

Occupational Underutilization and the Social Concentration of Political Disaffection

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Research Article

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Abstract

Why do workers whose qualifications or skills are underused in their jobs often express more political disaffection? Existing accounts often treat labor-market disadvantage as a source of political change, but longitudinal associations can reflect two different processes: occupational underutilization may update political attitudes, or underutilization and disaffection may become concentrated in the same trajectories. Using four waves (2020–2023) of the Dutch Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS), we distinguish these processes for overqualification and skill underuse across populist attitudes, trust in representative politics, external political efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy. The Dutch panel is especially useful because repeated measures of work and politics are observed for the same individuals. Recurrent skill underuse marks a coherent between-person profile: greater average exposure is associated with more disaffection. Yet within-person estimates are small, formal tests distinguish the between- and within-person coefficients for all four outcomes, and observed entry and exit show little consistent political change. Overqualification shows no comparable profile. The findings qualify workplace-to-politics spillover accounts: occupational underutilization locates political disaffection more clearly than it produces political updating, making recurrent skill underuse a marker of politically distinctive social location rather than a general mechanism converting workplace disadvantage into political grievance.

1 Introduction

Adverse labor-market positions are frequently invoked to explain political discontent. Unemployment, precarious employment, occupational decline, economic insecurity, and blocked mobility have all been associated with distrust, political alienation, or support for anti-establishment alternatives (Emmenegger et al, 2015; Van Hootegeem et al, 2025; Selenko et al, 2025). Yet a recurring problem in explanations of political disaffection is to infer a process of individual change from a durable difference between social groups. A between-person association may arise because an occupational experience changes political orientations, because people with different prior trajectories sort into different occupational positions, or both. The distinction is substantive rather than merely methodological: social concentration tells us where an inequality is located, whereas within-person change speaks to how that inequality is produced over time. This distinction is especially important in research on work and politics. Emmenegger et al (2015) show how accumulated labor-market disadvantage can be associated with lower political efficacy and electoral withdrawal or protest. Van Hootegeem et al (2025), using the Dutch LISS panel, similarly find that longitudinal profiles of job insecurity and income inadequacy differ substantially in later political trust. Yet in both designs the labor-market history is longitudinal while the principal political outcome is observed at a single endpoint. Such studies identify politically distinctive trajectories, but they cannot determine whether political attitudes changed when the same person's labor-market circumstances changed. An integrative review reaches a similar conclusion: work is related to political participation, trust, and attitudes, but evidence on the individual-level processes through which specific work experiences cross institutional domains remains fragmented (Selenko et al, 2025).

Panel studies that observe political outcomes repeatedly make the distinction visible. Bauer (2018), for example, finds large within-person effects of unemployment on life satisfaction but mostly negligible effects on trust in government and satisfaction with democracy in Swiss and Dutch panels. Wiedner's (2022) analysis reaches a related conclusion for qualification mismatch: mismatch has clear consequences for wages and work-related outcomes, but much weaker consequences in the political domain once selection and status-inconsistency problems are addressed. These results suggest that the social distribution of disadvantage and the production of political change should not be treated as interchangeable empirical questions. Occupational mismatch provides a particularly revealing case. We distinguish two forms. Overqualification refers to workers reporting more formal education than their jobs require and has a long history as a sociological indicator of mismatch between educational attainment and occupational position (Vaisey, 2006). Skill underuse refers to workers reporting that their knowledge and skills exceed the level required by their work. The two conditions overlap, but they capture different discrepancies. Overqualification concerns the relation between credentials and job requirements. Skill underuse is closer to the experienced realization of capacities at work: workers can hold jobs formally appropriate to their education and still experience their actual knowledge and skills as unused.

Skill underuse is therefore a demanding test of workplace-to-politics spillover. Longitudinal research shows that changes in overskilling can have within-person consequences for mental well-being even when formal overeducation has weaker effects (Zhu and Chen, 2016), so the question is whether those consequences extend into politics. We examine four outcomes. Trust in representative politics, external political efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy capture related but distinct evaluations of representative institutions and democratic functioning; we refer to them collectively as institutional disaffection without treating them as a latent scale (Kölln and Aarts, 2021; Erhardt, 2023; Menzner and Schweizer, 2026). Populist attitudes are analyzed separately because they organize discontent around popular sovereignty, a people-elite opposition, and the general will. Distrust or low external efficacy can exist without that specifically populist interpretation (Geurkink et al, 2020).

