Societal pessimism: A study of its conceptualization, causes, correlates and consequences

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CHAPTER 9
Conclusions and Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This book started by pointing out the lack of systematic attention in the literature to the concern about the state of society. Although scholars discuss a range of assumed consequences, from individual psychological problems (Bennett, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2010) and decreasing trust in institutions (Mazarr, 1998; Whitman, 1998) to economic and social degradation (Mahbubani, 2008; Moïsi, 2009), there is very little knowledge of what this attitude is. There is no such thing as a stream of literature; instead, previous research on this phenomenon is limited to a few studies. Indeed, my first research decision was to conceptualize concern about the state of society as an individual attitude. This means I follow the few other studies that have investigated pessimism, unease or concern about society as an individual-level attitude (Keyes, 1998; Eckersley, 2000; Elchardus & Smits, 2002; Elchardus & Smits, 2007; Eckersley, 2013; Kroll & Delhey, 2013; Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 2013). This approach differs from others who instead focus on the culture at large (Bennett, 2001; Furedi, 2002 [1997]) or theorize about developments taking place, instead of the public opinion about those developments (Taylor, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2000).

Throughout this dissertation, I focused on three main questions: the *conceptualization*, *causes*, and *correlates* & *consequences* of this concern about the state of society. In Part I, the central research question was how the concern about the state of society can be defined, conceptualized and measured. Part II asked about the causes of the concern about the state of society, and Part III examined the correlates and consequences of this concern.

Below, I first reflect on the findings of this dissertation by chapter. Next, there is a section in which I draw the main conclusions, and one that discusses the limitations of this study. I continue by describing the contributions of this book and routes for future research, and finally I conclude this book with a section that describes its societal implications.

9.2   Chapter summaries

Conceptualization of societal unease and societal pessimism

The question how we can define the concern about the state of society and how it differs from other concepts in the literature was the central question of Chapter 2. To this end, the first decision was to consider the concern about the state of society as an individual attitude with societal issues as its object. Second, the concern about the state of society is described as a concern about the unmanageable deterioration of society and a collective powerlessness to stop that decline. This concern is defined in two ways. *Societal pessimism* is a concern that society is in decline. It does not refer to specific objects of concern, and is therefore theoretically applicable to all types of societies in all phases in history. *Societal unease* is a specification of societal pessimism, and reflects the concern about the state of society in contemporary developed liberal democracies. It is defined as a latent concern, which is composed of the perceived deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society: distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability. *Distrust of human capability* reflects concerns about the limitations of policies and technological innovations to make improvements. *Loss of ideology* deprives us of a sense of direction about where we are heading and a perspective on a better society. *Decline of political power* points to the diminishing possibility to change things for the better because our tool to do that, the national government, has less ability to do so. *Decline of community* is the perceived decline of shared norms, values and solidarity within the nation. *Increasing socioeconomic vulnerability* reflects the perceived tendency towards increasing instability in citizens' socioeconomic position.

Conceptually, I distinguished resentment and insecurity of status from societal pessimism and societal unease as attitudes about one's personal situation that are typical of our era. In line with the literature, resentment is defined as not getting what you deserve or unjustly having less than others. Insecurity of status is a new concept, which reflects insecurity about one's social position and with whom to identify. The chapter concluded with a theoretical model of the book, and a section on the similarities and differences of societal pessimism and societal unease with anomie, anomia, alienation, and fear.

Chapter 3 aimed to test the conceptualization of societal unease of Chapter 2, to examine the measurement validity of societal unease and societal pessimism, and to explore which groups of citizens are likely to be uneasy about society. First, the conceptual model of societal unease is tested with Dutch COB data gathered in January 2012. The confirmatory factor analyses showed that the five elements do contribute to a

single (second-order) factor that shows good fit, and that other issues than those five do not fit into this scale. This means that this scale of societal unease works well and is a tool that can be used in future research. The measurement validity of societal unease and societal pessimism was supported by a very high correlation between the two concepts, which validated both. Additionally, they both relate weakly to happiness and moderately to anomia, as expected. A third test of measurement validity – whether the conceptual model of societal unease holds among educational subgroups – returned ambiguous results, neither fully contradicting nor confirming the existence of the same scale among these groups.

