally agree that populism is a "thin ideology" that populist leaders and political entrepreneurs combine opportunistically with a range of different ideologies and positions, such as an anti-immigration stance, for political gain (Mudde 2004).

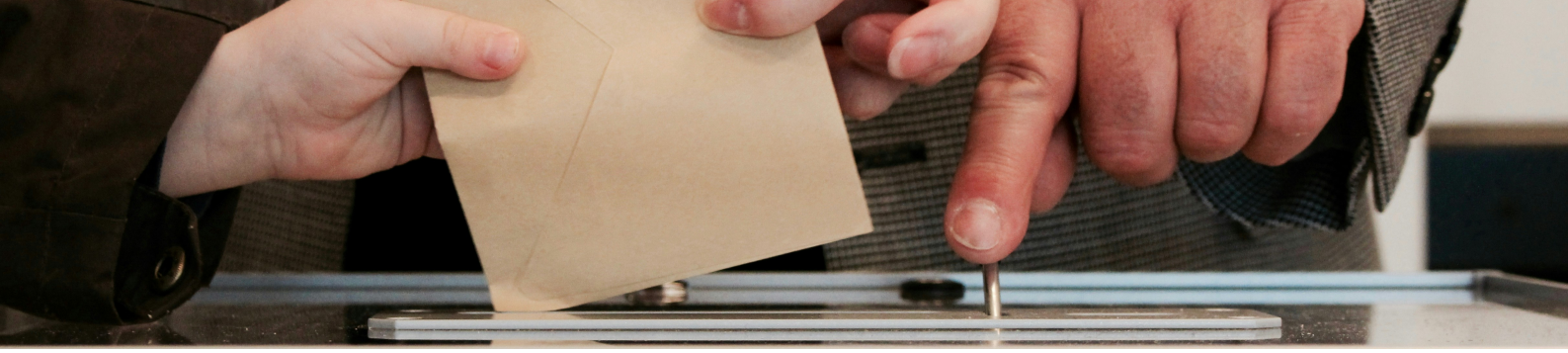


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3. The emergence of "geographies of discontent"

What are geographies of discontent?

Most recently scholars have suggested that although the economic and cultural approaches help explain the rise in discontent in western democracies to an extent, geographic and demographic developments may also be playing an important role in driving those high levels of dissatisfaction in spatially distinctive geographies of discontent. Indeed, this century has seen a growing spatial socio-economic and cultural divergence between peripheral, rural, remote areas that have been left behind and more centrally located innovative and productive areas (De Lange et al. 2023, Iammarino et al. 2019, McCann 2020, Rodríguez-Pose 2018, Rodríguez-Pose 2020, Kenny and Luca 2021). Rodríguez-Pose (2018) argues that such spatial and territorial inequalities are more important than interpersonal inequalities in the effort to understand high levels of discontent in the West. Electoral behaviour in the last decade does indeed suggest that there is a rise in polarisation and tensions between growing city and urban areas and declining rural and remote areas and that "place" seems to play a strong role in people's levels of satisfaction with their government (Kenny and Luca 2021). Although that divide has long existed in western states, it had seemed to be diminishing in the late 20th century. In 2013, Eurofund (2013) found no political polarisation between urban and rural dwellers before the economic crisis of 2008-2013. However, the financial crisis of 2008 and its repercussions appear to have reversed that trend, with those developments prompting Rodríguez-Pose (2018, 2020) to coin the phrase "the revenge of the places that don't matter", as well as driving McCann (2020) to employ the concept "geographies of discontent" and Munis (2020) to speak of "place-based resentment" (Marlar 2022). Those authors have all put forward the thesis that this feeling of being "left behind" has resulted in some form of protest voting in those places. McKay et al. (2021) have added, however, that different local "left-behind"

contexts are provoking different kinds of grievance, with an impact on both the level and expression of discontent.