Looking across these outcomes shifts the question from whether mismatch predicts a single attitude to whether occupational underutilization marks a broader political profile and whether that profile also appears within the same individuals over time. The outcomes themselves are capable of change: the same LISS waves show within-person movement in populist attitudes (Theuwis, 2026), while Dutch panel studies show that democratic satisfaction, external efficacy, and political trust respond to changing political evaluations and representation (Christmann and Torcal, 2017; Erhardt, 2023). A longer LISS panel likewise shows that political discontent can move within individuals alongside changing support for populist parties (Rekker, 2026). Weak within-person associations with skill underuse therefore cannot simply be attributed to invariant political attitudes.

The temporal question also connects to research on the stability of political orientations. Gidron and Mijs (2019) find limited evidence that changes in material circumstances drive changes in populist radical-right support. Kölln and Aarts (2021) argue that stable socioeconomic characteristics are better

suited to explaining general levels of democratic satisfaction than short-run fluctuations, while Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) show across six panels that political trust is highly stable and weakly responsive to changing individual circumstances. In the Netherlands, la Roi *et al* (2025) similarly describe institutional trust as a settled baseline around which shorter-term evaluations fluctuate. These findings make it important to distinguish persistent differences between workers from political updating within workers.

We use LISS observations from 2020 through 2023 to examine whether occupational underutilization is associated mainly with persistent differences between workers or with political change within workers. Annual Work and Schooling measures of overqualification and skill underuse are linked to subsequent Politics and Values outcomes and to the five-item populist-attitude scale validated by Theuwis (2026) across 16 Populism Barometer waves. Because the political orientations are repeatedly observed, we can assess whether they move when occupational circumstances change. Our primary models decompose each mismatch indicator into a respondent-specific mean and a within-person deviation, calculated on the exact estimation sample for each outcome. We reproduce the within estimates with respondent fixed effects, formally compare the coefficients, examine repeated exposure histories, and analyze observed entry into and exit from skill underuse. Finally, we use education and occupational class as social-location diagnostics rather than as neutral controls that mechanically reveal a single "true" mismatch effect.

The results are consistent across the four core political outcomes. Workers who spend more of their observed years in skill-underused employment report more populist attitudes, less trust in representative politics, lower external efficacy, and lower satisfaction with democracy. On a strict common sample, the between-person associations correspond to approximately 0.23–0.31 standard deviations of greater political disaffection. The within-person estimates are much smaller. For every outcome, the difference between the between- and within-person coefficient is statistically distinguishable from zero, including after false-discovery-rate adjustment. Overqualification produces no comparable pattern. Education and occupational class attenuate the between-person associations, most strongly for populist attitudes, but the adjusted association remains clearest for trust in representative politics. Observed transitions provide little evidence of a broad political response to entering or leaving skill underuse.

The article makes three contributions to research on political disaffection and the political consequences of work. First, it shows that the political profile of occupational underutilization is concentrated around recurrent skill underuse rather than formal overqualification: the former is associated with a broad profile of disaffection across workers, while the latter shows no comparable pattern. Second, it identifies a limit to cross-domain spillover: skill underuse changes evaluations inside work more clearly than it changes politics, even though recurrent exposure identifies a broad profile of political distance. Third, it treats occupational underutilization as a relational feature of social location rather than as a self-contained causal treatment. More broadly, the findings show why politically distinctive occupational trajectories should not automatically be treated as evidence that the

occupational experience itself produced political change. Patterned disadvantage can help locate political grievance without necessarily being the immediate experience that generates it.

2 Occupational Underutilization and Political Disaffection

2.1 From Work Experience to Political Translation

Employment is simultaneously a source of material resources, social relations, status, identity, and everyday experience with authority. There are therefore multiple routes through which work may matter politically. Labor-market disadvantage can alter material interests and preferences for redistribution; it can reduce resources for participation; it can undermine mastery or perceived competence; and it can foster judgments that institutions fail to represent or respond to people in one's position (Emmenegger et al, 2015; Selenko et al, 2025). These mechanisms differ, but each requires an experience originating in employment to acquire consequences beyond the employment relation. A stronger version of this argument is that experiences at work spill over into politics. Frustration, insecurity, powerlessness, or exclusion at work may be generalized to evaluations of politics. This possibility is plausible because workplaces themselves can function as sites of adult political socialization. Geurkink et al (2024) show that political discussion, open workplace climates, influence over organizational policy, and supportive experiences with workplace voice are associated with political trust. Such mechanisms provide a clear bridge between "small democracy" at work and representative politics: experiences of voice, authority, deliberation, and procedural treatment have close political analogues.

