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### Illustrations of political resentment among disadvantaged people

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*Published in:*  
Bitter-Sweet Democracy?

*DOI:*  
[10.11647/OBP.0401.05](https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0401.05)

*Publication date:*  
2024

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

#### [Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (HARVARD):*  
van der Does, R, Amara-Hammou, K & Talukder, D 2024, Illustrations of political resentment among disadvantaged people. in *Bitter-Sweet Democracy?: Analyzing Citizens' Resentment Towards Politics in Belgium*. Open Book Publishers, pp. 115-137. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0401.05>

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BITTERSWEET

# DEMOCRACY?

ANALYZING  
CITIZENS'  
RESENTMENT  
TOWARDS  
POLITICS  
IN BELGIUM

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Louise Knops, Karen Celis, Virginie Van Ingelgom, Heidi Mercenier, and François Randour (eds), *Bitter-Sweet Democracy? Analyzing Citizens' Resentment Towards Politics in Belgium*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0401>

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Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0401#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-290-7

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-291-4

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-292-1

ISBN Digital (EPUB): 978-1-80511-130-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-295-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0401

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 5. Illustrations of political resentment among disadvantaged people

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& David Talukder*

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**Abstract:** People who face socio-economic disadvantages tend to be underrepresented in politics. Existing research suggests that this should make them particularly resentful towards politics. Yet, empirical studies on how resentment might express itself among them remains rare. This chapter seeks to address this gap in the literature through the analysis of survey data as well as focus groups conducted among socio-economically disadvantaged people in Brussels, Belgium. The survey results show that socio-economically disadvantaged people are generally more resentful, but also underline the difficulty to reach this population and the necessity to combine it with qualitative research methods. Our analyses of the focus groups show, first, that the objects of participants' resentment were mostly local actors and that expressions of resentment seemed tied to the experience of concrete problems. Second, even though resentment manifested itself in frustration, disappointment, and, at times, indifference towards politics, it also went hand in hand with at least some hope that politics could offer a solution to societal challenges. Most of all, participants wanted to be heard and they generally wanted local politicians and bureaucrats to just come to talk to them. We discuss the implications these findings have for the empirical study of political resentment among people experiencing socio-economic disadvantages.

## Introduction

People facing socio-economic disadvantages are often underrepresented in politics. They are underrepresented descriptively, in terms of not having representatives in office who share their physical features (Pitkin, 1967, p. 11) or lived experiences (Allen, 2022, p. 1114; Mansbridge, 1999, pp. 629, 644; Young, 1997, p. 366), and substantively, in terms of not having their interests represented and translated into policy outcomes and political decisions (Dovi, 2002; Phillips, 2020; Williams, 2000). In this chapter, socio-economic disadvantage refers to people who face particular difficulties in the labour market, such as unfavourable working conditions, not having a stable income, or receiving a low wage; in the housing market; and/or in education, due to limited access to formal schooling.

Existing research shows that these people's underrepresentation in politics tends to weaken their support for democracy and their trust in political institutions and politicians; undercuts the degree of legitimacy they award to decision-making; makes them support political reform; and, for instance, discourages them from participating in politics (Ceka & Magalhães, 2016, 2020; Dacombe, 2021; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; McCormick, Hague, & Harrop, 2019; Phillips, 1998; Talukder & Pilet, 2021; van der Does & Kantorowicz, 2022; Williams, 2000). This structural lack of voice, both with regard to not being present and not being heard (Young, 2000), seems to fuel negative appraisals of politics and disengagement, suggesting resentment towards politics should be particularly pronounced among people experiencing socio-economic disadvantages.

Yet, so far, few studies have focused specifically on political resentment among people experiencing socio-economic disadvantages. They often fall outside of the scope of empirical studies on political resentment, mainly because they are considered to belong to a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population (cf. Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015). It follows that empirical evidence regarding how they feel about politics is therefore sparse (Behrens, Freedman, & McGuckin, 2009; Miscoiu & Gherghina, 2021; Wojciechowska, 2019), and a specific focus on their potential resentment towards politics remains wanting too. Our study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

We use a combination of survey data on the Belgian population and focus group data on people living in socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the municipality of Molenbeek, Brussels. This chapter thereby further expands and deepens the literature on political resentment by uncovering how the expression of resentment captured through survey questions manifests itself in a variety of ways among participants in these neighbourhoods, as communicated in their own discourses produced during a series of focus groups. We conducted the latter in a typical European city: Brussels. Brussels is typical in that, as in many other European cities, socio-economic disadvantage is highly concentrated geographically in specific municipalities and neighbourhoods (Nieuwenhuis, Tammaru, Van Ham, Hedman, & Manley, 2019; Van Hamme, Grippa, & Van Crielingen, 2016). Zooming in on the experiences of people living in one such municipality (Molenbeek) thereby allows us to provide insights that could help us to begin understanding resentment among similar groups of people in other cities too.