Key factors driving geographies of discontent

Increasing economic divergence

A central argument explaining why geographies of discontent have formed is that regional economic inequalities have increased over the last decades in many industrialised countries, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis (Marlar 2022, The Economist 2016). Globalisation and the "urbanised knowledge economy" have created new spatial imbalances and inequalities in economic development, opportunities and living standards, in part because the knowledge economy is much more strongly dependent on a geographic clustering of knowledge and skills and high-density levels than traditional jobs in the industrial sector (Rodríguez-Pose 2018, Florida 2021, Marlar 2022). In many cases, peripheral areas with long distances to urban areas, as well as old industrial hubs facing global competition, have been "left behind" economically, with many experiencing growing levels of unemployment, poverty and economic decline (Larsson et al. 2021, De Lange et al. 2023, Koeppen et al. 2021). Mascherini and colleagues (2023) have found that the rural-urban gap in the EU has widened particularly in terms of income employment and opportunities. Scholars even argue that some of those areas are falling into a "development trap" (Iammarino et al. 2019), a term that refers to regions that are experiencing "lower growth in income, productivity, and employment compared to: (i) their own historical performance; (ii) the country in which they are in; and/ or (iii) the EU" (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023b).

Furthermore, EU Cohesion and Regional Policy and Common Agricultural Policy may not always be systematically contributing to economic convergence in Europe. The objective of the former is to support the competitiveness of regions but that focus on the goal of competitiveness may be harming declining regions (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Similarly, the modernising reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU have put pressure on many farmers in Europe to expand and intensify farming through technology and have led to a dependency on bank loans and food chains (Deppisch et al. 2022). Most recently, repercussions of the European Green Deal have been identified as threatening to increase real or perceived economic inequalities between territories. Indeed, many left-behind areas often also have a high dependency on transportation, heavy industry and agriculture, and will need to significantly restructure if countries are to meet Green deal Objectives. That may lead to negative economic repercussions in those areas and resentment. (Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci 2023).

Many academics have shown that people who live in those economically stagnating or falling-behind areas have lost trust in their representative governments. Indeed,

support for anti-establishment and populist parties has been shown to be generally higher in those regions in Europe (Dijkstra et al. 2020). McKay's (2019) research has found that people have a higher grievance level if they perceive the national economy to be doing better than their own. Furthermore, Dijkstra et al. (2020) have found that the longer and more severe the development trap experienced by a given region, the higher the vote share is for Eurosceptic parties, particularly if those areas are also experiencing high levels of immigration (Dijkstra et al. 2020, Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2023b). Findings by Rodríguez-Pose (2018) show, however, that it is not necessarily the most economically marginalised groups that express the highest levels of discontent, but rather the "squeezed middle" living in left-behind areas that experience or perceive their economic situation to be deteriorating. Larsson and colleagues (2021) further note that when trying to understand economic drivers of geographies of discontent it is crucial to understand that people and communities often experience and perceive inequality and feelings of being left behind in relation to nearby places and regions and not just distant cities and wider urban areas.

A social divide

The rural-urban divide is not only economic; there are also signs of social division and inequality between central and peripheral areas. Indeed, many rural and remote areas are experiencing both a decline in and ageing of their populations. Such trends have resulted in both a closure and/or reduction of public services overall and a high level of pressure on existing services, partly as a result of the elderly's high reliance on the latter. Public service deprivation in peripheral areas can be linked to governments and elected leaders deliberately choosing to spend limited public-sector resources on areas with a higher population density in a bid to increase their popularity. (Ballard-Rosa et al. 2023, Mascherini et al. 2023, Rickardsson 2021). Indeed, public services are often the most direct way in which people interact with the state, so they strongly influence voting behaviour (Golden and Min 2013). Service provision is a core element of accountable governance and less accessible services can lead to dissatisfaction and distrust.

Although limited in number, recent findings have found that diminishing or unequal access to public services such as schools, healthcare and public transport in peripheral areas is playing a role in the formation of geographies of discontent (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023b). In Italy, Cremaschi and colleagues (2022) found a causal link between voting for the far right and public service deprivation. In their findings they show that the geographical differences in far-right support match areas suffering from fewer public services. The authors explain that this phenomenon is due to people feeling and experiencing that there is competition for these limited services, which in turn sparks fear concerning high levels of immigration. In addition, in her study, Nyholt (2023) found that Danish voters tend to punish local government politicians at the polls when their local area has been

affected by school and hospital closures. Stroppe's (2023) study showed that a long-term lack of public services had impacted discontent and contributed to the formation of a spatial divide in levels of discontent in Germany. There is therefore evidence that access to public services and the social inequality repercussions it has on populations is impacting levels of discontent. However, there are still important gaps in research as to where access to services is deteriorating, who is being affected and discontent thresholds. (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023b).

