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### Studying political resentment

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BITTERSWEET

# DEMOCRACY?

ANALYZING  
CITIZENS'  
RESENTMENT  
TOWARDS  
POLITICS  
IN BELGIUM

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and François Randour (eds)

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## 2. Studying political resentment: a methodological overview

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François Randour*

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Abstract: Political resentment is a theoretically and methodologically challenging concept to study. It requires the observation of complex emotions, moral judgement and the over-time persistence of this sentiment, both in specific groups and in entire populations. To reach this goal, the RepResent project relied on large scale population-based surveys and focus groups. This chapter discusses the rationale, strengths and weaknesses of the different methodological choices and operationalisations which emerged from the research project. In doing so, the contribution helps the reader to make sense of the different approaches used in the book to study political resentment. More specifically, the chapter first examines the quantitative methods used to study resentment (i.e., waves of surveys, types of questions and rationale). Second, the chapter discusses the use of qualitative methods aimed at understanding resentment (i.e., waves of focus groups, types of questions and rationale). Third, the chapter presents how qualitative and quantitative methods have cross-fertilized to integrate insights from focus group research in the development of a new survey question. We conclude with an assessment of the different approaches in light of the theoretical and methodological challenges associated with the study of political resentment.

## Introduction

Political resentment is a complex and multi-dimensional concept, which makes it a theoretically and methodologically challenging concept to study. To take up this challenge and to unpack the complexity of resentment among Belgian citizens, this book is structured around four objectives. It aims to (1) define political resentment and identify the dominant traits of resentful citizens in Belgium; (2) empirically study the emotional and behavioural dimensions of resentment as well as (3) examine the feelings of injustice experienced by (disadvantaged) citizens and the feeling of being unrepresented. Finally, the book (4) explores the link between resentment and democracy, both in how resentful citizens feel towards democracy, and the hopes they have about democracy.

Different levels of empirical detail and scope are required to meet these objectives. For instance, mapping the characteristics of resentful citizens, and examining the relationship between resentment and political behaviour requires a standardized measure of political resentment that allows us to observe this sentiment among a representative sample of a population. To answer questions about how citizens think about political representation, or how the personal experiences of citizens are linked to resentment, more detailed accounts of the experiences, views and emotions of specific groups within the population are required. To provide both scope and detail, as well as observations of general and specific populations, and snapshots and observations undertaken over a duration, the RepResent project combined both large-scale population-based (panel) surveys and focus groups as methods of data collection.

The concept of political resentment itself raises some methodological challenges. It is defined in this book as a complex emotion, with anger as a core aspect that can commingle in a broader 'resentful affectivity' consisting of fear and disappointment and which involves a moral judgement resulting from the persistent and cumulative experiences of unfairness across time (Celis et al., this book; Capelos and Demertzis, 2018; Celis et al., 2021; Fleury, 2020). Hence, to observe the full sentiment, one needs to observe various aspects at the same time. One must explore the co-relation of various emotions and of resentful affectivities, moral judgment, and how resentment is related to time and experiences, which

are very personal. Qualitative and quantitative methods can contribute to this in different ways.

Finally, our goal to study a concept that has not been widely researched requires us to distinguish it from, and relate it to, neighbouring concepts. While Chapter 1 accomplishes this on a theoretical level, the research methods we have used allow us to do so empirically as well. They make it possible, to a certain extent, to compare our findings with previous research.

In sum, studying political resentment triggers important methodological questions, which are reflected in the diversity of data sources and methods of analysis used in this book. Following an abductive approach, as explained in Chapter 1, the project started off with the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in parallel (see Figure 2.1).

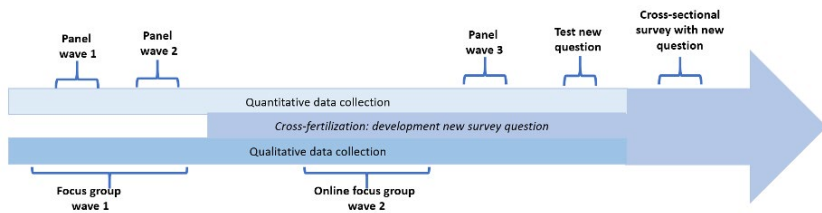


Fig. 2.1 Data collection stages of the RepResent research project.

Note: The data collection started in January 2019 and ended in November 2021.

Quantitatively, the project started with a set of ‘waves’ of online surveys (a three-wave panel)<sup>1</sup> that aimed to capture political resentment and perceptions of democratic representation among the Belgian population (discussed in Section 1 below). Qualitatively, focus groups were organized among samples of the population in which political resentment is most likely to be observed, and that are typically underrepresented in large-scale survey research (Section 2). After this initial phase, the analysis of the focus group data and the consideration of the strengths and limitations of the survey data collected thus far led to the development of a new measurement instrument for political

1 In this chapter we base our discussion on the three first waves of the EoS Panel survey; for the full overview of the surveys, see the Appendix.

resentment in survey research, which was included in a cross-sectional survey, which was the final survey of the project (Section 3).

The chapter then goes on to discuss the different methodological choices and operationalisations used in the research project.<sup>2</sup> The chapter concludes with an assessment of the different approaches taken in relation to the challenges identified in the study of political resentment (Section 4).

## Section I: Studying resentment with surveys

In order to capture political resentment (and its relationship to other attitudes and behaviour) in society at large, the RepResent project conducted a three-wave, online panel survey among Belgian citizens. The data collection was structured around the elections of 26 May 2019 in Belgium.<sup>3</sup> In a pre-electoral wave, respondents were surveyed between 5 April and 21 May 2019 (see Figure 2.1). The post-electoral wave surveyed the same respondents immediately after the elections between 28 May and 18 June 2019. Finally, about one year after the elections, these respondents were surveyed a third time between 7–27 April 2020. The panel design makes it possible to examine the evolution of resentment over time.