Occupational underutilization is less directly political. Reporting that one's skills exceed the demands of one's job identifies a discrepancy between capacities and realized work. It does not identify an actor responsible for that discrepancy, specify whether it is temporary or unjust, define a collective group, or establish that political institutions have failed. Political translation therefore requires additional interpretation. A worker may attribute underutilization to personal choices, a temporary career stage, organizational decisions, labor-market structure, educational expansion, discrimination, or political institutions. The same work condition can consequently have different political meanings. This distinction helps reconcile apparently conflicting evidence. Voces and Caínzos (2022) find that overeducation in Spain is associated with lower external efficacy and lower satisfaction with democracy, as well as some forms of participation. Yet the analysis is cross-sectional and its status-inconsistency interpretation must confront a longstanding identification problem: mismatch is constructed from the same status dimensions whose main effects also predict political outcomes. Brown et al (1988) showed how difficult it is to isolate status inconsistency from education, occupation, and income themselves, and found little replicable evidence for broad independent effects once that problem was confronted. Wiedner (2022) develops this concern for qualification mismatch and finds far stronger evidence of consequences inside the work domain than outside it.

This leads to a simple temporal test. If skill underuse itself generates political disaffection, then political evaluations should differ not only between workers with different average exposure but also within the

same worker as underutilization changes. If, instead, recurrent skill underuse primarily marks a social and occupational trajectory in which political distance is concentrated, the between-person association can be sizable while the within-person association remains small. The two coefficients answer different sociological questions.

2.2 Institutional Disaffection and a Specifically Populist Interpretation

Political disaffection is not a single attitude. Trust in representative politics concerns whether actors and institutions such as government, parliament, politicians, and parties can be relied on to act appropriately. External political efficacy concerns whether those institutions are responsive to citizens and whether people like oneself have political influence. Satisfaction with democracy is a broader evaluation of how the democratic system is functioning. These orientations are empirically related, but their objects are not identical. Erhardt (2023), for example, shows with long-run LISS data that political representation is related to all three, while Kölln and Aarts (2021) emphasize that satisfaction with democracy contains a meaningful short-run evaluative component. Recent measurement work similarly finds that trust and democratic satisfaction occupy closely related positions within a broader political-support continuum (Menzner and Schweizer, 2026). We therefore use institutional disaffection as shorthand for a family of negative evaluations of representative politics and democratic functioning, not as a claim that trust, efficacy, and democratic satisfaction form a single latent construct in these data. Keeping these outcomes separate matters because they capture different aspects of political evaluation. A worker may believe that politicians are untrustworthy while still believing that democratic institutions respond to citizens, or may feel politically ignored without rejecting democracy's functioning more generally. The multiple-outcome design allows us to ask whether recurrent occupational underutilization is concentrated across this family rather than relying on one indicator.

Populist attitudes are conceptually adjacent but more specific. Geurkink et al (2020) show that populist attitudes, political trust, and external efficacy are distinct latent constructs even though they correlate strongly. Low trust captures suspicion toward political elites, and low external efficacy captures perceived unresponsiveness, but neither by itself entails the people-centeredness, antagonism, and general-will claims that define populism. Recent sociological work similarly emphasizes that populism is constructed through boundary work that distinguishes worthy people from elites and other political out-groups (Tuğal et al, 2026). Populism is therefore not treated as another indicator of institutional disaffection. It is a more specific political interpretation that can organize political distance around popular sovereignty and a people-elite opposition. For occupational mismatch, this distinction matters in a straightforward way. If skill underuse is associated between persons with trust, efficacy, and democratic satisfaction but not with within-person change, the result indicates social concentration of a broad political profile. If it is additionally associated with populist attitudes, recurrent underutilization marks a group in which a specifically populist interpretation is also more common. That pattern would not, however, show that skill underuse first produces institutional disaffection and then produces populism. The outcomes are parallel political orientations, not a mediation chain.