Beyond provision of public services, formal and informal government institutions have also been shown to have an impact on people's levels of satisfaction with their government. According to Charron and colleagues (2018), regions with a higher quality of government – referring to a government's overall ability to act impartially, efficiently and without corruption throughout its services and institutions – show higher economic, environmental and public-health performance and, crucially, show higher levels of social equality and social trust, with the latter in turn positively impacting well-being and satisfaction (Charron et al. 2018).

A recognition gap fuelling a cultural divide and regional resentment

People tend to form a social and cultural identity around the place they live and feel attached to their village, town or region (Cramer 2016). As De Lange and colleagues (2023) describe, "this positive in-group identity might result in feelings of resentment towards out-groups living in other geographical areas" if other geographical areas are in reality better off or are perceived to be so. Mascherini and colleagues (2023) have found that people living in rural areas are significantly more likely to perceive recognition gaps than left-behind people in urban areas. That has led to a phenomenon that Munis (2020) refers to as "place resentment", whereby people living in peripheral areas feel neglected, disrespected, marginalised and left behind by their elite and often geographically distant national governments and politicians (McKay et al. 2021). A strong cultural dimension contributes to such resentment. People living in rural areas feel that urban dwellers do not value their norms, lifestyles and traditions and that cities and urban areas exert cultural dominance over theirs (De Lange et al. 2023, McCann 2020). That perception of injustice is not unjustified; cultural establishments and the media, as well as parliaments, courts and universities, are often found in capital cities.

Ballas and Thanis (2022) suggest that negative media and political discourse on left-behind areas is aggravating that cultural divide. Studies have also shown that populist parties and leaders have been able to take advantage of place resentment and are not only a result of rising regional resentment, but have also had their own role to play in driving it. Indeed, populism taps into an anti-elite "us-versus-them" sentiment that can be found in many rural areas. De Ruyter and colleagues (2021) have shown in the Netherlands, for example, that political discontent is both a cause and consequence of the rise of populist parties, which have inflamed rural

discontent by purposely criticising the urban elite.

Finally, studies have found that the media is not necessarily only expressing discontent; it is also playing a role in forming it, in part because the media often needs to reduce the complexity of reality and encourages simple narratives. Furthermore, many traditional media outlets have been the target of populist agendas and portrayed as being part of corrupt and urban elite groups. That strategy has allowed room for the growth of mostly online media platforms that have both created and spread populist content. (Nilsson and Lundgren 2019).

Demographic and compositional factors

Two overarching explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, are often put forward by academics in the field of geographies of discontent. The first has been put forward in the three preceding sections, namely that geographical divides in levels of discontent are fundamentally driven by a complex combination of economic, social and cultural factors (Koeppen et al. 2021). The second suggests that it is not the context and places where people are living that are driving discontent, but rather the individual characteristics of the people living in those regions. That argument suggests the higher levels of discontent in specific regions may be due to a high concentration of individuals who have specific characteristics connected to anti-establishment voting, such as higher age, male, low education and low income. Such compositional effects emerge because urban centres tend to offer more opportunities to younger, well-educated people, who often also hold more liberal or cosmopolitan attitudes. That leads to growing differences in population characteristics and value systems between rural and urban areas, with cities being characterised by more progressive social values. (Kenny and Luca 2021). Kenny and Luca (2021) argue that a "fracture" is indeed emerging between metropolitan and more rural areas, caused by "socio-economic divergence, discernible differences in collective worldviews and attitudes" (Florida 2021). As Larsson (2021) notes, discontent is "fundamentally a geographic process, driven by and reinforced by the sorting of different socio-economic and racial and ethnic groups into distinctive geographies, which in turn reinforce economic, racial and cultural divides".

Whether it is places or people driving discontent is indeed much debated in academia, with studies finding contradictory results. Van Vulpen et al. (2023) found in the Netherlands that regional economic development did not seem to explain political discontent. Koeppen et al. (2021) found that both place and people played a mixed role in explaining dissatisfaction, whereas Gallego et al. (2014), found individual characteristics to be the most influential in terms of voting behaviour. Research by Mascherini and colleagues (2023) revealed that urban areas still have higher levels of social tolerance and content once compositional factors such as sex, education and age have been taken into account.