The target population of these surveys were the inhabitants of the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels regions who were eligible to vote in the 2019 elections. The sample was targeted to match the gender, age, and education distribution for the voting-age population in the respective regions. Anticipating panel attrition due to the longevity of the panel, we began with a very large sample of 7351 respondents in Wave 1 (Flanders N= 3298; Wallonia N= 3025; Brussels N= 1028). The sample shrank to 3917 respondents in Wave 2 (Flanders N= 1971; Wallonia N= 1429; Brussels N= 509). For the third wave, only the Flemish and Walloon respondents who participated in the two previous waves were

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2 The methodological choices and the data collection are the outcome of a collective process involving all researchers of the RepResent research project.

3 Belgium is an interesting case, since rising support for parties with extreme ideological positions and the mobilization of social movements suggests that political resentment may be present in substantial parts of the population, which raises questions about the role of political resentment in the development of political attitudes and behaviour.

contacted, resulting in 1996 completed responses, with a response rate of 58.6% compared to the second wave (Flanders N= 1266; Wallonia N= 730). Respondents from Brussels were not contacted for this wave, because the sample had become too small.

The representativeness of the sample was checked by comparing the sample to the population of reference in terms of age, gender and education. Although we aimed to have a representative sample at Wave 1, a sample is never a perfect reflection of the population from which the sample is drawn. Indeed, Chi-square statistics showed that there are statistically significant differences between the sample of Wave 1 and the population ( $p < 0.001$ ) (more information can be found in the technical report of the survey, see the general methodological appendix in this book). Further, due to panel attrition, Waves 2 and 3 also showed significant differences on most variables. To account for the differences between the samples and the population, weights were calculated for each sample based on the known distribution of the population in terms of age, gender and education, and computed through the iterative proportional fitting procedure (ipfraking module–Stata). This ensures that the weights correct the marginal distributions of the sample to match the population distribution.

### Survey questions on resentment

The complex nature of political resentment provides various methodological challenges, including the development of survey questions that can capture the full concept. As explained in Chapter 1, our project defined political resentment in terms of three key components: (1) its nature as a complex emotion, (2) that is rooted in a moral judgement and experienced unfairness and (3) which is long-lasting, due to accumulated experiences over time. The temporality aspect is incorporated into the design of the panel survey.<sup>4</sup> To capture

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4 The panel design allows us to examine the evolution of resentment over time. Most emotions remain stable between wave 1 and wave 2 of the panel. Results of the paired t-test (same respondents, two time points) show significant statistical mean differences for anger (Mean Diff: 0.138,  $p < 0.010$ ), bitterness (Mean Diff: 0.135,  $p < 0.010$ ), fear (Mean Diff: 0.191,  $p < 0.001$ ) and contentment (Mean Diff: -0.096,  $p < 0.010$ ). Most of the panel respondents moved up one to two points on the 0-10 scale between the waves, except for the emotion of contentment, which went down.

the other two aspects, the project (initially) chose to draw on a number of well-established survey questions for concepts that are related to political resentment, which, taken together, would cover all its key aspects. This allows us to situate the findings of the RepRepresent project within the long tradition of empirical research on citizens' attitudes vis-à-vis politics. Yet, there are also some limitations to this approach, in terms of its conceptual match with the definition of political resentment. In the last phase of the project, the insights from these surveys and from focus groups were therefore used to develop a novel survey measure of political resentment (see Section 3), which can be directly compared with more established indicators such as political trust, cynicism and efficacy (see for example, Chapter 10 in this volume).

The surveys had to capture political resentment as a complex cluster of emotions. While resentment is most commonly associated with anger, many scholars point to its being a complex mixture of multiple emotions besides anger, perhaps including, for example, disappointment or fear (Tenhouten, 2007). This ongoing conceptual discussion raises the question: which emotions should be included in a measure of political resentment? For example, Capelos and Demertzis (2018) approach political resentment by measuring a multitude of 'resentful affectivities', including emotions of anger, fear, anxiety and hope. The advantage of their approach is that it avoids setting strict boundaries in advance to determine what political resentment is and is not. Similarly, we built on the question on emotions developed by Valentino (2008) and extended it to an 8-item battery that tapped into various emotions related to politics (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1 Measure of emotions towards politics.

**When you think of Belgian politics in general, to what extent do you feel each of the following emotions?" [0-10 scale: 0 = Not at all; 10 = To a great extent]**

1. Anger
2. Bitterness
3. Anxiety
4. Fear
5. Hope
6. Relief
7. Happiness
8. Contentment

Note: This question is included in wave 1 and 2.

Political resentment is also characterized as a moral judgement that emerges in the face of experiences of unfairness or injustice. This implies certain norms about how one should be represented, and a judgment that these norms are not complied with. This aspect of political resentment connects to a long tradition of survey research that tries to capture citizens' attitudes towards politics using concepts that are closely related to political resentment. Most notable in this regard are the American National Election Surveys (ANES), which introduced empirical measures of various sub-dimensions of political alienation. Among other things, they introduced indicators of concepts such as trust in government, political cynicism and political efficacy. Although these concepts do not deal with resentment per se, they do capture the experiences of unfairness and the moral judgement that are key aspects of political resentment. The included measures are presented in Box 2.2.

One of the most frequently used indicators dealing with citizens' relation vis-à-vis politics is political trust. Although there is no consensus about the exact definition of political trust (Seyd, 2016), it is most frequently referred to as a relational concept, in which a person expects another person or an organization to behave in a certain (beneficial) way in the face of uncertainty and dependency on the outcome of those actions (e.g., Hardin, 2000; Van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017; Van der Meer, 2017; Seyd, 2016). When this trusting relationship is broken, and one or more characteristic components of a trusting relationship—commitment, care, predictability and competence (Kasperson et al., 1992; Van Der Meer, 2010)—are perceived to be absent, resentful attitudes may arise. Specifically, a lack of trust implies that one believes that the elites (or the system) cannot be expected to treat one fairly (hence, perceived unfairness). To measure political trust, we followed the example of the European Social Survey (ESS) and limited political trust to a specific set of political objects. In this research, these are: political parties, the Federal Parliament, politicians and the European Union.