Finally, I explored the demographic, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of societally uneasy citizens. I found that the middle aged, the less educated and the lower income group, people who are unsatisfied with their financial position and people with a high external locus of control are more often uneasy about society. In addition, many social attitudes are related to social unease, resentment and concern about the difference between the rich and poor most strongly, but also attitudes about welfare, the EU, the euro and the character of the country are significant, along with trust in the national Parliament, external political efficacy and satisfaction with the national economy. In terms of behavior, volunteers are less likely to be societally uneasy, as are readers of quality newspapers and voters for the VVD, D66, Groenlinks and CDA, in contrast to PVV and SP voters. This finding is in line with the political mobilization axis of Azmanova (2011), who posits risk-oriented, Radical parties in opposition to opportunity-oriented Liberal and Green parties.

In Chapter 4, I explored how people express their negative view of Dutch society with open-ended COB survey questions from 2012 to gain more insight into the nature of societal pessimism and societal unease. Through both inductive and deductive content analysis, I investigated why people think their country is heading in the wrong direction and how they argue their stance. Eight issues dominated the answers: decline of community, socioeconomic vulnerability, poverty and income inequality, the economic crisis, immigration and integration, criminality and safety and the EU and foreign affairs. The answers underlined the conceptualization of societal pessimism and societal unease in several ways. The argumentation virtually always referred to societal issues, not personal ones, as can be expected of a sociotropic concern. The tone of their answers was in line with the choice of the term unease because the respondents were negative and showed a firm discontent but were not deeply worried. An exception was the small group of respondents that show outright anger in their argumentation, which is in line with the distinction of emotions about society called a public mood by Rahn, Kroeger, and Kite (1996). Consistent with the conceptualization of societal

unease as a latent concern, respondents often pointed to several societal issues, often describing these issues as interlinked and thereby pointing to a broad and vague attitude about society in general. This latent character also follows from the differences in which the elements of societal unease are mentioned, which indicates difference in saliency. Whereas decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability are both often referred to, decline of political power and the loss of ideology were less prominent, while distrust of human capability was virtually non-existent in the data. Apparently, the fact that these elements all related to a latent dimension in Chapter 3 is a connection that is not made by the respondents themselves but that instead takes place in an unconscious, latent fashion. I compared the societal pessimists with their most societally uneasy subgroup, based on the scale in Chapter 3. The latter group showed a deeper concern, exhibited more anger and resentment, and pointed to more issues concurrently. They are more often concerned about criminality and safety, and poverty and income inequality, thus indicating that the most societally uneasy are socioeconomically leftist and culturally rightist. Finally, I explored whether societal optimists disagree with the societal pessimists, but instead of taking an opposing stance, they argue their positive expectations with different developments.

Causes of societal pessimism

Chapter 5 aimed to examine whether societal pessimism is rooted in real societal developments or is a cultural characteristic instead. To that end, the political and economic causes of both cross-national differences in societal pessimism (between 23 countries) and longitudinal differences (between 13 moments in the period 2006-2012) were investigated. Specifically, I theorized that supranationalization, political instability, and corruption were political factors to consider in explaining societal pessimism, and the retrenchment of welfare state provisions, economic growth, unemployment and inflation were economic factors. The analyses showed that political factors best explain differences between countries, while economic factors best explain differences within countries over time. Two political factors, political instability and perceived corruption, explained cross-national differences in societal pessimism as expected. Unexpectedly, early elections decreased societal pessimism, which may be explained by the positive perception of the fall of a problematic government or the responsiveness of a political system. Additionally, contrary to expectations, in new EMU countries, societal pessimism is lower than in non-EMU countries. Apparently, either adoption of the euro or the context in which the euro is introduced produces societal optimism. Longitudinally, within countries, economic recession and unemployment increased and the net EU benefit decreased societal pessimism as hypothesized.

Unexpectedly, regular elections seem to boost uncertainty, whereas early elections decrease societal pessimism.

The results also informed us on the nature of societal pessimism. They imply that societal pessimism is at least partly rooted in real societal developments. This contradicts accounts that frame Europe as culturally pessimistic. Moreover, this means that it is possible to counteract societal pessimism. Additionally, societal pessimism appears to have both a structural and a conjunctional element. The former follows from the considerable cross-national differences in the level of societal pessimism. The latter follows from the substantial fluctuations in the level of societal pessimism within countries over time.