Table 1: Summary of potential factors driving geographies of discontent

Driving force	Potential Factors	Examples of publications that analysed the impact of factor on discontent
Increasing economic divergence between "central" and "peripheral areas"	Household wealth	Van Vulpen (2023)
	Income inequality	Koeppen et al. (2021); Rodriguez-Pose et al. (2023a), Denti and Faggian (2021)
	Income levels	Van Vulpen (2023); De Lange et al. (2023)
	(Un)employment	Van Vulpen (2023); Koeppen et al. 2021, Larsson et al. 2021; De Lange et al. 2023
	Regional wealth and economic growth	McKay (2019); De Lange et al. (2023) Rodriguez-Pose et al. (2023a)
	Type of employment	McKay et al. (2021); Dijkstra et al. (2020)
Increasing social divide between "central" and "peripheral areas"	Access to essential public services	Van Vulpen (2023); Cremaschi et al. (2022); De Lange et al. (2023); Stroppe (2023); Nyholt (2023)
	Quality of formal and informal government institutions	Charron et al. (2018)
	Presence of public authorities	Rickardsson et al. (2021)
A recognition gap fuelling a cultural divide and regional resentment in "peripheral areas"	Media discourse	Nilsson and Lundgren (2019)
	Political discourse	De Ruyter et al. (2021)
	Urban bias	McKay et al. (2023)
Demographic and compositional factors	Population decline	Van Vulpen (2023); Dijkstra et al. (2020)
	Education level	Kenny & Luca (2021); Larsson et al. (2021); Dijkstra et al. (2020); Ballas and Thanis (2022)
	Age	Koeppen et al. (2021); Kenny & Luca (2021), De Lange et al. (2023); Dijkstra et al. (2020); Ballas and Thanis (2022)
	Gender	Ballas and Thanis (2022)
	Ethnicity	Rodríguez-Pose et al. (2023b)

Electoral expressions of discontent in "geographies of discontent"

Discontent is a complex concept that is both difficult to define and measure. A unified definition of discontent does not currently exist. For the purpose of this study, we loosely define the term as the feeling of dissatisfaction that people may experience towards their government and that expresses itself in electoral processes. In most studies on geographies of discontent, discontent is measured by protest voting, referring to all votes cast for populist or anti-establishment parties, and not for example solely levels of apathy and voter turnout (Rodríguez-Pose 2018, De Ruyter et al. 2021). That is explained by the fact that, as described above, discontent in left-behind areas is the result of, and characterised by, a unique combination of economic, social, cultural and demographic factors that have led people in such areas to feel ignored, neglected and marginalised by political, economic and cultural elites. Furthermore, studies have found that although rural residents are less likely to be informally politically engaged than urban residents, such as by attending protests or signing petitions for example, they are more likely to vote despite a higher level of dissatisfaction. (Mascherini et al. 2023, Kenny and Luca 2021). Furthermore, the more extreme the distrust and dissatisfaction with democracy is, the more likely voters are to turn their backs on established parties and vote for a new party (Haugsgjerd 2019). Relatively recently formed populist and anti-establishment parties and their agendas therefore become an attractive alternative for voters in peripheral areas that have high levels of dissatisfaction with their government. At the heart of populism lies the idea of the "ordinary people" battling against "the elite", with both terms being open to interpretation (Mudde 2004). Populist parties are therefore conceptually close to the phenomenon of rural resentment, with the elite perceived as being associated with urban areas and urban dwellers.

Although election data in most liberal democracies are reliable and widely available, they cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of discontent and its drivers. Discontent and resentment are complex feelings that can stem from a multitude of sources and issues. As Van Vulpen and colleagues (2023) remark, we cannot decipher from voting data alone what kind of resentment is being expressed and towards what institution or phenomena. Moreover, not all discontent is expressed through a vote for an anti-establishment party or even by voting. Finally, not all votes for populist parties necessarily represent a protest vote. Many scholars have therefore employed other methods such as surveys, analysis of media coverage or even measurement of levels of cyberhate crime instead of, or as well as, voting data to measure and understand discontent (Denti and Faggian 2021, Kenny and Luca 2021, Van Vulpen et al. 2023).