Supplementing survey research with focus group data on people in Brussels who experience socio-economic disadvantages allows us to add more depth and nuance to the assumption that people experiencing such disadvantages are unequivocally politically resentful, in three ways. First, zooming in on this population enables us to take a closer look at how resentment manifests itself, adding substance to the claim made in the introduction to and prior chapters of this book that resentment is a multi-layered concept and a complex emotion. Second, it allows us to show how day-to-day experiences shape political emotions like resentment, as other scholars have suggested (Cramer & Toff, 2017; Knops, 2021; Rosanvallon, 2021). Third, it enables us to demonstrate how socio-economic forms of discrimination can intersect with other types of discrimination, such as xenophobia, racism, or religious discrimination.

Our results thereby offer a more nuanced view of how these people experience politics and on their possible resentment towards it. Our analyses show: (a) that resentment was fuelled by people's everyday experiences, (b) that the objects of participants' resentment were mostly local actors, and (c) that feelings of resentment were often accompanied by expressions of hope that politics could still change and offer a solution

to the societal problems that people identified, pointing towards what Celis et al. (2021) have called the ‘democratic dilemma.’

In the following, we first describe the political attitudes of socio-economically disadvantaged people associated with resentment, based on survey data from the first cross-sectional survey carried out by the RepResent team in May 2019. Then, we provide an account of how resentment possibly manifests itself among people experiencing socio-economic difficulties in neighbourhoods in Molenbeek. We examine how ‘resentment’ manifested itself in discussions about societal problems and how those might be resolved. Specifically, we study what the objects of resentment are and how its three dimensions (that is, emotional complexity, morality, and temporality) come to the fore in relation to those identified targets of resentment. We end with a discussion about the ‘democratic dilemma’ and the implications of these findings for the wider study of political resentment.

### Survey data on resentment

This section aims first to situate the analyses by means of survey data on indicators commonly associated with resentment. In the following, we compare respondents who, according to their self-reports, were in a socio-economically disadvantaged situation compared to the rest of the sample on several proxies for political resentment. We measure political resentment based on five items that we expect to be associated with resentment as conceptualized in Chapter 2 of this book. The items are reported in Table 5.1 and have been re-coded to a 0-1 scale, where higher scores represent more negative (and, by approximation, more resentful) attitudes toward politics.

Table 5.1 Items used to measure political resentment.

Item	Min	Max	Name
To what extent are you satisfied with the policies implemented by the following political decision-making entities in the past few years?*	0 (very unsatisfied)	10 (very satisfied)	Policy dissatisfaction
[The federal government]			

When you think of Belgian politics in general, to what extent do you feel each of the following emotions? [anger]	0 (not at all)	10 (to a great extent)	Anger
Voting is pointless because parties do what they want anyway.	1 (totally disagree)	5 (totally agree)	Election is useless
In general, politics reflect rather well the people's preferences*	1 (totally disagree)	5 (totally agree)	People's preferences not reflected
In general, our political system functions in an efficient way*	1 (totally disagree)	5 (totally agree)	System is inefficient

Notes: Reports the original scales. All the items were recoded to a 0-1 scale.

\* Items for which we reversed the scale.

In order to obtain an overview of disadvantaged people's attitudes in relation to political resentment, Figure 5.1 compares disadvantaged people (respondents who are either unemployed/unqualified workers and have not completed secondary education) to the other respondents ( $N = 7433$ ). Despite a sample of 7609 respondents, only a few of them ( $N = 184$ ) are socio-economically disadvantaged. The small sample size reflects the limits of general-population-based surveys to reach this group of people and underlines the value of combining the results with qualitative data to get an accurate picture of their potential political resentment. The results show that the distributions for disadvantaged people on the five items are much more tilted towards the higher end of the scale compared to other people. These results are in line with the common observation that underrepresentation in politics tends to weaken public support for democracy.