Correlates and Consequences of societal pessimism

Chapter 6 examined the extent to which societal pessimism offers a new explanation of Populist Radical Right (PRR) voting, besides established theories. It argues that societal pessimism among voters is in congruence with the nostalgic character of PRR ideology. By comparing voters of PRR parties to those of Radical Left, Mainstream Left (Social Democratic) and Mainstream Right (Christian Democratic and Liberal-Conservative) parties, I found that societal pessimism is distributed in a tilted U-curve, with PRR as the most and Mainstream Right (MR) as the least societally pessimistic. Moreover, societal pessimism significantly explained why people vote for a PRR party instead of the Mainstream Right, even while controlling for usual factors (such as socioeconomic characteristics, satisfaction with democracy, opposition to immigration, European integration and authoritarianism). This is in line with the risks-opportunity axis of political mobilization that Azmanova (2011) identifies, and shows that not only personal but also sociotropic risks such as societal pessimism fit into this cleavage. This means that societal pessimism is an attitude that is both politically relevant and a characteristic of an important political cleavage. Further analyses showed that societal pessimism is the only attitude on which MR and PRR voters take opposite, extreme positions. In addition to a direct effect, there are indications that societal pessimism is also mediated through satisfaction with democracy, opposition to immigration and European integration, thus explaining this combination of ideological positions.

Chapter 7 theorized and tested the extent to which societal pessimism is related to specific types of political and civic participation. Moreover, it aimed to further the understanding of the similarities and differences between several types of political and civic participants. Despite a comprehensive literature on *why* people participate, little is known about *which* people participate in specific types of engagement. Instead of looking at the established factors in participation research, which are not likely to differ

much between participants, I proposed to differentiate participants by their outlook on society. The hypotheses expected that whether people engage in institutional, formal versus protest participation, and whether that engagement is within or outside political institutions, depends on their level of societal pessimism, political trust and social trust. In the analyses, groups of participants are compared with each other, while excluding non-participants. The results showed that institutional political participants trust politics rather than people, that non-institutional political participants are societal pessimists who trust people rather than politics, and that civic participants are societal optimists who trust other people. Additional analyses of societal pessimism showed that it is equally related to both non-institutional (protest) participation and non-participation. Among politically efficacious citizens only, societal pessimism is more related to protest participation than non-participation.

Chapter 8 investigated whether societal pessimism and other types of sociotropic uncertainty encourage selectivity in their identification with political-geographical groups. I examined multiple identification with respect to three political-geographical groups: the city, the country and the EU. With these identification measures, I constructed four groups: low, single, dual and multiple identifiers. The hypothesis was that the logic of the 'uncertainty-identity' and 'need-for-closure' literatures, which show the effect of personal uncertainty on identification, can be extended to sociotropic uncertainty and multiple identification. The results confirm that societal pessimism, political distrust and negative economic expectations all lead individuals to express a less-complex pattern of identification. These patterns remain when two (not three) groups are considered (dual identification) in any combination. The implication is that identification with multiple political-geographical groups is hindered by societal pessimism and other types of sociotropic uncertainty. This outcome pictures societal pessimists as people who identify with a single political-geographical group, if at all.

9.3   Main conclusions

In addition to the detailed summaries above, this dissertation offers several overarching conclusions, which I discuss by reflecting on the three main questions. With respect to the first research question of how the concern about the state of society can be defined, conceptualized and measured, several conclusions can be drawn. First, this book proposes two new definitions to capture this phenomenon, namely, societal pessimism – a concern that society is in decline – and societal unease – a latent perception of the deterioration of five specific aspects of society, namely distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community

and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability. While societal pessimism is universally applicable, societal unease is predominantly present in contemporary developed liberal democracies. Both concepts can be characterized as perceptions of an unmanageable deterioration of society and a collective powerlessness to change things for the better. The findings underline that these attitudes are broad, latent, and relatively unconscious reflections of the state of society.

Second, this book shows both how we can measure societal unease and societal pessimism with survey questions, and that societal pessimism and societal unease are empirically very similar (in the Netherlands in 2012). Third, it theorizes and shows that societal pessimism and societal unease are different from other attitudes such as resentment, insecurity of status, anomia, alienation, happiness, political and societal trust and economic expectations. Societal pessimism and societal unease fill a theoretical gap because they are concerns about society that have only rarely been distinguished in a similar fashion (Keyes, 1998; Eckersley, 2000; Elchardus & Smits, 2002; Elchardus & Smits, 2007; Eckersley, 2013; Kroll & Delhey, 2013; Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 2013); furthermore, the results in this book also show that societal pessimism and societal unease are empirically different from those other attitudes. Fourth, this dissertation underlines in several ways that sociotropic concerns should be differentiated from egotropic ones. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, societal pessimism is shown to have an effect independent from both subjective and objective wellbeing, (satisfaction with life and socio-economic status).