In contrast, in much empirical research—especially in American studies—conceptions of political trust or 'trust in government' are often characterized by a stronger focus on norms and morals. This research

looks at whether political actors are complying with certain normative expectations, or instead are corrupt, and whether they waste tax money, or only look out for special interests or themselves (Hetherington, 1998). Political actors that are perceived as scoring badly on those indicators are regarded as not to be trusted. In this tradition, trust is sometimes posited as the inverse of political cynicism (e.g., Easton, 1975; Mason, House, and Martin, 1985), which involves an attitude 'that the political process and its actors are inherently corrupt, incompetent and self-serving' (Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017, p. 5). Political cynicism is most clearly connected to the notion of resentment and has even been defined as being a 'bitter or resentful attitude' about the morality of political actors (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p. 142). Based on the ANES trust scale, which has often been used to measure political cynicism (e.g., Dardis et al., 2008 and Pinkleton and Austin, 2002), the three panel waves include a 7-item scale of political cynicism, specifically selected to tap into key elements of political resentment: experiences of unfairness and moral judgement.

Furthermore, the surveys included questions to measure an individual's perceived political efficacy. Political efficacy refers to 'the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process' (Campbell et al., 1954, p. 187, via Craig et al., 1990, p. 290). One can distinguish internal and external components of political efficacy (e.g., Lane, 1959). Internal efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about one's own competence to understand and participate effectively in politics. External efficacy is an individual's beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizens' preferences (Chamberlain, 2012). External efficacy is relevant to the study of political resentment as it deals with citizens' perception about whether or not political parties (or the system as a whole) allow regular citizens to have an input, thereby again tapping into perceptions about (un)fairness. The three survey waves included elaborate efficacy batteries.

## Box 2.2 Measures of moral judgements towards politics.

**1. Political trust**

**Can you indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below?  
[0-10 scale: 0 = No trust at all, 10 = Full trust]**

1. Political Parties
2. The Federal Parliament
3. Politicians
4. The European Union

**2. Political cynicism**

**Can you indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below?  
[1-5 scale: 1 = Totally disagree; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Somewhat agree; 5 = Totally agree]**

1. Politicians are corrupt.
2. Most politicians are competent.
3. Politicians are trying to keep their promises.
4. Politicians do not understand what is going on in society.
5. Many politicians have been around for too long.
6. The way we organize elections in this country is fair.
7. Political parties take sufficient account of independent experts when making decisions.

**3. Political efficacy**

**Please indicate to what extent you disagree or agree with the following statements. [1 = Totally disagree; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Somewhat agree; 5 = Totally agree]**

1. Most citizens do not have clear political preferences.
2. Political parties do not offer real political alternatives to the people.
3. Political parties give too much freedom to campaign advisers to determine important political issues. The influence of interest groups and lobbyists on policies is too big.
4. Voting is pointless because parties do what they want anyway.
5. In general, our political system functions fairly.
6. Our political decision-making processes are sufficiently transparent.
7. In general, our political system functions in an efficient way.
8. I feel that I have a fairly good understanding of important political values in Belgium.

Note: The question on trust was included in wave 1 and 3, the question on cynicism and efficacy were included all three waves. Efficacy item 9, however, was only included in wave 2 and 3.

## Limits of using survey data for the study of political resentment

There are, however, some limitations to this approach when studying political resentment. First, the chosen measurement is not ideal. Although using well-established indicators has the advantage of comparability with earlier public opinion research, and these indicators together capture the key theoretical aspects of political resentment, the fragmented manner in which political resentment is captured in the panel surveys (spread across the surveys) also has a number of disadvantages. Most importantly, by using scales of related concepts instead of one scale focused specifically on political resentment, it is impossible to make inferences about 'how resentful' citizens are towards politics. Rather, the included measures give indications of how resentful citizens are in terms of certain key elements. Therefore, these measures may be useful to examine the relationship between aspects of political resentment and other variables such as political participation (Chapter 4 in this volume), substantive representation (Chapter 6 in this volume) or feeling represented (Chapter 7 in this volume). However, a more detailed analysis mapping how resentful citizens are and who the resentful citizens are requires a standardized measure of political resentment (Chapter 3 in this volume). Also, while the temporal aspect of political resentment was incorporated into the survey design with its panel setup, this key aspect of resentment was neglected in the actual survey items. A standardized measure of political resentment also needs to take the long-lasting character of political resentment into account more substantively.

Furthermore, using large-scale online surveys also creates some limitations for the study of political resentment. Asking respondents to answer closed questions pre-emptively narrows the scope of their answers to fit the researchers' theoretical assumptions. A more bottom-up approach, in contrast, can bring forward new insights from the perspectives of the citizens themselves. Relatedly, as people are largely unable to elaborate on their answers in online surveys, the insights one gets from survey data often lacks nuance in comparison to more in-depth interviewing methods.

The final limitation of using survey data to measure resentment is that it is challenging to reach marginalized groups as these citizens are simply unlikely to participate in survey research (Dillman et al., 2002).

## Section 2: Studying resentment with focus groups

Since political resentment is a relatively new field of empirical study, and given the limitations of the survey approach elaborated above, the RepResent project complements the deductive quantitative approach for which large-scale surveys were used with a more inductive qualitative approach relying on focus groups. The focus groups aim to develop a deeper understanding of what political resentment is, how individuals experience it, and how they express it. Focus groups are conversations between research subjects—participants—that are organized by a researcher, about a specific topic. This method is useful to shed light on a topic that does not typically spontaneously become visible in an interviewing context, while, at the same time, the method limits the intervention of the researcher so that plenty of room is left for the free expression of views and experiences by the participants (Hennink, 2014; Kapiszewski, Maclean, Read, 2015). This setting permits participants to collectively define and highlight issues that are important to them, thereby giving prominence to research participants' perspectives, perceptions and understanding of a political issue (Hennink, 2014; Van Ingelgom, 2020). A key characteristic of focus groups is the interaction among participants (see Hennink, 2014; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996; Van Ingelgom, 2020; Wilkinson, 1998). This interactive setting encourages participants to react to other participants' experiences, thereby allowing for the collection of more complex and 'fully articulated' accounts. This makes focus groups a method of observation that is particularly well-suited for studying political resentment. Overall, this method allows to capture unanticipated issues and enables more nuance than a fixed list of items proposed by a researcher would permit, thereby rendering data that would not otherwise be available for study.