2.3 Social Location, Status Realization, and Political Updating

Why might recurrent skill underuse distinguish workers even after formal education and occupational class are considered? Social location is not exhausted by one's educational credential or broad occupational level. It also includes the relation between capacities, expectations, and realized occupational positions, as well as trajectories of mobility, blocked attainment, and social recognition. Workers with the same educational level and broad occupation can differ in whether their jobs use the capacities they have developed and in whether their careers approximate the positions they expected to attain. The idea resembles older status-inconsistency arguments, but the empirical claim here is deliberately narrower. We do not assume that mismatch automatically creates frustration that then causes political disaffection. Brown et al (1988) provide strong reasons for caution about such claims. Instead, recurrent skill underuse may operate as a marker of frustrated status realization: a repeated discrepancy between developed capacities and realized occupational position. That relational location may be only partly captured by education and broad occupation.

Recognition approaches provide one way of understanding why this discrepancy might matter, without treating recognition as a measured mediator. Lamont (2018) distinguishes inequalities in resources from inequalities in socially affirmed worth. Schneickert et al (2019) show that appreciation and disrespect are stratified by vertical inequalities, that the workplace is an important site of both experiences, and that recognition gaps are associated with satisfaction with democracy. Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) likewise emphasize social standing, respect, and integration in explanations of anti-establishment politics. A closely related argument has been developed for the Netherlands: Noordzij et al (2019) interpret the educational gradient in trust in politicians as a status-based cultural conflict rather than as a purely material or informational divide. These perspectives make it plausible that occupational underutilization can be embedded in trajectories involving status and recognition. They do not imply that a survey report of skill underuse directly measures disrespect or that recognition mediates the associations observed here.

Evidence on the temporal structure of political support leads to a similar expectation. Schoon and Cheng (2011) show that adult political trust reflects accumulated educational, occupational, and social experiences across the life course. Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) find that changing individual circumstances explain surprisingly little within-person movement in political trust compared with long-standing differences between people and short-run political shocks. la Roi et al (2025) similarly describe adult trust as a relatively settled baseline around which evaluation occurs. Kölln and Aarts (2021) reach a parallel conclusion for satisfaction with democracy: stable socioeconomic characteristics are better at locating general levels than explaining short-run movement. This leaves us with two different empirical possibilities. A political-spillover pattern requires a meaningful within-person counterpart to the between-person association: when workers are more underutilized than usual, their political evaluations should also become more disaffected than usual. A social-concentration pattern permits recurrently

underutilized workers to be more disaffected on average without expecting comparable political movement when their mismatch status changes. The second pattern does not make the between-person association meaningless or "spurious." It still locates a political cleavage across occupational trajectories; it simply does not show that occupational underutilization itself produces political updating.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data and Temporal Design

We use data from the LISS panel (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences), which is administered and managed by the non-profit research institute Centerdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands). LISS is a probability-based household panel sampled from the Dutch population register; households without the necessary equipment are provided with internet access to participate (Scherpenzeel and Das, 2010). Its repeated Work and Schooling, Politics and Values, and Populism Barometer modules allow employment conditions and political orientations to be observed for the same respondents over time. This makes the Netherlands an analytically strong setting for the present temporal question: the value of the case lies in observing changes in work and politics within the same individuals, not in assuming that Dutch levels of mismatch or disaffection represent Europe more broadly. The main analysis covers 2020 through 2023. Occupational mismatch is measured annually in the Work and Schooling module. Three political outcomes - political trust, external efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy - are taken from the subsequent Politics and Values interview linked to each Work observation. For all four years used here, the harmonized Politics observation occurs after the relevant Work interview. Populist attitudes are measured more frequently in the Populism Barometer, which was fielded approximately quarterly. The primary annual populism outcome averages the August and November observations after the annual Work interview, using whichever observation is available when only one is completed. The quarterly files are used for supplementary timing checks.