These findings also provide more insight into what the concern about society is not. Instead of studying developments in society at large (Taylor, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1997; Glassner, 1999; Bauman, 2000; Bauman, 2006; Bauman, 2007), or individual problems typical or our era (Wilkinson, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2010; Han, 2012), here the perception of a decline of society is the subject of study. This study also differs from research that focuses on the gap between private contentment and public pessimism (but not what such public pessimism is)(McKenzie, 1997; Whitman, 1998; Mazarr, 1998) and studies of aggregated attitudes or the sentiment of society overall (Stimson, 1991; Bennett, 2001; Furedi, 2002 [1997]).

The second research question asked about the causes of the concern about the state of society. I showed that there are substantial differences in the level of societal pessimism both cross-nationally and longitudinally, within countries. This suggests that societal pessimism is not a cultural feature but instead, that it is rooted in real societal developments. The findings indeed show that to be the case. Both political and economic conditions affect societal pessimism.

The third research question of this book asks about the correlates and consequences of the concern about the state of society. The results demonstrate that societal pessimism relates to several types of behavior and attitudes that are deemed relevant to the functioning of democracy. The findings show that societal pessimism has an societal impact and is important to consider in social research. First, societal pessimism is in congruence with the nostalgic character of PRR parties, and it increases the chance of voting for such a party. Furthermore, societal pessimism fits into the risks-versus-opportunity axis of political mobilization proposed by (Azmanova, 2011) because it is most common among PRR voters but least common among MR voters. This means that societal pessimism coincides with a current political cleavage. Second, when we compare types of participation, societal pessimism is related to protest participation (non-institutional political participation) such as demonstrating, signing a petition and boycotting certain products; additionally, it is related to non-participants, who are engaged in none of these three types of participation. In contrast, it is least likely to be found among people involved in institutional political participation or civic participation. Third, societal pessimism decreases the chance of multiple identification with political-geographical collective groups, namely, concurrent identification with a city, a country and the EU. Societal pessimism and other types of sociotropic uncertainty encourage people to focus more on specific identities, i.e., to show a simple, selective identification pattern.

Combining this book's outcomes, societal pessimism can be characterized as a latent but firm discontent that is most common among middle-aged citizens (40-55), socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, inhabitants of rural areas, PRR voters, non-participants and non-institutionalized (protest) participants, and Europeans who do not identify concurrently with all of the political-geographical groups to which they belong but instead show a simple, less complex pattern of identification. The results indicate that societal pessimists focus on the risks in their society, aim to make their world less complex by focusing on what is familiar and close to them, and retract from their society rather than engaging in it.

9.4   Limitations

With this dissertation, I aimed to advance the research on the concern about the state of society. Although steps have been made in this regard in this book, four caveats need to be mentioned. First, I theorize that societal unease is the shape of societal pessimism in contemporary developed liberal democracies, but I cannot test that proposition beyond the Netherlands, where I find that the two are indeed empirically

extremely similar. Although the Netherlands is a good case to study societal unease and societal pessimism,[1] I cannot offer any conclusions with respect to the relationship between societal unease and societal pessimism beyond the Netherlands. Although in subsequent chapters, which study societal pessimism cross-nationally in European countries, the character of societal pessimism is implicitly understood as resembling societal unease, it should be empirically validated that the assumed external validity from the case of the Netherlands in 2012 is justified. It could be that societal unease takes shape in a manner that is substantively different in countries with higher levels of societal pessimism, such as France. Further research is needed to show that in other European countries, societal unease also forms a latent attitude, which is composed of the same five elements as in the Netherlands and that is just as highly associated with societal pessimism as it is among the Dutch. The problem is that as it stands, no cross-national data are available to perform such a test. Therefore, the first step here would be to test several countries, one at a time, using national data.

Aside from the relationship between societal pessimism and societal unease, a second caveat involves the question of whether societal pessimism is theoretically and empirically equivalent across countries. Theoretically, societal pessimism is a universal concept that is not predefined in its scope or focus. This means that it is theorized to be a broad attitude, which thus can take shape in many ways and relates to many other attitudes. On the one hand, one can nonetheless wonder what minimum level of equivalence is needed to use it in comparative studies, both cross-nationally and longitudinally. On the other hand, theoretically it is not a problem when in one country, societal pessimism is more related to the economy and in another country, it is more related to issues of safety or immigration. Like the nostalgic character of PRR parties, which takes shape in context-specific ways, the bottom line of societal pessimism is that people think their society is in decline, regardless of the reasons for that decline. Therefore, it does not matter that the issues that constitute societal pessimism differ according to context. Moreover, we still lack the data to investigate societal pessimism cross-nationally more thoroughly than I have in this book.