Photo: Benjamin Suomela / Norden.org

4. Geographies of discontent in the Nordic context

The Nordic countries have not been immune to the overall western rise in political discontent, but to our knowledge there has been no systematic study of whether rural-urban or periphery-centre divides have formed geographies of discontent in the region. There is, however, significant evidence in all Nordic countries of economic, social, cultural and demographic divergence between central and peripheral areas and of the latter having been somewhat neglected by national governance (State of the Nordic Region 2018). As Eriksson and Tollefsen (2022) note, there has been a "general upsurge in political debates around uneven development and spatial divisions and deprivation during the 2010s". Limited country-specific studies have shown some evidence that such inequalities may be forming geographies of discontent in the Nordic region, primarily in peripheral areas but more comprehensive, region-wide studies are needed (Stein et al. 2021, Erlingsson et al. 2023).

Expressions of discontent: electoral behaviour in the Nordic region in the 2010s

All five Nordic states saw a change in electoral behaviour and also, to various extents, a rise in popularity of non-traditional and/or anti-establishment parties and/or platforms in the 2010s. Martinez-Toledano and Sodano (2021) also found varying degrees of an electoral urban-rural divide in all five countries.

Iceland, the country hit hardest by the financial crisis, experienced mass protests and the unprecedented success of multiple new political parties in 2010s. In the 2010 local election, many voters abandoned the four established parties and voted for new parties, stayed home or cast a blank ballot. Turnout in local elections was the lowest for decades at 74%. Over 6% of voters cast a blank or void ballot. (Önnudóttir et al. 2021).

In Sweden, many have described the 2010 election as a turning point in Swedish politics given that the far-right anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats, entered parliament for the first time with 5.7 percent of votes. The 2014 election saw them succeed in doubling their share of the vote to 13%, which meant that none of the traditional political blocs was able to form a majority. In the 2022 election, they reached 20.5 per cent. (Jylhä et al. 2019). Geographically, Michaud and colleagues (2021) have found that the Swedish electoral landscape has become increasingly fragmented since the early 2000s, driven by dominance of the Sweden Democrats in southern Sweden.

In Norway, the Social Democrats that had held power for eight years lost the parliamentary elections in 2013 to a centre-right coalition. The winning populist Progress Party entered government for the first time as part of a coalition, marking a turning point in the party's electoral success. (Bjerkem 2016).

In Finland, the 2011 election saw the unexpected success of the right-wing populist Finns Party, paving the way for a further victory for the party in 2015. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the Finns Party won nearly 18% of votes, becoming the second largest party. The Finns Party has typically attracted votes in rural and remote areas. (Salo 2022).

Finally, election behaviour has proven slightly more complex in Denmark. The Danish People's Party garnered 21% of the vote in 2015, with most of its support coming from rural areas. By the 2019 elections, however, the party's populist platform had been partly adopted by the mainstream parties and the Danish People's Party lost support. In 2022, two new anti-establishment parties formed. One of them, the Denmark Democrats received 8.1% of the vote and explicitly targeted rural areas with an anti-urban agenda. (Sörensen and Svendsen 2023).

Next steps: identifying factors driving "geographies of discontent" in the Nordic region

All Nordic countries are western liberal democracies and there is nothing in the academic literature to suggest that the key factors potentially driving geographies of discontent in other countries, such as the economic, socio-cultural and recognition inequalities, as well as demographic factors, identified above, are not applicable or at least partly applicable to the Nordic context. Most if not all the factors mentioned in the previous section should therefore be considered when conducting any comprehensive empirical study of the phenomenon of geographies of discontent in the Nordic region. However, given some of the distinct political, social, economic and geographic characteristics of the Nordic countries, such as, but not limited to, parliamentary democracy stability, high levels of decentralisation, the universal, tax-funded welfare state and a unique blend of socialism and capitalism, it could be that certain factors identified above are of

greater or lesser importance in terms of understanding discontent. Furthermore, the Nordic countries have experienced high immigration rates in the past 15 years. The refugee crisis of 2015 in particular led to significant numbers of asylum seekers and refugees from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan seeking refuge in the Nordic countries.

In this final section we briefly describe the factors that should be considered in future empirical analysis of geographies of discontent in the Nordic region.

Increasing economic divergence

The Nordic countries experienced the 2008 crises differently and showed more resilience than most of the western world. The economies of Norway, Sweden and Denmark started recovering as quickly as by 2010 and Iceland's economy had followed suit by 2012. Finland took longer to recover as it faced tougher structural and unemployment issues but its economy had also started to pick up by 2016. However, like many other OECD countries, the 2010s was a decade that saw a deepening spatial and interpersonal divide in the Nordic countries. (Meinander 2021). According to the Territorial Cohesion Development Index, which monitors the development of territorial cohesion, peripheral regions fell further behind urbanised areas in Denmark, Finland and Sweden in the 2010s, although that was not the case in either Norway or the Åland Islands (Rauhut and Marques da Costa 2021).