Focus groups are also appropriate when a researcher wants to gain insight into the views of 'hard-to-reach' or marginalized groups in society (Barbour, 2007). On the one hand, a targeted recruitment strategy

makes it possible to contact people who ‘may slip through the net of surveys’ (Barbour, 2007, p. 20). The organization of focus groups close to the spaces where participants spend much of their time contributes to their willingness to participate in research and to share their views. On the other hand, standardized (survey) approaches may not be a sufficiently close fit with the life-worlds of certain parts of society. Focus groups allow participants to talk about what they know and experience, using the words that are familiar to them, thus allowing the researcher to observe which words and references people spontaneously use when discussing certain issues (Wilkinson, 1998). These aspects that relate to access and inclusion are another key reason why the RepResent project uses focus groups.

In sum, using focus groups, the researcher can unpack both what citizens think, and how they think about political issues (Van Ingelgom, 2020). These advantages are of major importance when studying a multi-dimensional concept such as political resentment. The more flexible approach used by focus groups and their interactive nature are key to letting participants reflect on politics in a way that is relevant to them and that is close to their life and their own experiences (i.e., life-world in context). Focus group data thus allow us to explore the diversity and complexity of feelings of resentment towards politics in detail.

### A focus on (potentially) resentful citizens

Participants for the focus groups were recruited following a logic of purposive sampling and the selection of participants was theoretically driven (Van Ingelgom, 2020). In the RepResent project, the objective of the focus groups was to capture a diverse sample of citizens among whom we expected to observe political resentment, while ensuring a certain homogeneity within each focus group (Wilkinson, 1998; Hennink, 2014; Van Ingelgom, 2020).

Focus groups were organized in two ‘waves’ of data collection. The first wave (January 2019–February 2020) aimed to explore resentment among two main categories of participants: (1) politicized citizens (Chapter 8) and (2) disadvantaged citizens (Chapter 5). Politicized citizens are understood as citizens involved in a protest or social movement, or an activist association. Due to their (protest) activities,

these citizens were expected to express resentful attitudes and feelings towards current political institutions and politicians. In particular, two focus groups consisted of citizens belonging to the Youth for Climate movement, three focus groups consisted of members of the Yellow Vests and three focus groups were conducted with members of non-profit associations active in the social sector ('Expert du Vécu' and 'Syndicat des Immenses').

The second category aimed to document (potential) feelings of resentment among (dis)advantaged citizens who are confronted with very visible (economic) disparities and who do not engage in explicit expressions of resentment through protest activities. We focused on two geographically proximate—yet very distinct—areas of the 'Canal Zone' in Brussels: the Molenbeek and Dansaert areas. While Molenbeek is mainly residential, commercial (hosting mostly local shops) and is a socio-economically disadvantaged area, the Dansaert area across the Canal of Molenbeek is more touristic, commercial (hosting mostly high-end shops) and very popular with young middle-class adults (Van Crieckingen, Fleury, 2006).

We also conducted two focus groups with 'blue-collar workers' employed at the European Parliament in Brussels. We expected that these workers (i.e., contractual employees working in maintenance, logistics and the IT sectors) might hold resentful feelings as they were working in an organization where people with very different economic backgrounds and access to political decision-making are employed (i.e., members of the European parliament and EU civil servants). In total, seven focus groups were conducted along this spatial dimension (four in Molenbeek, one in Dansaert and two with blue-collar workers). The focus groups were organized in person, in the areas where people were recruited.

The second wave of focus groups (December 2020–March 2021) was conducted online and aimed to document how citizens expressed resentment in a time of crisis (Chapter 8). With the COVID-19 pandemic as the common context of this wave, four categories of participants were sampled: (1) far-right voters; (2) COVID-19 vaccine sceptics; (3) participants (heavily) affected by COVID-19 restrictions and finally, (4) non-politicized 'middle-class' citizens dissatisfied with politics. A recruitment survey and an external survey company were used to

identify and recruit participants. We conducted two focus groups with Belgian citizens who had far-right or right-wing Flemish nationalist political preferences (VB and N-VA). We also conducted two focus groups with citizens who were suspicious of, or opposed to the COVID-19 vaccine. We expected these participants to depict relatively high levels of resentment towards ‘mainstream’ political representatives. The third category focused on citizens who have been presented in the public debate as being particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic:<sup>5</sup> professionals from the cultural sector (two focus groups) and university students (three groups). In addition to these very specific groups, three focus groups were organized with non-politicized ‘middle-class’ citizens who are generally dissatisfied with politics. They serve as a point of comparison for the other specific groups.

### Documenting resentment through the prism of societal issues

The focus groups used an experience-based and context-sensitive approach to study political resentment. The organizers started from the personal experiences of the participants and let them identify what (societal) issues or problems were most important to them. We thus used a problem-based approach, which begins with the identification of problems before exploring the means available to tackle them (Chapter 9) (Goodin, 1996; Saward, 2020; Warren, 2017; White, 2010).

Embedded in this approach and inspired by previous studies on citizens and politics (Mercenier, 2019; White, 2010), the focus groups were organized around three central questions (see Appendix 1 for a generic version of the topic guide). The first question dealt with *what* participants considered to be the most important societal challenges that Belgium is facing today. This allowed respondents to reflect on politics in a way that is concrete and relevant to them, enabling substantive discussions where views on representation and resentment could be expressed. The second guiding question focused on *who* should take care of resolving these societal challenges. With this question,

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5 It can be argued that many other groups have been strongly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, in the Belgian public debate and in the media when the focus groups took place—a period of a couple of weeks—the effects for students (social isolation) and the cultural sector (economic consequences) were very salient.

participants could collectively debate the role of various types of actors—not solely political representatives—whom they think should be in charge of resolving problems. This question permitted participants to discuss the role of actors beyond the usual suspects (i.e., ‘politicians’) and to understand if participants were making specific connections and comparisons between groups of actors within society. Finally, the third guiding question introduced a discussion about *how* these issues could be resolved. As a follow-up to the open discussion of this question, participants were offered six images representing ways in which societal issues can be addressed. The pictures could be described as: people voting; citizens coming together to discuss societal issues; a non-violent street demonstration; a violent protest; experts getting together to discuss societal challenges; citizens directly helping others. Finally, the facilitator could ask a concluding question about what it means for the participants to be represented, and ways in which people of their group could be represented.