The empirical cross-national equivalence is important with respect to Chapters 5 through 8, in which I use one or two items on societal pessimism. This equivalence is difficult to examine with such a small number of items. In the only chapter (Ch.7)

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1   The Netherlands can be seen as a least-likely case, with a relatively low level of societal pessimism and a high level of personal well-being and economic and social conditions, whereas in the media, the concern about society is regularly assumed and discussed, thus indicating that societal pessimism is certainly not foreign to the Dutch (see Chapter 1).

in which I can use two (instead of one) items of societal pessimism in many countries (19), the correlation between the two items ranges from .32 in Spain to .55 in Germany. Although this range is not to be neglected, it is not too large either because we are speaking of such a broad, latent attitude. Therefore, some cross-national difference is likely to be inherent to the concept, and this range does not seem problematic.

A third caveat is the operationalization of societal pessimism and whether the various operationalizations are equivalent. Given that a cross-national dataset combining the various measures of societal pessimism is unavailable and therefore, the equivalence of these measures of societal pessimism cannot be tested cross-nationally, the analyses in Chapter 3 provide a proxy for such a confirmation. With the Dutch Citizens' Outlooks Barometer from January 2012 this chapter confirms that the various operationalizations of societal pessimism are all closely related to societal unease in the Netherlands, which underlines that the different operationalizations of societal pessimism in subsequent chapters measure the same phenomenon. However, one of those operationalizations, a two-item scale, showed a lower correlation in Chapters 6 and 7 which use European Social Survey data of 2012 and 2006, respectively. This lower correlation in the ESS data than in the Dutch COB data can probably at least partly be explained by the fact that in the COB questionnaire, the two pessimism items are placed close together, between other societal issues, whereas in the ESS, they are further apart and are placed between personal and mental well-being questions. The lower correlation of the societal pessimism items in the ESS data is therefore not very surprising; nevertheless, it is far from ideal, and it represents a limitation of this study. However, the best option was to use both items because theoretically, they are both fit to measure the broad concept of societal pessimism. Using only one of them instead would therefore seem like a deviation of what I aim to measure. After all, the commonality of such items is what I assume to be societal pessimism. Furthermore, the results of Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 underline the measurement validity of societal pessimism because clear patterns can be traced in the causes, correlates and consequences of the concept. Additionally, robustness checks per country in Chapters 7 and 8 confirm the effect of societal pessimism in the large majority of countries, even though small samples and skewed distributions make this less likely. In addition to pointing to measurement validity for societal pessimism, this also provides reassurance that social pessimism has cross-national equivalence.

The fourth caveat is the testing of causal relationships in cross-sectional models in Chapters 5, 6 and 8 because they are the best alternative for testing causality. Although panel data are needed to be conclusive, the minimal conditions for speaking about causality have been met. In Chapter 5, I examine the influence of context factors on

cross-national and longitudinal differences in the level of societal pessimism. By taking data from a period close but prior to the measurement of the survey data, causality is proven to the extent that a causal mechanism is argued, a statistical relationship is shown, and a chronological order between cause and effect is measured. Although theoretically spuriousness cannot be excluded, causality is shown to be very likely. In Chapter 8, in which I examine the effect of societal pessimism on identification patterns, the causal mechanism and the statistical relationship underline causality. Although endogeneity cannot be ruled out, it is unlikely because the causal mechanism only makes sense in the argued direction; it cannot be reversed. The results underline the causal mechanism not only on an aggregate level but also in separate country analyses. In Chapter 6, I studied the influence of societal pessimism on voting behavior. There is reason to expect endogeneity to play a role here. Research shows not only that elite cues from the political leaders of one's party affect societal attitudes (Meffert et al., 2006; Lenz, 2009; Slothuus, 2015) but also that voting behavior and attitudes affect one another, resulting in a spiral of increasing polarized stances between groups of voters (Harteveld, Kokkonen, & Dahlberg, 2015). This means that PRR voting would incite a spiral of increasing societal pessimism. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this research question would derive a particular benefit from panel data, the clear causal mechanism and correlational results that follow from regression analyses support the causal claims that are made.