Globalisation and economic restructuring have led to the peripheral, rural and remote Nordic areas in general facing the same challenges of competition and economic attractiveness confronted by other regions in the world (Meinander 2021). Sparsely populated areas traditionally associated with manufacturing have lagged behind urban areas offering knowledge service jobs (Eriksson and Hane-Weijman 2017). National and EU regional development policy interventions focusing on regional economic growth and competitiveness have been implemented throughout the region to curb the centralisation effects of globalisation. Overall, however, Knudsen (2020) has showed that Nordic regional policies that have focused on regional competitiveness and not necessarily spatial equality have contributed to the rural-urban divide to a certain extent, for example through the regional policies of smart specialisation, which has favoured already well-off areas. The extent of the impact of such regional development policies on spatial inequality varies substantially, however, between the countries in the region. Norway and the Åland Islands have developed a relatively successful regional policy, with the former placing a strong emphasis on rural development, whereas Denmark, Finland and Sweden are more reliant on the European Cohesion Policy. The Swedish case is often seen as representing an "extreme" in terms of rapid rural depopulation, postwar industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation of the economy (Knudsen 2020, Eriksson and Tollefsen 2022). In Finland, neither national nor European regional policy appear to have prevented an increase in spatial economic inequality in the country (Fina et al. 2021). Iceland's particularly high levels of

urbanisation and the fact that over two-thirds of the population live in the city-region of Reykjavik could make the country particularly vulnerable to urban economic dominance over remote areas. Some scholars have gone so far as to call regional policy in the Nordic countries neocolonial on the grounds that those countries deprive lagging regions of their assets by way of resource extraction and/or state-led centralisation (Jakobsen et al. 2022, Eriksson 2008). Carson and colleagues (2022) further argue that regional development policy in the Nordic region is not well adapted to sparsely populated areas and reinforces the "urbanisation of the hinterland" and the development of dominant small service towns. Regional and rural policy, however, represent a relatively small proportion of state budgets in the Nordic region. The financial equalisation schemes, such as the transfer of government resources between richer and poorer municipalities, that can be found in all Nordic countries have been shown to play a role in reducing rural/urban inequalities. (Tillväxtanalys, 2021)

A social divide

The Nordic welfare states have gradually been cut back since the 1980s (Allelin et al. 2021). Neoliberalist policies in the Nordic region have led to an increase in marketised welfare services, meaning that they have become less universal and less equal (Allelin et al. 2021, Östberg 2021). Eriksson and Tollefsen (2022) underline how that has increased the vulnerability of some households and places compared to others and, according to the findings of the Nordic Council of Ministers (2018), welfare and service gaps have increased between and within rural and urban regions. (Eriksson and Tollefsen, 2022, Slätmo 2023). That is the case particularly in Sweden, where the welfare state has seen higher levels of privatisation than other Nordic countries (Björling and Rönnblom 2023). Furthermore, in Europe, the Nordic region stands out as having some of the most mobile populations and a strong urbanisation trend (Nordic Council of Ministers 2018). That has led to significant population loss and demographic change in rural and remote areas, making public service provision in these areas a challenge. Indeed, service provision in the Nordic region is mainly reliant on local tax revenue, with the diminishing population resulting in local rural public sector often not having the funds to cover its service needs. That financial struggle is made worse by challenging geographical circumstances such as low-density levels and long distances to services and the fact that rural areas tend to have an older age structure than urban areas. Decreasing populations and lower wages also mean that Nordic rural areas have difficulties attracting highly skilled workers to work in the public service sector. Many rural areas therefore often have higher than average income tax rates to cover the cost of delivering services in part. Despite that and the significant financial equalisation schemes between municipalities in the Nordic countries, the availability of services often remains lower than in urban areas. (Slätmo 2023).