The outcome-specific analytical samples differ because the Politics and Values module has much broader coverage than the Populism Barometer. The primary within-between samples contain 3,030 respondent-years from 1,389 respondents for populist attitudes; 7,149 observations from 3,292 respondents for political trust; 7,224 observations from 3,315 respondents for external efficacy; and 6,998 observations from 3,239 respondents for satisfaction with democracy. A strict robustness sample requiring all four political outcomes in the same respondent-year contains 2,777 observations from 1,282 respondents. We use the larger outcome-specific samples for primary estimation and the common sample for standardized cross-outcome comparisons.

3.2 Occupational Mismatch

Overqualification and skill underuse are measured separately. Overqualification comes from the Work and Schooling item asking respondents to evaluate the relationship between their education and their current work. Respondents who report that their education is higher than their work requires are coded 1; respondents reporting an approximately appropriate educational level are coded 0. Skill underuse comes

from a separate item asking whether the statement "My knowledge and skills are higher than the level required by my work" applies to the respondent. Selecting this statement is coded 1; otherwise the respondent is coded 0. The two measures are entered simultaneously in all primary models. This is important because formal overqualification and experienced skill underuse overlap but are not equivalent. Their simultaneous inclusion asks whether recurrent skill underuse has a political profile net of the respondent's observed overqualification history, and vice versa. For descriptive and fixed-effects robustness checks, we also classify respondent-years into four states: matched on both measures, overqualified only, skill-underused only, and double mismatch.

3.3 Political Outcomes

Populist attitudes are measured with the five-item version of the Akkerman et al (2014) scale used and longitudinally validated by Theuwis (2026) for the same LISS Populism Barometer waves. Respondents indicate agreement, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with five statements: politicians in parliament should follow the will of the people; people rather than politicians should make the most important political decisions; representation by an ordinary citizen is preferable to representation by a professional politician; elected officials talk too much and act too little; and political compromise amounts to selling out one's principles. Following Theuwis (2026), the primary measure is the mean of available valid responses, ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating stronger populist attitudes. The five-item measure is used as the primary outcome because it matches the scale longitudinally validated for these LISS waves; the six available Populism Barometer items and alternative item-completeness rules are used as robustness checks.

Political trust is the mean of four 0–10 confidence items asking about the Dutch government, Dutch parliament, politicians, and political parties. The four items show high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$), supporting their combination into a single index. Higher values indicate greater trust. We refer to the construct as trust in representative politics because all four objects concern representative political actors and institutions. The four item-specific associations are examined separately in robustness analyses. Confidence in the legal system and police is used as a specificity check rather than incorporated into the main trust measure.

External political efficacy is the mean of three items: whether parliamentarians do not care about the opinions of people like the respondent, whether political parties are interested only in the respondent's vote rather than opinion, and whether people like the respondent have no influence on government policy. The three items show good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), supporting their combination into a single index. Each item is recoded so that 1 indicates rejection of the low-efficacy statement and 0 indicates endorsement; the resulting scale ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater external efficacy.

Satisfaction with democracy is measured on the standard 0–10 item ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied with how democracy functions. Political satisfaction is also available, but it correlates at approximately .94 with the four-item political-trust measure in the linked sample and is therefore treated

as a redundancy robustness check rather than a co-equal main outcome. Internal efficacy, political interest, and political participation form a separate engagement/capacity family and are reported as secondary analyses rather than combined with institutional disaffection.

3.4 Within-Between Decomposition and Fixed Effects

The principal models distinguish differences between respondents from changes within the same respondent over time. For each outcome's exact estimation sample, skill underuse is decomposed into the respondent's mean exposure across observed years, $\bar{S}_i$, and the deviation from that mean in year t , $S_{it} - \bar{S}_i$. Overqualification is decomposed in the same way. The basic model is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_{WS}(S_{it} - \bar{S}_i) + \beta_{BS}\bar{S}_i + \beta_{WQ}(Q_{it} - \bar{Q}_i) + \beta_{BQ}\bar{Q}_i + \text{year adjustment} + \epsilon_{it}.$$

The between-person skill-underuse coefficient, β_{BS} , compares respondents according to the share of their observed years spent in skill-underused employment. The within-person coefficient, β_{WS} , asks whether the same respondent reports a different political outcome in years with and without skill underuse. Because skill underuse is measured annually as a binary condition, this within-person contrast should not be interpreted as a sharply dated treatment-onset effect.