9.5   Implications

Contributions to the literature and suggestions for future research

With this dissertation, I take various steps to advance the knowledge on societal unease and societal pessimism, and I contribute to the literature in various ways. At the same time, this research field is still underdeveloped and many questions remain. In this section, I discuss this book's contributions and the routes that can be explored in future research to enhance our understanding of the concern about the state of society.

First, with respect to the *conceptualization* of the concern about the state of society, I build on the literature about the gap between private contentment and public pessimism (McKenzie, 1997; Whitman, 1998; Mazarr, 1998; Eckersley, 2000; Eckersley, 2013; Kroll & Delhey, 2013) and studies on a culture of pessimism and 'maatschappelijk onbehagen' (Keyes, 1998; Bennett, 2001; Elchardus & Smits, 2002; Elchardus & Smits, 2007; Dekker, Van Noije, & Den Ridder, 2013; Eckersley, 2013) by offering two new definitions: that of societal pessimism and that of societal unease. For societal unease, I also propose a conceptual model that is embedded in a large, interdisciplinary

literature. This adds to our understanding of this sentiment and provides an overview of the heterogeneous literature on negative societal developments.

Second, this book offers new *measurements* of the concern about the state of society, namely, a scale of societal unease and various operationalizations of societal pessimism. These measurements are validated in this book, not only by the strong correlation between the two in the Netherlands shown in Chapter 3, but also by the fact that the theorized correlates and consequences of societal pessimism are confirmed by the results reported in the subsequent, empirical chapters. Therefore, both the scale of societal unease and the operationalizations of societal pessimism proposed here are tools that can be used in future research.

To further extend the knowledge on the nature of societal pessimism and societal unease, several steps can be taken. As noted above, the scale of societal unease developed for the Dutch case in Chapter 3 should be tested both for cross-national equivalence and with a larger number of items. Additionally, the operationalization of societal pessimism needs improvement, and an investigation not only of cross-national equivalence of societal pessimism itself but also of its relationship with societal unease is necessary. Additionally, a comparison of non-Western and Western countries would be interesting to investigate to what extent the conceptualization of societal unease also applies to citizens of non-Western countries, whether they show societal pessimism, and the subjects of their societal pessimism. Both quantitative as well as qualitative research are useful to investigate the cultural differences in societal pessimism not only within the Western world but also between Western and non-Western countries.

The time dimension is also an important subject for further research. Has societal pessimism always been a feature of (modern) society, or is it primarily characteristic of the current era? Although there are only sporadic studies of societal pessimism over time, these studies have reached interesting and contradictory conclusions. In the USA, societal pessimism seems to have increased since the 1970s and has shown greater volatility since that time (Whitman, 1998). This picture resemblance the development of political trust in the USA, which also first decreases and then shows variety, with no clear trend (Norris, 2011). Dutch data for the period 1958 to 2012, with only twelve measurements, shows no meaningful structural trend in (one indicator of) societal pessimism (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2014).

In addition to describing the trend of societal pessimism, it is important 1) to determine the relationship with societal unease over time and 2) to determine the politicization of this attitude. I propose in this book that societal unease reflects the concern about society in current Western countries. Is it the case that in earlier times, societal pessimism reflected different issues, such as during the Cold War or the

rebuilding of Western countries after World War II? Additionally, to what extent is societal pessimism an attitude of importance? Currently, societal pessimism seems to coincide with the risks-versus-opportunity axis of political mobilization (Azmanova, 2011) and shows a large difference between educational groups and political participants. However, it could very well be that in previous periods, societal pessimism was not only substantially different (that is, composed of different societal problems) but also prevalent among different groups and did not have the same political and social meaning and importance that it does now. The saliency of societal pessimism is likely to show different patterns over time.

The third contribution of this dissertation is that it provides both theoretical and empirical additions to several streams of literature on social attitudes. By comparing various attitudes either in a theoretical way, an empirical way or both, I add some insight into the similarities and interrelatedness of attitudes such as resentment, anomia, happiness, political trust, social trust and economic expectations (e.g, Seeman, 1991; Eckersley, 2000; Barbalet, 2001; Uslaner, 2002; Dalton, 2004; De Boef & Kellstedt, 2004; Legge, Davidov, & Schmidt, 2008; Norris, 2011; Kroll & Delhey, 2013).