Bremberg (2020) has demonstrated that healthcare provision is insufficient in

areas with low population density in Finland, Norway and Sweden. In terms of education, Beach and colleagues (2018) have found that there is a tendency to close small urban and rural schools in Finland, Norway and Sweden in general. Transport costs are also often lower in cities in the Nordic region and there are fewer and less frequent public transport options and services in rural areas. That particularly affects those without a licence or access to a vehicle. (Wøien Meijer et al. 2023). Furthermore, access to adequate housing in Nordic rural areas has been shown to be a challenge for certain social groups due to the fact that rural housing markets are dominated by privately owned individual houses, which are unaffordable and/or inaccessible to certain groups. Many of those challenges, especially those linked to transport, housing and education, have made rural areas less attractive and a challenge for young people (Wøien Meijer et al. 2023). The combination of those important factors has led to a general decrease in services and closures in rural/peripheral areas, which in turn has resulted in a worsening quality of life and levels of wellbeing, as well as shorter life expectancy in rural areas over time (Lundgren et al. 2020).

Finally, with respect to Denmark, Sørensen and Svendsen (2023) have revealed that not all rural areas have political capital, i.e. a community's capability to organise and coordinate politically for the collective good, which in turn has repercussions on an area's economic and social wellbeing. That could be linked to a lack of institutional meeting places such as assembly houses or multifunctional centres in rural areas compared to urban ones.

A recognition gap fuelling the cultural divide and regional resentment

In all Nordic countries there are signs of a significant recognition gap and disparities in worthiness and acknowledgment between rural areas and urban areas. First, when it comes to the people living in rural and urban areas, scholars have found evidence both in media and political discourse that rural communities in Sweden, Denmark and Finland are often portrayed as the "obsolete white working class" as opposed to the "modern middle class" that populates urban areas. (Eriksson 2010). Second, when it comes to how the places themselves are portrayed, rural areas are regularly referred to as places in need of financial support that are surviving only thanks to generous urban support. The northern areas of Finland and Sweden in particular are described as being lonely, sparsely populated and devoid of culture or social happenings. Regional policy and tax systems are seen by some to be nourishing that stigma by hiding some of the important economic and contributions of those northern areas and some scholars have even argued that there is an exploitation of natural resources. (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2022). In Denmark, Rudolph and Kirkegaard (2019) found evidence that wind farm developers, for example, have been pushing the stigma of rural decline to justify the purchase and demolition of properties in marginalised rural areas. That

recognition gap has not only fuelled a cultural divide but also regional and place resentment in rural areas. In Sweden, for example, signs of regional resentment manifest themselves in the existence of rural social movements that campaign against the closure of public services and that express a feeling of being abandoned by the national government (Lundgren, 2020). A report by Öhrvall (2023) also found that people living in Swedish rural areas believe that they have different values from those who live in the cities and that the city dwellers do not care about the countryside.

Demographic factors

Like in the rest of the western world, rural and remote areas in the Nordic region have ageing populations and a more strongly increasing proportion of the elderly (+ 65) in relation to the working-age population (16-64 years). That increase is considerably smaller in urban areas, which typically have a young population and a high proportion of the well-educated. One of the main reasons for that is that many young people leave rural areas in their twenties (20–29 years) for educational or professional reasons, although today there are some signs of counter-urbanisation, headed by younger people in their thirties (30–39 years) working in the public sector. There are also often more men than women living in Nordic rural areas, with gender ratios tending to show a deficit of women in the countryside due to outmigration of women to urban areas. (Lundgren et al. 2020).

5. Conclusions

The rise in discontent levels in the 2010s, resulting in turn in an increase of votes cast for anti-establishment parties in western liberal democracies, including in the Nordic region, has puzzled, and alarmed many scholars and thinkers. Identifying and understanding the root causes and drivers of that discontent and change in electoral behaviour has therefore fuelled much academic work.

Most thinkers agree that overall it has been driven by the economic structural change such as increased globalisation and marketisation of public services that has occurred since the 1980s. That has increased the vulnerability of many individuals and territories and in turn led to greater inequality and a socio-cultural divide between people and places.

Discontent and dissatisfaction levels have therefore risen among people and within places that feel left behind, creating geographies of discontent in certain regions and contexts. Whether or not that is the case in the Nordic region still needs to be fully determined.

This paper has established that key factors that have driven geographies of discontent elsewhere in the West can also be found in the Nordic region. A deeper analysis, however, is required in order to ascertain whether discontent in the region is primarily driven by territorial or interpersonal inequality. In other words, it has yet to be demonstrated at a regional scale whether discontent/content fault lines can be found within or between places.

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