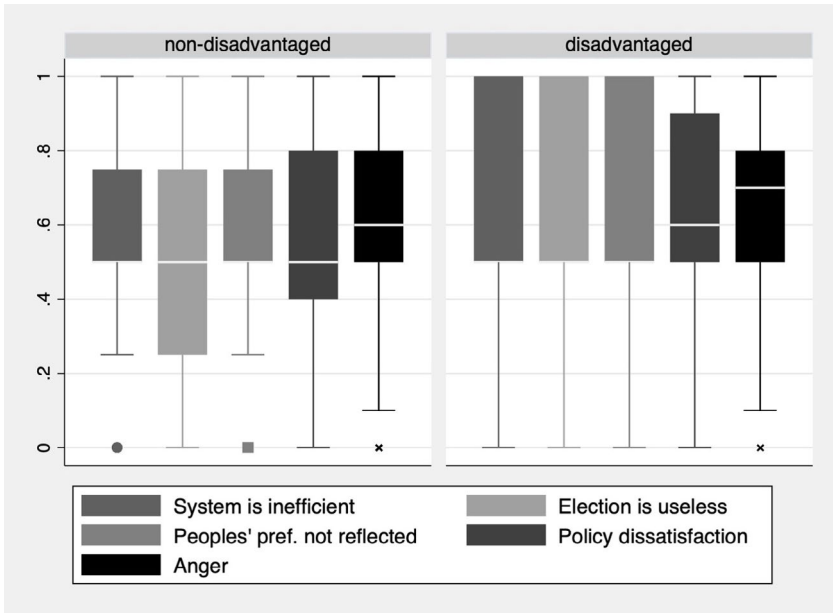


Fig. 5.1 Boxplots of five items measuring resentment by socio-economic (dis)advantage.

To move a step further, we conducted several t-tests and Figure 5.2 provides a 95% confidence interval plot which compares disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged people. The results of the t-tests tend to show that disadvantaged people do hold significantly more negative attitudes than people who do not experience socio-economic disadvantages on four<sup>1</sup> of the five items. There are no significant differences between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged people on the perception that politics reflect people’s preferences rather badly ( $t = -0.88, p = .81$ ). Nevertheless, as with the other items, the score is still higher for disadvantaged people ( $Mean = .633, SD = .020$ ) than for others ( $Mean = .617, SD = .003$ ).

However, the fact that—according to the survey data—there are differences between people experiencing socio-economic disadvantages and those who do not in terms of attitudes associated with resentment does not tell us much about *how* political resentment expresses itself.

1 The respective t-values are the following: -2.06 (Anger); -2.47 (Elections is useless); -2.48 (System is inefficient); -4.99 (Policy dissatisfaction).

More specifically, we do not know how people *experience* political resentment and how they talk about it. In order to move one step further and to have an in-depth view of what political resentment looks like, we recommend focusing on the analysis of several focus groups conducted among disadvantaged people in the next section of this chapter.

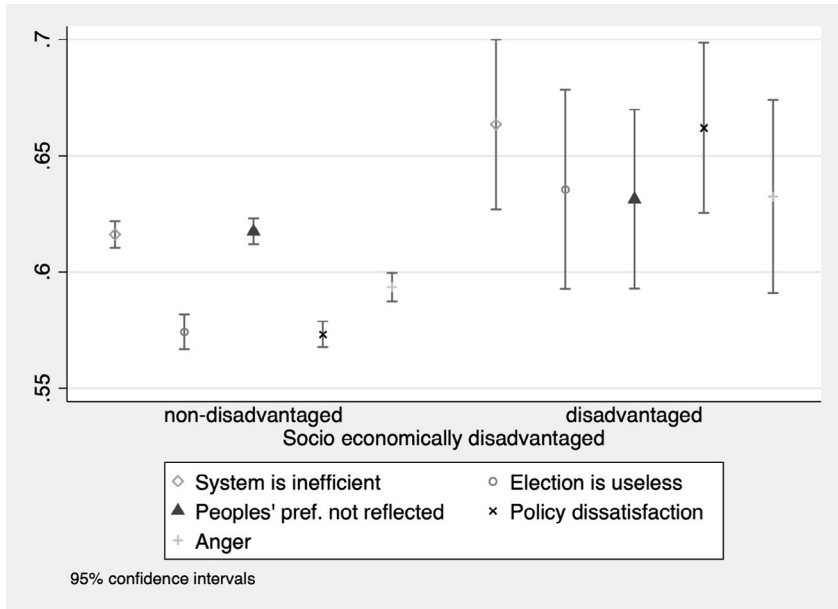


Fig. 5.2 Average scores on the five resentment items with 95% confidence intervals.