Fourth, this book takes some first steps to revealing the causes of societal pessimism by showing that cross-national political conditions affect societal pessimism, whereas longitudinally, it is economic conditions that matter the most. These results also indicate that societal pessimism is not a cultural feature; instead, it is rooted in real developments. In terms of consequences, I add to the knowledge on societal pessimism by showing that is related to voting behavior, the type of participation in which people are involved, and identification patterns. Thus the results underline that this attitude is not only common but also consequential, which reaffirms the need to pay more scientific attention to societal pessimism.

Future research is needed to further the understanding of the causes of societal pessimism and societal unease. The first category to consider is that of macro causes of societal unease and societal pessimism. Related to the distrust in human capability, the record of technology-related disasters (from nuclear power plant problems and dangerous levels of resistant bacteria in hospitals to the negative side effects of (social) policies) could increase societal unease. Similarly, in view of the loss of ideology, there could be an analysis of the extent to which political parties offer long-term, ideologically inspired views and the diversity in that views can be considered. On both the political and economic sides, related to the decline of political power and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability, the influence of multinationals on governmental decision making, and citizens' decreased financial protection caused by more short-time

contracts and flexibilization of the labor market can be considered as causes of societal unease and societal pessimism.

Furthermore, the level of income inequality, especially the position of the middle-class compared to the upper-class, is important to investigate in future research (Ehrenreich, 1989). Although in general, attention to the difference between the rich and poor is increasing, especially since Piketty's (2014) study, I expect the worsening position of the middle-class to be most important to the perception of increasing socioeconomic vulnerability (Ehrenreich, 1989). The fragile position of the middle class means that only people at the top of society are free of worry about the future, whereas all others are increasingly vulnerable.

The final macro level cause of societal unease and societal pessimism that I want to point to here is the media. Several authors argue that societal pessimism is caused by the negative tone in the media (McKenzie, 1997; Whitman, 1998). This issue deserves scrutiny: is it indeed the case that media consumption increases societal pessimism? In addition, the influence of the media's tone and content on the concern about society is important. Examining the resemblance of how issues are discussed in the media and by citizens in a longitudinal study might offer insight into whether the media pick up certain issues and their framing or instead, whether they cause issues to be more salient and determine how they are discussed.

Moreover, not only macro, but just as well micro causes of societal pessimism should be investigated. Why are some people more concerned about the state of society than others? In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, societal pessimism is shown to be important *despite* a person's socioeconomic characteristics. This is particularly interesting because it is unclear what causes this remaining effect of societal pessimism. Therefore, differences between (groups of) citizens need to be examined. Future research should consider both personality characteristics and social milieu.

Regarding personality, research shows the effects of both general optimism or pessimism (whether the glass is half full or half empty; whether you expect to succeed in life) and the 'big 5' personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) on political attitudes and behavior (e.g. Uslaner, 2002; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Future research should focus on the relationship between such personality traits and both societal unease and societal pessimism. It would be especially interesting to study general pessimism, to examine the extent to which pessimism in the usual sense of the word is related to societal pessimism. Although the influence of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, as shown throughout this book, contraindicates a particularly strong influence of personality on either societal

unease or societal pessimism, an effect is likely to exist, and it is important to know the size of its influence.

Moreover, research should focus on the influence of social milieu in understanding differences in societal pessimism. Following the famous idea of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1989), attention to the way society is perceived, discussed and framed in people's network, among 'their own people', might provide insight into different levels of societal pessimism among subgroups. Focus group studies of the scp on how people think the Netherlands is doing show differences in how educational groups perceive society (Dekker, Van der Meer, & Steenvoorden, 2008; Steenvoorden, 2009; Den Ridder, Dekker, & Van Ditmars, 2013). The instant negative consensus among the low educated can clearly be separated from the more optimistic and nuanced vision among the high educated. Insight into the different ways in which society is perceived could be performed with qualitative studies that gather insight into differences among subgroups of society in terms of what is seen as 'common knowledge', i.e., what people think everybody they know could agree upon. More quantitative research can follow up on the equivalence of a scale of social unease among subgroups. In Chapter 3, the analyses did not provide grounds for a final answer about the extent to which social unease is the same among educational groups. With the use of more elaborate measures, it could be possible to reach conclusive results.

The fifth contribution of this dissertation is that it adds to several other streams of literature, besides societal unease and societal pessimism. It contributes to the literature on prr voting by underlining the nostalgic character of these parties and the societal pessimism among their voters, and it increases the understanding of the difference between mr and prr support (Ignazi, 2003; Taggart, 2004; Canovan, 2004; Van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008). Additionally, it shows that societal pessimism can be understood as part of the risks-versus-opportunity cleavage proposed by Azmanova (2011). This means both that sociotropic concerns should be regarded as part of that cleavage and that the electorate on the risk end of that cleavage is potentially larger than suspected.