Overall, by using focus groups, it was possible to unpack two important dimensions of resentment. The first major finding outlines the necessity to embrace the complexity of emotions. The varying affective associations that resentful citizens express towards politics confront them with a ‘democratic dilemma’ (Celis et al., 2021; Chapter 1). While resentful citizens express a combination of feelings of anger, frustration, fear, disappointment and unfairness towards the institutions and actors of the Belgian representative democratic system, they also show some form of trust and hope in that same representative democratic system. The second major finding is that resentment is an incremental emotion that builds up over time. For instance, it can be the accumulation of emotions, such as fears and grievances, that lay the foundations for ‘tipping points’ of indignation (Knops and Petit, 2022). Beside this incremental—linear—perspective, Knops et al. (Chapter 8) explore the cyclical nature of resentment, which could also emerge from a perceived clash of temporalities and a synchronicity between citizens’ life and politics. In sum, the use of focus groups contributes to our understanding of the various affective aspects of political resentment, and of the role of temporality.

## Limits of using focus group data for the study of political resentment

Regardless of the important advantages of using focus groups, there are also some limitations to studying resentment with focus group data, which lead to a number of remaining questions. The first limitation relates to the sampling of participants. The purposive sampling of participants among whom we are likely to observe political resentment leaves us with a sample that is not representative of any defined population. However, this method does allow us to reach relevant participants, and individuals that less easily show up in surveys. Yet, at the same time, there is also bias in those who decide to participate in the study. Participating in a focus group requires a substantial amount of time (two to three hours), and one needs to feel comfortable enough to engage in a discussion with strangers. The qualitative nature of the data and the context-specific approach of focus groups thus does not aim to produce findings that can be generalized to the broader population. Rather, it provides a rich exploration of the complex nature of resentment.

Second, as outlined by Celis et al. (2021), the focus group data we collected constitute a (static) snapshot of emotions at a certain moment in time. Emotions—and combinations of them—evolve through time and should be apprehended as dynamic so as to fully understand them. Indeed, previous findings highlighted the incremental and evolving nature of resentment. While various accounts in the focus groups that reflect (aspects of) political resentment include reflections on the past, and on a perceived evolution of the state of politics and society and how they relate to this, more should be done to identify the different temporalities of resentment and to reflect on the broader role of time on (political) representation.

Third, while the focus group discussions provide context for the observed expressions of political resentment, the focus groups do not allow for a systematic analysis of what characteristics, attitudes, experiences and beliefs are related to political resentment. For instance, it is a pressing question how resentment is associated with views and preferences towards democratic arrangements and alternatives, and to undemocratic alternatives. It is therefore important to question how

the politically resentful challenge the current government system, and whether resentment undermines or strengthens democracy overall. More systematic research should be pursued to understand the relationship between resentment, democracy, and attitudes about the governing system more broadly.

### Section 3: Cross-fertilization across methods: from focus groups to new survey questions

In the previous sections, we explained how the project approached the study of political resentment with both quantitative and qualitative methods. Drawing on the insights of both the panel surveys and the focus groups, a new survey instrument for measuring political resentment was developed. The measure combines insights from the conceptual literature on what political resentment entails, and insights from the focus groups organized as part of the project. The result is a survey question with seven statements tapping into disappointment, anger, feeling infantilized, unfairness, and the perception that the bad situation has persisted.

This standardized measure of political resentment allows us to make inferences about how resentful citizens relate to politics, and which characteristics are systematically related to higher levels of resentment. It also allows us to inquire into the relationship between resentment, democracy, and attitudes about the governing system more broadly. As such, through the cross-fertilization between qualitative and quantitative methods, we are able to offer an alternative to studying political resentment in all its dimensions in an ungeneralisable qualitative way, or studying it in large samples solely through basic questions about emotions that people associate with politics and through indicators that are only partially related to resentment (trust, cynicism and efficacy).

The process of integrating qualitative and quantitative research proceeded in five steps: (1) conceptualizing the various dimensions of political resentment; (2) identifying quotes from focus group data capturing these dimensions; (3) formulating a new survey question; (4) testing the new question and finally (5) including the new measurement instrument in a cross-sectional survey, which was the final survey of the

research project. This question is used in the analyses in Chapters 3 and 11 of this book. In this part of the chapter, we lay out each of these steps, and present the resulting survey instrument.

To start with, we conceptualized political resentment as a complex emotion with anger as a core emotion that can commingle to form a broader ‘resentful affectivity’ consisting of fear and disappointment, which involves a moral judgement resulting from the persistent and cumulative experiences of unfairness across time (Chapter 1 in this volume; Capelos and Demertzis, 2018; Celis et al., 2021; Fleury, 2020). It requires observing the co-relation of various emotions, moral judgment, as well as how resentment is related to time and experiences. Specifically, we derived five key elements from this definition: disappointment, anger, fear, feelings of unfairness, and a lasting sentiment. While anger, fear, and feelings of unfairness are indeed captured by parts of the survey questions presented in the first part of this chapter, we noticed that feelings of unfairness are included in a very limited way (only about elections), and that disappointment and the lasting aspect of the sentiment are entirely missing from the measurement. Moreover, elements of political resentment are dispersed across measures of other concepts.