### A study of resentment through focus groups

To provide qualitative insight into how these people express resentment towards politics, we draw on four focus groups that the RepResent team conducted in the fall of 2019. The team recruited the participants via door-to-door canvassing in a socio-economically challenged municipality in Brussels: Molenbeek. Molenbeek is part of the former industrialized area in Brussels. While the area used to house workers, today mainly people with a migration background live in the area. Molenbeek is also one of the poorer, more densely populated municipalities in Brussels and is characterized by low household income and lower levels of employment,

manifesting itself especially in a high youth unemployment rate (Van Hamme et al., 2016).<sup>2</sup>

We used this spatial proxy to recruit people who would be likely to experience socio-economic disadvantages. Table 2 provides the background characteristics of the 22 participants based on a short survey they were asked to fill out. Most participants had completed, at most, secondary education (15 out of 22) and did not have paid work (16 out of 22).<sup>3</sup>

The focus group format allowed participants to use their own words to express themselves, focus on the problems they themselves considered important, and challenge each other's formulations and arguments (cf. Van Ingelgom, 2020). The analyses reported in this chapter draw on the first set of questions posed in each of the four focus groups. These questions addressed what participants considered to be the most important societal problems (i.e., 'In your opinion, what are the most important societal challenges that Belgium is facing today?'), what they thought were potential solutions to those problems (i.e., 'How should these societal challenges be resolved?'), and whom they thought was responsible for these challenges and should take care of solving them (see Appendix 1, Chapter 2 of this volume for a simplified version of the topic guide). These questions offered a way to tap into participants' thinking about societal problems and the role various actors and institutions do and should play in resolving those problems. The focus groups allowed us to inquire into the varying ways in which people in socio-economically difficult situations connect the societal problems they deem important to their evaluations of relevant actors and institutions.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the parts of the focus group transcripts that deal with the aforementioned questions, providing a summary per group with accompanying quotes to substantiate our

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2 As with other municipalities in Brussels like Anderlecht, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Schaerbeek, it is not uncommon for households to have a total disposable income falling below the poverty line (i.e., €1,284 per month for a single person). For details, see STATBEL at <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/poverty-risks-belgium-2020>

3 For education: not counting missing data or ongoing education.

interpretations (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).<sup>4</sup> We started by cataloguing what participants viewed as (a) the most important problems, (b) potential solutions, and (c) the actors and institutions involved in creating and solving the identified problems. After this descriptive exercise, we then moved to a more detailed reading of the materials, in which we focused on participants' understandings and evaluations of the actors and institutions they identified. To underpin the accuracy of our interpretations of the materials, we relied on discussion to share our understandings of the transcripts as well as to settle any remaining disagreements (Mason, 2013).

In line with the conceptual discussion in Chapter 1, we focused in the second stage of coding on the three dimensions of resentment: morality, emotional complexity, and temporality. To capture its moral dimension, we looked for statements regarding unfairness, injustice, and moral wrongs. We specifically looked into references that participants made to experiences, interactions or events that caused a sense of injustice or of being treated unfairly or badly (Améry, 1980; Fassin, 2013; Russell & McKenna, 2012). These included experiences such as being discriminated against on the job market, not being listened to or consulted and not being responded to. We also examined comparisons participants made between how different social groups are treated and how different people within social groups are treated (e.g., residents of a certain municipality, minorities, and people who experience socio-economic disadvantages).

Subsequently, we looked into the complexity of feelings (Strawson, 2008) that participants expressed when talking about these experiences, interactions or events. Viewing resentment as a complex constellation of feelings with anger at its core, we took note of expressions of anger, disappointment, and fear but also, conversely, of positive feelings such as hope and satisfaction. Finally, we captured the temporal dimension by looking into references that participants made to the past, present and future and comparisons that participants made between different points in time. We paid specific attention to experiences, interactions

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4 We conducted the analyses based on the original transcripts in French. For transcripts partly in Arabic, we based our coding on a translation to French provided by one of the authors.

or events that seemed to have a long-lasting effect on participants and impact their present-day feelings and attitudes (Améry, 1980).

Taken together, we thereby seek to complement the description drawn from the survey data by providing qualitative insight into *how* resentment manifests itself when people discuss politics. Further, by providing a contextualized analysis of people's expressions of resentment, we can also point towards potential reasons *why* people feel resentful.