This book also provides some new insight on civic engagement, specifically on what differentiates participants from each other. The literature on voluntary involvement has focused more on why people participate (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004) and less on which people participate in what type of activity. Unlike most previous studies, I excluded non-participants, compared participants with each other, and showed, in line with the matching hypothesis (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Granik, 2005), that participants in voluntary engagement can be best distinguished from each other according to their societal outlook.

Finally, this book aims to adds to the literature on multiple identification, uncertainty theory and the need-for-closure theory. It is one of the first studies to examine the causes of multiple identification, thereby contributing to the literature on dual and multiple identities (Kohli, 2000; Brewer, 2001; Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2001; Díez Medrano & Gutiérrez, 2001; Risse, 2004). Furthermore, I show that the effect of uncertainty on identification, which is the focus of the 'uncertainty-identity' literature (Hogg, 2000; Reid & Hogg, 2005; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Hohman, Hogg, & Bligh, 2010; Grant & Hogg, 2012) and the 'need-for-closure' literature (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Kruglanski et al., 2006), can be broadened to include not only personal, egotropic uncertainty but also sociotropic uncertainty.

Social policy

The results of this book may also be of interest to politicians and policymakers. The finding that a substantial part of European citizenry is pessimistic about society has various implications.

First, the results underline that in general, politicians should seriously consider citizens' concern about the state of society. Politicians can choose to reassure citizens by pointing to imminent improvements or other reasons for optimism, but they should not downplay societal pessimism. The latter tactic would not only alienate citizens, but particularly strengthen the division between voters who mainly perceive risks against voters who mainly focus on opportunities in contemporary Western society. This book suggests that would become visible in various ways. One could imagine the consequences for voting behavior. Currently, it is the Populist Radical Right parties that acknowledge this concern most explicitly, which makes them particularly attractive to societally pessimistic voters. Neglecting or downplaying societal pessimism by other political parties thus risks pushing societal pessimists toward the prr. Another way in which societal pessimism might become politicized is via identity politics. Societal pessimism mitigates identification with multiple political-geographical groups. To ignore societal pessimism as a backward cultural characteristic is therefore harmful in the long run, if it means that people turn their back on their city, their country or the eu, or all three. For the democratic system to function, political communities need their members to have a sense of belonging.

Second, this study suggests that the ongoing depoliticization of public problems and the decline of long-term, ideologically inspired visions among political parties are likely to add to societal pessimism. In particular, the tina-frame ('there-is-no-alternative') is problematic, precisely because it underlines the sentiment of collective

powerlessness against societal decline. These points ought to be taken into account by political leadership, if not in election manifestos than at least as part of their regular discourse.

Third, this study shows that societal pessimism is not unwarranted: it is rooted in political and economic conditions that to some extent can be managed. Politicians and policy makers are therefore not powerless in the face of a societally pessimistic electorate; there are ways to counter it. Tackling political instability, corruption, economic recession, and unemployment all contribute to decreasing societal pessimism. Even early elections bring down societal pessimism, meaning that terminating a malfunctioning government is perceived positively by citizens.

Fourth, policy makers should be aware that the voices of societal pessimists are easily overlooked. Societally pessimistic citizens less often engage in formal, institutionalized participation. If they participate, they are more likely to do so in the form of non-institutional protests. Politicians and policy makers are thus not likely to encounter societally pessimistic citizens in institutional meeting places such as neighborhood organizations and political parties. Engaging with societally pessimistic citizens and learning about their stance, thus requires politicians and policymakers to make an extra effort. It may not be easy to set up such engagements, though. It is questionable whether societally pessimistic citizens would be willing either to join events or meetings designed for citizens to have a say or to participate in (new) initiatives that aim to improve society.

Fifth, the underlying attitude of societal pessimism can offer insight into concrete and topical issues such as perceptions of the refugee crisis, climate change or terrorism. All of these issues portray the complexity of current society and the collective powerlessness to make actual changes in the course of events. Citizens' concerns with – and perhaps even agitation about – such problems can be understood somewhat better by studying societal pessimism. Such problems are concrete examples of societal deterioration that is perceived to be unmanageable and that reaffirm pessimism about society's future.

Ultimately, the main risk is one of a negative spiral in which new problems confirm pre-existing pessimism on societal decline and collective powerlessness, and contribute to a further increase of societal pessimism.