To fill these gaps, we<sup>6</sup> analysed the first wave of focus group data (i.e., the conversations with Yellow Vests, Youth for Climate, and individuals who occupy a socially disadvantaged position—see section 2 of this chapter; January 2019–February 2020) and searched for quotes and expressions matching the different aspects of political resentment that we identified in the literature. At various instances, we noticed anger in the tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and choice of words. For instance, when participants say that they feel infantilized because politicians treat them like children, they express anger and frustration about this situation. At times, it is literally mentioned, e.g., ‘I’m so tired, right, I’m angry’ (Syndicat des Immenses). As concluded in the study of Celis et al. (2021) that also draws on these data, both disappointment and its opposite—hope—also appear in the conversations. For instance, in a group with participants from the Syndicat des Immenses, it is mentioned that ‘They [politicians] talk about transparency, make promises, but when they are in power, they don’t apply it.’ Feelings

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6 Kenza Amara-Hammou, Louise Knops, François Randour, Ramon van der Does, Soetkin Verhaegen.

of unfairness are also expressed at various points in the focus groups: unfairness in terms of who gets access to public spaces, the distribution of the costs and benefits of public policy, and more generally about who is (not) taken into account by the governing system. Participants are very clear in explaining that their evaluations of the political system are persistent, hence the time element is also very clear in the data in quotes such as 'There is always a mismatch between the intentions they have and the results that come out. And this interaction will always persist and continue to be there.' (Dansaert area), 'It's always the same thing, the same problems, they get repeated.' (blue-collar workers at the European Parliament), and 'I don't see any progress' (blue-collar workers at the European Parliament).

We used the quotes from the first wave of focus group data to develop a measure for political resentment. Since political resentment is a multidimensional concept and as we want to use formulations that speak to respondents' life-worlds, we opted for a battery question with statements that reflect as closely as possible the words that participants in the focus groups used. Yet, considering guidelines on the formulation of effective survey questions and translations (the focus groups were either in Dutch or French and the survey was in both languages), adaptations to the formulations were required. Box 2.3 presents the formulated survey question. This survey question was then pre-tested in a (non-representative) sample of respondents in Flanders between 23 August and 14 September 2021. Using these results, we checked the distribution and variation of answers to the items, how they correlate, and whether they load on a single factor. We also inquired whether the items correlate in expected ways with concepts that are theoretically expected to be positively associated with political resentment and for which validated measures already existed, i.e., emotions related to politics, populism, cynicism, efficacy, and feeling represented. These tests showed that the answers to the new items are well distributed, generally load on a single factor, that correlations with other concepts are as expected, but not to such a degree as to suggest that we were measuring exactly the same attitudes and feelings as captured by other items in the survey.<sup>7</sup>

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7 This chapter focusses on the items that made it to the final survey that is used in Chapters 3 and 10 in the book. However, one additional item was included in the pre-test: 'One cannot say that politics systematically favours certain groups'. This

## Box 2.3 Developed survey question.

**How strongly do the following statements correspond to your opinion about politics? [0= Doesn't correspond to my opinion at all; 10= Corresponds to my opinion very well]**

1. What the government decides is often less good than what I hoped for.\*
2. I'm generally disappointed in politics in Belgium.\*
3. I get angry when I think about politics.\*
4. Most politicians don't take citizens seriously, they rather treat us as children.\*
5. Policy is usually better for others than for people like me.\*
6. I'm afraid that the government will use it against me if I negatively express myself about politics.
7. Elections don't matter, everything has been decided on beforehand anyway.\*
8. Politics treats all groups in society fairly.
9. Political decisions often have a positive impact on the majority of the people.
10. The political system in Belgium has been malfunctioning for a long time.\*
11. I believe that politics is capable of solving people's problems.

\* These items are kept in the final measurement for political resentment.

Note: The 11 items were asked in the test survey in August–September 2021 (but see footnote 6 on item 8), and in the final survey in November 2021. The items marked with \* are part of the final measurement for political resentment.

We finally included the new survey questions in a representative survey of the Flemish and Walloon population of Belgium, fielded in November 2021. Theoretically, we have good reasons to expect that this survey battery as a whole provides a rich and encompassing measurement of respondents' political resentment. Yet, we also explore whether, statistically, the different items of the battery load on a single factor in a principal component factor analysis (Mooi et al., 2018). As a first step in the factor analysis, all 11 items included in the survey are included in the analysis using Stata SE 16.1. Here, we observe that the positively formulated items do not load on the same factor as the negatively

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item does not load on the factor. We concluded that this is probably due to the formulation. The item includes a negation, and it can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. It was therefore reformulated to 'Politics treats all groups in society fairly'.

formulated items. We formulated some items so as to tap into fairness, as the counterpart of items that tapped into unfairness, and we included an item that expresses the believe that politics is capable of solving people's problems as an expression of hope. Yet, as noted in previous research on survey question formulation, we do not find that these formulations tap into the same concept as the negatively formulated items in a positive way (Roszkowski and Margot, 2010). Rather, we find a second factor of positively formulated attitudes towards politics. For this reason, we exclude these items from the measurement for the concept of political resentment, which is an affect that reflects negative rather than positive evaluations of politics. Additionally, we observe that item 6, tapping into fear, does not load well on what we label the 'political resentment factor', so this item is excluded from the analysis too. The result is a measurement for political resentment consisting of seven survey items in total, tapping into disappointment, anger, feeling infantilized (which in the focus groups was used as an expression of anger), unfairness, and the perception that the bad situation has been lasting. The factor analysis is presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Principal factor analysis: political resentment battery.

Survey item	Factor scores
1. What the government decides is often less good than what I hoped for.	0.781
2. I'm generally disappointed in politics in Belgium.	0.833
3. I get angry when I think about politics.	0.755
4. Most politicians don't take citizens seriously, they rather treat us as children.	0.821
5. Policy is usually better for others than for people like me.	0.568
6. Elections don't matter, everything has been decided on beforehand anyway.	0.771
7. The political system in Belgium has been malfunctioning for a long time.	0.831

Source: 4th EOS RepResent Cross-Sectional survey, 2021.

Note: Cronbach's Alpha is 0.883

## Conclusion

As outlined throughout this contribution, studying political resentment is a theoretically and methodologically challenging task for which there is no 'one size fits all' research method. The diverse chapters in this book illustrate how different research questions and objectives require diverse methodological approaches. This chapter laid out the main quantitative and qualitative approaches that are used in this book to observe political resentment. It presented the rationale, strengths, and weaknesses of population-based surveys and focus groups to study political resentment. It also demonstrated how both methods fruitfully cross-fertilized, by using the rich insights from the focus groups to develop a new—standardized—survey measurement of political resentment, allowing us to move beyond the fragmented manner in which political resentment was captured by previous surveys. Moreover, the coordinated collection of focus group and survey data using the new measurement makes it possible to answer research questions using a mixed-methods design, as done in Chapter 10.