Table 5.2 Overview of focus group participants.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>
Molenbeek1	Moussa	Male	45–54	None or primary	Unemployed
	Sonia	Female	45–54	None or primary	Incapable of work
	David	Male	45–54	None or primary	Permanent contract
	Emma	Female	65–74	Post-sec. vocational	Retired
Molenbeek2*	Jamal	Male	35–44	None or primary	Unemployed
	Rayane	Female	55–64	None or primary	Retired
	Malik	Male	35–44	Secondary	Student
	Chayma	Female	35–44	Secondary	Housekeeper
	Younes	Male	45–54	None or primary	Incapable of work
	Malory	Female	35–44	None or primary	Housekeeper
Molenbeek3	Walid	Male	18–24	Ongoing	Student
	Tais	Male	25–34	Post-sec. vocational	Permanent contract
	Mehmet	Male	25–34	University (short)	Unemployed

	Abbou	Male	25–34	Secondary	Permanent contract
	Adil	Male	25–34	NA	Permanent contract
Molenbeek4**	Abdelkrim	Male	45–54	None or primary	Unemployed
	Ayman	Male	45–54	Post-sec. vocational	Permanent contract
	Asma	Female	35–44	Secondary	Housekeeper
	Anabelle	Female	25–34	Post-sec. vocational	Permanent contract
	Hamid	Male	45–54	Post-sec. vocational	Incapable of work
	Abdellah	Male	55–64	None or primary	Unemployed
	Soukaina	Female	25–34	None or primary	Unemployed

Note: \* = In this group, three social workers were present too. The participants at the time of the focus group lacked legal documentation to reside in Belgium.  
 \*\* = For this group, we focused the analyses on the participants who faced socio-economic difficulties: Abdelkrim, Asma, Hamid, Abdellah, and Soukaina. NA = Missing data. All names are pseudonyms.

### Concrete problems

Participants' discussions generally focused on concrete, local problems. In terms of space, these problems varied from a lack of services provided by the management of their own social housing unit to a variety of issues in their neighbourhood, including theft, drug use and traffic, and a lack of public transport services and childcare. If not tied to their direct surroundings, participants often discussed concrete issues encountered in their daily lives, such as difficulties paying taxes or obtaining legal documentation as well as experiences of discrimination. Nevertheless, at times, they did connect these everyday issues to wider trends and problems. For example, participants in Molenbeek3 linked their discussion of discrimination against Muslims on the job market to the recognition of Islam as a religion in Belgium (Adil), the many koranic schools in the country (Mehmet), and the representation of

the Muslim community in Brussels (Abbou). To give another example, in Molenbeek1, David and Sonia suggested that politicians are just ‘marionettes’ and everything is settled behind the scenes. Besides linking this to freemasonry and the Illuminati, they also sparked a discussion on (former) world leaders, such as Obama and Chirac.

Notwithstanding these exceptions, the predominant focus on concrete problems meant that participants also concentrated their discussions mostly on local actors, most notably street-level bureaucrats and local politicians, such as public welfare employees, police officers, and the mayor of Molenbeek. The solutions participants had in mind often focused on a stronger presence of these actors in the neighbourhood, and on enhanced efforts to consult residents before taking any decisions.<sup>5</sup> We recognize that the focus on local, concrete problems and solutions is in part the result of our methodological choices, singling out people in a single socio-economically challenged neighbourhood and asking them to discuss together what societal challenges they deem most important. At the same time, the findings echo the relevance of local circumstances and interactions to how these people think about politics, as also identified in prior studies (Dacombe, 2021; Rosanvallon, 2021; van Wessel, 2017). This underlines the need to move beyond generic, decontextualized statements about how these groups relate to politics if we are to understand their resentment towards it. In the following section, we show how resentment towards politics surfaced during the focus group discussions, being closely tied to the concrete problems and solutions participants had in mind.

## Morality

In all focus groups, participants expressed a feeling of being treated unfairly and unequally compared to others. This often pertained to discrimination on the basis of one’s migrant, and, sometimes, religious background. Participants signalled general prejudice towards them, such as the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists: ‘Ah, it’s the Arabs,

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5 After that, solutions focused on people themselves, including proposals to improve education (Molenbeek3) and to unite in order to be heard by local administrators (Molenbeek1), as well as on substantive policy reforms, such as a revision of the tax return system (Molenbeek3).

it's the Arabs. They are terrorists' (Malik, Molenbeek2). In addition, they linked it to direct and indirect personal experiences. For instance, in Molenbeek2, Malik expressed his frustration with the way people without legal documentation are discriminated against based on their country of origin: '[...] No, not even the fact that they don't obtain [required documents] [...] The fact that not regulating individuals without legal documentation promotes criminality among people coming from Morocco or North Africa who are obliged to steal to survive. You know?' In another example, David (Molenbeek1) linked this to encounters with the police: 'Immediately when a police officer sees a man of Moroccan origin, well, then it's he who did it.' Similarly, in an account that resonated with the other participants in Molenbeek3, Abbou expressed his feeling of being discriminated against on the job market based on his foreign, Muslim name and appearance:

I had all the competencies for the job for which I had applied. I had it all. And so, they had to make a choice. They had to make a decision. There was me, my name is Abbou, and next to me there was a mister Jean-Marie, and on the other side there was another girl. You see? And so, they immediately saw my face and they didn't even look at my competencies that were on my CV, and said: 'Mister is called Abbou...' I felt it like that, they didn't say that to me, but it felt like that: 'He is called Abbou, so we remove him directly from the list.'

(Molenbeek3)

At times, participants also compared their own situation in Brussels to other places in Belgium to underscore their relative deprivation. For example, in Molenbeek3, they emphasized the stronger presence of the police and better public services in other Belgian cities, such as Antwerp, and in Molenbeek1, participants discussed how a former mayor of the municipality did more for 'the rich' than for them.

However, the most prevalent theme related to fairness, encountered in all of the focus groups, was procedural rather than substantive: participants time and again expressed their lack of voice and linked this to the ineffectiveness of public policies aimed at addressing the problems in their community. This pertained both to street-level bureaucrats as well as to local politicians. Regarding the former, David (Molenbeek1) described, for example, how police officers tend to make a lot of fuss in the neighbourhood but do not tackle the actual problems:

But there is [...] a lot of incompetence. Here, there is a lot of laxity. We're going to do, they're going to do the Lucky Luke thing because quickly, [...] there's something coming out of, I don't know, out of a garbage can or something like that, then they're going to come quickly and make a row, put on the flashing lights, [...] pissing everyone off.

(Molenbeek1)

When participants turned to solutions concerning safety and the police, they indicated that they not only wanted a stronger presence from the police but specifically police officers who 'don't hesitate to come and find people, asking whether it is going all right or not' (Emma, Molenbeek1). The idea that street-level bureaucrats are out of touch with people and with the actual problems that participants experience could also be seen in complaints about the local housing agency not solving the 'real' problems and failing to listen to residents.

We find a similar view on local politicians. In Molenbeek4, Abdelkrim pointed out that he started a petition together with other residents to counter noise nuisance at night in Molenbeek. He had already been to the town hall and the mayor of Molenbeek twice but did not receive a response:

Abdelkrim: They didn't do anything. So how does that happen?

Hamid: [in a loud voice] They have seen the petition! 15 or 20 people, [and] nobody responded.

Abdelkrim: [outraged] There you go! Nothing!

Hamid: That is what he wanted to say. They filed a petition! But, there you go. There, on Léopold II, it's rotten.

(Molenbeek4)

In the other focus groups, we find comparable accounts of participants that express their frustration with not being listened to by local politicians. In line with their description of street-level bureaucrats, participants in Molenbeek1 linked their frustration with the local mayor to her failure to take concrete actions or to demonstrate a physical presence in the neighbourhood:

David: [mockingly] She does social things. She says 'No but we will try to do something, we will do social things. We will help them, we will roll out a red carpet.' Well...

[...]

Moussa: But do you see her? Since the elections, I have never seen her.

David: [in a firm tone] I have never seen her! I have never seen her and I haven't even crossed her.

Sonia: She had to come, uhm, to the building. A month ago, the new management [of the building] presented itself. And she had to be introduced.

[...]

Moussa: But she wasn't there.

Sonia: Everyone, well, everyone was outraged because she wasn't there.

(Molenbeek1)

Participants in Molenbeek3 also mentioned that the current mayor did not consult residents before making decisions about public facilities in Molenbeek, such as the removal of parking lots. According to Abbou, for example, she should have discussed this first with the inhabitants:

The mayor hasn't made the effort to come to the residents of that place [...]. So, what do we do, what is negative, what is positive, right, and after that we take a decision together. But according to her, taking decisions by herself like that without talking to residents, I don't think that's normal, you see?

(Molenbeek3)

Finally, what also tended to generate frustration among participants was the lack of accountability from the people whom participants presumably held responsible for the problems they experience. In Molenbeek1 for instance Sonia discussed the mismanagement of the social housing services, suggesting that neither social housing agencies nor politicians at the local level want to claim responsibility. Instead 'they point their finger at each other' when a problem presents itself. This also meant that Sonia was confused about who is actually responsible:

Sonia: When you have a problem, they tell you to go the housing department at the town hall, to the mayor.