However, with the selected methods, there are still some facets of resentment and important questions that we cannot tackle in the present book. One of the major limitations relates to the analysis of the different temporalities of resentment and, more generally, on the incremental and long-lasting character of political resentment. Indeed, despite the panel setup of the surveys, the temporality of resentment could not be captured consistently in the (fragmented) selected survey items. Moreover, focus groups only constitute a snapshot of citizens' resentful feelings at a certain moment in time. While some participants evoked their past (experiences) to explain their current feelings, more needs to be done in forthcoming research to understand the role of time and its impact on political representation. Second, despite the efforts of the research team to adopt an experience-based and context-sensitive approach to political resentment, the chosen methods and the data we collected also imply that we focused on expressions of political resentment collected in a research setting. Therefore, we still know little about how citizens express political resentment in 'real-world' configurations, for instance during protests or on social media. Some of these limitations could be addressed by refining the research design of the (panel) surveys and of the focus groups so as to draw in contextual information about

participants' experiences. Yet other purposes require the collection of different kinds of data or the use of other types of data-collection methods that allow for more direct observation of both context and feelings.

One way forward is to collect different kinds of data. Previous studies have shown that the communication context in which discourses are produced have an impact on the linguistic register used by the participants (Perez et al., 2019). Therefore, it could be interesting to compare expressions of political resentment in focus groups with expressions of political resentment in other contexts, such as the interventions of citizens during (political) television debates, in the written press, on social media or during protests ((non)participant observation). This would allow us to analyse 'real-world' expressions of resentment rather than expressions of resentment in a research setting. Moreover, these types of data would allow for a comparison of expressions of political resentment across different types of actors and communication contexts. This would contribute to our understanding of the conditions under which political resentment discourse is produced, how it circulates among actors in society and how it might impact the democratic functioning of society.

In terms of methods of analysis, new methods of text analysis could aid the detection of emotions, and specifically political resentment, in this type of observational data. In recent years, computational sciences have made important steps forward in the study of emotions of large corpora (Soroka et al., 2015). Sentiment analysis makes it possible to grade sentiment (i.e., from very positive to very negative), detect emotions (i.e., frustration, anger, sadness etc.), and to conduct 'aspect-based' sentiment analysis (i.e., linking emotions with particular objects). These can be useful strategies to analyse large amounts of data where citizens express themselves spontaneously, and thus where the researcher is unable to ask about, or probe, some (aspects of) political resentment in particular.

In sum, this book draws on different types of qualitative and quantitative data that shed light on feelings of political resentment in Belgium. The purpose of this chapter was to lay out the reasons for the choices made, the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and to help the reader understand how a dialogue between types of data collection and methods of analysis has led to an innovation in the measurement of political resentment in large-scale survey research.

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## Appendix I: Simplified generic version–Topic guide Focus group (2020-2022)

### **Welcome and introduction**

**Presentation of the research project:** *who we are, what we do, what we are interested in, what we will do together.*

**Discussion rules:** *consent form, anonymity and recording, duration.*

**Get to know each other:** *can you briefly introduce yourself to the rest of the group?*

### **Societal issues**

**Main question:** *What are the most important societal issues today?*

(1) *Inner deliberation:* Each participant writes their answers on a post-it; (2) *Tour de table:* Each participant shares their answers; (3) *Collective discussion:* Reactions and collective discussion

### **Follow-up questions:**

*We would like to ask you to discuss together which of these issues are for you—as a group—the most (second and third) important issues and challenges.*

*Have there been any moments, or important changes, or evolutions that stood out to you?*

*Who is to blame?*

When a participant expresses an emotion about politics (e.g., ‘depressed’, ‘angry’, ‘sad’), ask if the other participants feel the same. If no one mentions an emotion, ask *how do you feel about politics today?*

### **Societal problems and political solutions**

**Main question:** *What are the solutions to these societal problems?*

**Main question:** *Who is responsible? Who should take care of that?*

**Stimuli (pictures):** *Here are some examples of ways in which people try to address these problems. What comes to mind when you see these pictures? What do you think about these? How do they relate to our discussion so far?*

**Description of the pictures** [follow-ups with suggestions]

(1) **Voting** [e.g., elections; referendum]; (2) **Citizens** coming together to talk about an issue [e.g., citizens coming together to talk about the problems and potential solutions; citizen summit that gives *advice* to the government; citizen summit that can *make decisions* for the community]; (3) **Demonstrate**; (4) **Helping people that are having a hard time**; (5) **Experts** getting together to make decisions [experts = scientists; professionals in their field]; (6) **Violent protest**

**Follow-up question:**

*In the discussions, you mentioned the mayor/Belgian government/EU, Brussels/Flanders/Wallonia a few times, but there are also other places where decisions and laws are being made, like local/federal/Belgium/EU/Brussels/Flanders/ Wallonia. What do you think about these levels? What are the problems or good things about this?*

**Conclusive question**

**Main question:** In all of this, what about the [label of the group]? How are you represented?

**Follow-up:** *What does it mean for you to feel represented? Who should take care of that (i.e., representing you)?*

## Appendix 2: RepResent Focus Group Dataset–Wave 1 (2019-2020)

The focus group data were collected between January 2019 and February 2020 in the framework of the EOS RepResent project (FNRS-FWO n°G0F0218N). This project examines the relationship between democratic resentment and political representation in Belgium. In particular, the RepResent Focus Group Dataset originates from work package 3 and focuses on symbolic representation. Symbolic representation mostly concerns the linkage between citizens and representatives and deals with questions such as: do people feel represented by their representatives? Do they believe that representatives are representing their concerns in the political arena?