- David: No! That's because what they are trying to say is 'Listen carefully, sort it out yourself. Try and talk to the management' [...]
- Sonia: They point their finger at each other!
- David: [Simultaneously] They point their finger at each other!  
(Molenbeek1)

Overall, then, we observe across the focus groups that participants feel discriminated against in their encounters with government officials and generally think that local politicians are out of touch with reality. Importantly, they feel ill-served by government officials and politicians who do not try to truly listen to them linking it to their physical absence in the neighbourhood. In the next section, we discuss how these elements play into to their feelings towards politics.

## Emotion

The previous section has illustrated participants' frustration and disappointment with politics and how those feelings generally centred on local actors. Another emotion that is linked to interaction with local authorities and voiced by participants was fear. In Molenbeek2, this revolved around the problem that the participants did not have the requisite documentation and were therefore afraid to ask for it, scared of being evicted. In Molenbeek4, fear manifested itself in relation to problems of crime in the municipality. As Abdellah explained, that is because one cannot trust the judicial system: '...the judiciary is implied in it as well, right. Even if I report, if I report him, for example. He will go by the police, he will arrive at a judge and [he will] set him free. Who is being humiliated? It's me.'

Sometimes participants' disappointment with politics and local administrations because of their deficient delivery of services or poor attempts to listen to residents was accompanied by statements signalling indifference. To illustrate, Moussa (Molenbeek1) did not see any difference between successive mayors in terms of addressing local problems: 'And they say that it was a MR [French-speaking liberal party] project before and Schepmans [the previous mayor] she has finished and that now PS [French-speaking socialist party] will take over. In reality,

it's... It's the same thing. For us it's the same thing.' Indifference also manifested itself when—exceptionally—participants in the same group connected their problems to global-level conspiracy theories. As Sonia made clear: '...we know very well that everything is settled in advance. Whether it's the United States or whatever other country, everything is arranged among them.'

Nevertheless, in two of the focus groups (Molenbeek1 and Molenbeek3), participants also offered a series of solutions to address problems in their community, suggesting that they neither despaired nor rejected local politics. Even participants such as David and Sonia, who expressed indifference towards politics, also suggested ways forward. Sonia, for example, pushed fellow residents in her building to unite and express themselves towards the management; argued that it was important that police officers should be 'neutral, above all, correct'; and proposed that the previous mayor should return because she 'beautified the community and made the Belgians return a bit.' Such signs of hope that politics could still resolve the societal problems that participants identified is also reflected in the suggestions made by participants in Molenbeek3 to consult residents before making decisions, and the need for the state and even the prime minister to address social problems. In fact, participants stated that such consultations and the opportunity to interact with politicians would make them feel more positive and optimistic about politics. Consider for instance the sequence below, which took place during the Molenbeek 3 focus group. Adil said he felt hopeful and positive about the future, after which Mehmet said he felt listened to. He added that this is what he and the other participants want from the government: to be listened to.

Adil: I'm positive. When I see all the youngsters present here. That gives... [...]. That gives hope for the future. [...] I'm very happy about this evening, I learned a lot of things and I am leaving here with a lot of hope and a big smile on my face.

[...]

Mehmet: Me too. Because at least someone listened to us, wrote to us, gave us... You were here to listen to us. That is what we want actually. We want the government to listen to us and take good decisions.

(Molenbeek3)

## Temporality

These feelings associated with local politicians and bureaucrats were generally tied to long-lasting problems. In Molenbeek3, for instance, participants emphasized the recurring nature of problems of insecurity in their neighbourhood due to the enduring lack of police interventions. In Molenbeek2, Jamal's disappointment provides a potential example of resentment stemming from an enduring lack of response from the local administration: 'almost now, almost four years, I have deposited my files for social housing, there's nothing like a response, there's nothing. That's it too, you see. Waiting for almost ten years.'

The relevance of temporality also showed in participants' feelings towards local politicians. Abbou (Molenbeek3) remarked, for example, that he prefers to cast a blank vote because of the repeated empty messages coming from politicians:

These politicians, it's only empty words. You see? For me politicians, I consider them as people that put the money into their pockets, that's all. I consider them like that and I don't believe what they say anymore. Every time they say 'Yes, we will do that, we will do this...' That's empty words.