To inquire citizens' experiences with, views about, and feelings (such as democratic resentment) towards political representation in

an open manner, focus groups were organized around three guiding questions: What are the most important societal issues that Belgium is facing today?; Who should take care of those issues?; How should they be resolved (i.e., political solutions)?<sup>1</sup> These three questions were asked in 16<sup>2</sup> focus groups carried out in the Brussels region. On average, six people participated in each focus group (92 participants in total). The average length of the focus groups was 2.5 hours. All focus groups were audio recorded —and, when participants agreed (written informed consent was required for participation), filmed (14 out of 16). Based on these recordings, anonymized verbatim transcripts were produced.

While all focus groups followed the same structure, the selection criteria and recruitment strategies aimed to achieve diversity in terms of participants and groups. Participants were selected along two main dimensions: a socio-political proxy and a socio-spatial proxy. The goal of these selection criteria was to capture a diverse sample of citizens from whom resentful feelings might be expected and to examine how these feelings are linked to matters of political participation. A first set of focus groups examined the expression of democratic resentment and views on political representation in political spaces (i.e., socio-political proxy) with politicized and/or pre-identified groups (i.e., Yellow Vests, Youth for Climate, social workers, Experts du vécu, Syndicat des Immenses and blue-collar workers in the European Parliament —59 out of 92 participants). A second set of focus groups included people based on the social spaces they are part of (i.e., socio-spatial proxy), focusing on both mixed or less advantaged areas (i.e., ‘Marolles’ and Molenbeek — 30 out of 92 participants) and, to a lesser extent, on more advantaged areas of Brussels (i.e., ‘Dansaert’ — three out of 92 participants). To guarantee the distinction between the socio-political and the socio-spatial proxy,

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- 1 The two focus groups conducted in French among the *Gilets Jaunes* [Yellow Vests] followed a slightly different structure. Indeed, these groups served as pilot groups. The main questions were addressed in the same order (What are the most important societal issues that Belgium is facing today?; Who should take care of those issues?; How should they be resolved (i.e., political solutions)?; but some more specific questions relative to this particular context of mobilization were also asked. Our experience with these first groups helped us to fine-tune the topic guide that served for the remainder of the focus groups. For example, a new vignette exercise among participants (discussing different solutions) was introduced after the two pilot groups with the Yellow Vests activists.
  - 2 Fourteen in French and two in Dutch.

researchers made sure that prospective participants for the latter groups were not part of a politicized collective/activist movement.

Two types of recruitment strategies were used: (1) direct recruitment by the researcher on the field of study and (2) a mixed strategy, composed of direct and indirect recruitment via existing networks (i.e., pre-existing organization such as NGOs, foundations, etc.). The technical report of the study specifies which groups were recruited in what manner. Using these socio-political or socio-spatial proxies and recruitment strategies led to the inclusion of participants with varying socio-demographic characteristics: (1) 64% of participants are male (36% female); (2) apart from 65+, respondents of all ages are relatively evenly represented; (3) about half of the participants obtained either no diploma or a diploma from secondary school, 14.3% were still in secondary school at the time of the focus group, 14.1% had a university degree, and 20.7% completed professional secondary education.

### Appendix 3: RepResent Focus Group Dataset–Wave 2 (2020-2021)

The focus group data were collected between December 2020 and March 2021 in the framework of the EOS RepResent project (FNRS-FWO n°G0F0218N). This project examines the relationship between political resentment and representation in Belgium. In particular, the RepResent Focus Group Dataset originates from work package 3 of the RepResent project and focuses on symbolic representation. Symbolic representation mostly concerns the linkage between citizens and representatives and deals with questions such as: do people feel represented by their representatives? Do they believe that representatives are representing their concerns in the political arena?

To inquire citizens' experiences with, views about, and feelings (such as political resentment) towards political representation in an open manner, the focus groups relied on an 'experienced-based' and a 'context-sensitive' approach, starting from the personal experiences of the participants. To do so, the focus groups were organized around the same three guiding questions used for the first wave of FG: What are the most important societal issues that Belgium is facing today?; Who should take care of those issues?; How should they be resolved

(i.e., political solutions)? These three questions were asked in 12<sup>3</sup> focus groups conducted online, using Zoom. On average, five people participated in each focus group (58 participants in total). The average length of the focus groups was 2 hours and 25 minutes. All focus groups were audio and video recorded (written informed consent was required for participation). Based on these recordings, anonymized verbatim transcripts were produced.

Participants were recruited following a logic of purposive sampling and the selection of participants was theoretically driven. Overall, the objective of the focus groups was to capture a diverse sample of citizens where political resentment is expected to be observed, while ensuring a certain homogeneity within each focus group. In particular, the second wave of focus groups aimed to document how citizens expressed political resentment in a time of crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). With the COVID-19 pandemic as the common context of this wave, four categories of participants were sampled: (1) far-right voters; (2) COVID-19 vaccine sceptics; (3) participants (heavily) affected by COVID-19 restrictions and finally, (4) non-politicized 'middle-class' citizens dissatisfied with politics.

More precisely, we conducted two focus groups with Belgian citizens who had far-right or right-wing Flemish nationalist political preferences (VB and N-VA). We also conducted two focus groups with citizens who were suspicious of or opposed to the COVID-19 vaccines. We expected these participants to demonstrate relatively high levels of resentment towards 'mainstream' political representatives. The third category focuses on citizens who have been presented in the public debate as being particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) professionals from the cultural sector (two groups) and university students (three groups). In addition to these very specific groups, three focus groups were organized with non-politicized 'middle-class' citizens who are generally dissatisfied with politics. They served as a point of comparison for the other specific groups.

A recruitment survey (for five groups) and an external survey company (for seven groups) were used to identify and recruit participants. Using these recruitment strategies led to the inclusion of

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3 Seven in French and five in Dutch.

participants with varying socio-demographic characteristics: (1) 50% of participants are male (50% female); (2) in terms of age, respondents below 25 (n=15); 25–34 (N=11); 35–44 (N=12); 45–54 (N=6); 55–64 (N=6); 65–74 (N=7); 75+ (N=1); (3) in terms of education, six participants obtained either no diploma or a diploma from secondary school and two participants completed professional secondary education; 15 participants had a professional bachelor's degree (i.e., higher education, short type); 15 participants were currently studying at a university (i.e., bachelor's degree) and two obtained a bachelor's degree; and 17 participants had a university degree (master's degree or higher).