(Molenbeek3)

Abbou then goes on to describe how current problems can be traced back to the previous mayor. This resonates with a similar frustration expressed by Moussa in Molenbeek1 regarding the incompetence of successive mayors. Yet it is worth pointing out that the other participants in the same group were instead nostalgic about the past, providing a potential source of hope rather than bitterness towards politics. To illustrate, Sonia and David agreed that the previous mayor had a stronger social agenda and Emma added that she brought more security to the municipality. Similarly, in terms of micro politics, Sonia and Emma pointed out that while the management of their building now fails to listen to them, they had a different relationship with the management twenty years ago when they also had meetings with them.

## Discussion

This chapter focused on socio-economically disadvantaged people's resentment toward politics in Belgium. Our analysis of population-based survey data show that these people tend to hold more negative political attitudes than people not experiencing socio-economic disadvantages. However, based on an analysis of focus groups conducted in the Belgian capital, we demonstrate that such resentment is not clear-cut, manifesting itself as a complex cluster of emotions (cf. Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). Indeed, even though decision-making via established democratic institutions seems to be experienced as something that is imposed on them—that is, as something that they do not choose, but have to accept—they realize that in order to solve many of the societal problems they experience, contact with and support from politicians are necessary. At the same time, they know that such contact and support are simply missing in practice. This makes for what we call an 'imposed' democratic dilemma.

These varied expressions of resentment among the disadvantaged participants were tied closely to local, concrete experiences, including deficient facilities and services in the municipality, (a lack of) interactions with street-level bureaucrats and local politicians, and other everyday experiences in their neighbourhood. Focus group participants generally underlined the absence of politicians and the inadequacy of institutions related to their everyday experiences and struggles. For some of our participants, the persistence of such a situation brewed resentment, echoing the findings in Chapter 8 related to the temporality of resentment.

These findings also feed back into survey-based research on political resentment. In contrast to what prior research and our own description based on the survey items suggest, the focus group discussions show that disadvantaged people cannot simply be portrayed as (particularly) resentful people. Among this population too, resentment expresses itself as a complex emotion that can go hand in hand with more positive feelings. Future research should therefore be careful not to draw overly simplistic conclusions about these people's resentment towards politics. What is more, our qualitative findings draw attention to the relevance of taking a micro-perspective and focusing on people's personal

experiences to study manifestations of resentment as well as other emotions. The analyses of the different focus groups underlined the fact that disadvantaged people's attitudes are closely tied to their personal experiences with the state and local politics, something the existing survey items did not allow us to tease out. Integrating questions about such personal experiences, on the one hand, and political resentment, on the other, could provide a way to gain a more nuanced view of resentment in future survey research. Finally, we wish to emphasize the need to adequately include disadvantaged people in survey research to be able to make well-informed statements about the population under discussion.

Our study nonetheless has several limitations. One possible limitation is the question format we adopted in the focus groups. That is to say, by asking participants to identify societal challenges or problems, we might have prompted more negative appraisals. However, despite the many problems that participants identified, at least some of them also shared positive appreciations of political actors and challenged other participants for being too pessimistic. In addition, we also asked how societal challenges might be resolved. To this question, as our findings show, participants gave answers that signalled hope.

Another limitation is our small and diverse sample. We focused on data from four focus groups and one of the focus groups, unlike the others, consisted almost exclusively of participants without legal documents.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, our goal was to look into the many ways in which resentment manifests itself during conversations about political topics by listening to people who are hardly reached by surveys and are rarely asked to give their opinion about politics. Our goal therefore was not to give a representative assessment of their political attitudes but rather to provide some initial qualitative insights into what resentment might look like in this understudied population.

Despite these limitations, our study sheds light on how political resentment manifests itself among disadvantaged people, specifically among those living in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods similar in many ways to those in other European cities. We have shown

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6 We also admit that while we were careful to communicate the aims of our study and put participants at ease, they might still have been fearful or reluctant to talk openly about politics.

that although disadvantaged people hold negative political attitudes and are dissatisfied with their everyday experiences, they do not fully reject politics and have not given up hope on politics or politicians as a means to solve their problems. However, contrary to people not experiencing socio-economic hardships, they experience this as an *imposed* democratic dilemma in that they do not have alternative means or channels to tackle the problems they experience.

The number of people in Europe experiencing socio-economic problems in their daily lives is growing as a result of a spike in food and energy insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-change-induced droughts and floods, and conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and the war and ongoing occupation in Palestine. As policymakers continue to struggle with tackling these problems, these resentments toward politics might become increasingly pronounced. This makes it urgent for future studies to improve our understanding of resentment among people experiencing socio-economic disadvantages as well as how it influences them in the short and long term, using both qualitative and survey data.

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