Following the logic of within-between panel models used by Christmann and Torcal (2017), all decompositions are calculated on the exact sample entering each outcome model. Year indicators are decomposed in the same way, which makes the reported mismatch within-person coefficients algebraically identical to those from respondent fixed-effects models with year fixed effects estimated on the same observations. Standard errors are clustered by respondent throughout.

A key test directly compares the between- and within-person skill-underuse coefficients. We test $H_0: \beta_{BS} = \beta_{WS}$ for each core outcome and control the false discovery rate across the four tests. On the strict common sample, outcomes are standardized and recoded where necessary so that positive coefficients always indicate greater political disaffection. This allows direct comparison across outcomes without constructing a single disaffection scale.

3.5 Repeated Exposure, Social Location, and Observed Transitions

We first make the between-person pattern substantively visible by classifying respondents with at least two valid annual skill-underuse observations as never underused, intermittently underused, or persistently underused across their observed years. For each political outcome, respondents must also contribute at least two valid outcome observations. We report average political orientations in the three history groups and estimate person-level models relating the share of observed years in skill underuse to the respondent's average political outcome, controlling simultaneously for the share of years overqualified. These history analyses are descriptive summaries of recurrent exposure; the hybrid model remains the formal decomposition.

Education and occupation are then used to locate the between-person association socially. Age is taken from the annual Work and Schooling interview. Tertiary education is based on the LISS Background Variables education classification and is coded 1 for higher professional or university education (HBO or WO; categories 5–6) and 0 for lower educational levels (categories 1–4). Occupational position is measured with the annual Work and Schooling item asking respondents to classify their current profession, or their last profession if they are no longer working, into broad occupational levels; these categories are entered as indicator variables. The diagnostic sequence adds age, tertiary education, and these occupational-level indicators to the common four-outcome sample. These variables are not treated as neutral controls whose inclusion reveals the causal effect of mismatch. Education and occupation are part of the process through which mismatch is generated, and adjustment can therefore remove substantively meaningful differences in social location. We interpret attenuation as evidence that part of the observed political gap is concentrated in educational and occupational composition, not as proof of causal mediation.

Finally, we examine adjacent-year changes around observed skill-underuse transitions. Entry compares workers who move from matched to skill-underused with workers who remain matched; exit compares workers who move from skill-underused to matched with workers who remain skill-underused. The dependent variable is the change in the political outcome across adjacent observations, with year indicators and respondent-clustered standard errors. These models identify observed changes in annual mismatch status, not the date at which underutilization actually began or ended. We therefore use "observed entry" and "observed exit" rather than onset and treat the estimates as temporally ordered diagnostics rather than event-study treatment effects.

3.6 Robustness and Outcome Specificity

Several analyses assess whether the findings depend on measurement choices or the particular political outcome. Populism is re-estimated with alternative item-completeness rules and the six available Populism Barometer items to assess whether the results depend on the construction of the primary five-item scale. Separate August and November post-Work observations test whether they are sensitive to the timing or aggregation of the populism measure. The four-item trust scale is decomposed into trust in government, parliament, politicians, and political parties to determine whether the association is broadly shared across representative political objects rather than driven by a single component. Confidence in the legal system and police provides a further specificity test: if skill underuse primarily marks distance from representative politics, the pattern should be weaker for state and legal-order institutions. The pre-specified secondary outcomes—political satisfaction, internal efficacy, political interest, and participation—test whether the profile extends beyond the four core outcomes to broader political orientations and behaviour.

We also examine whether the findings depend on how occupational mismatch is specified. Four-state respondent fixed-effects models separate matched employment, overqualification only, skill underuse only, and double mismatch, testing whether the main results obscure combinations of the two mismatch dimensions. Finally, political outcomes are compared with work-domain outcomes observed in the same

annual panel to assess whether weak political change simply reflects an occupational condition that is itself too stable or inconsequential to generate within-person change.

4 Results

4.1 Repeated Skill Underuse Marks a Broad Political Profile

The first result is not an absence of political differentiation. Recurrent skill underuse is associated with a graded pattern across all four core outcomes. As shown in Table 1, among respondents with at least two valid political observations, mean populist attitudes rise from 2.996 among never-underused workers to 3.125 among intermittently underused workers and 3.219 among persistently underused workers.

Table 1
Repeated Skill-Underuse History and Political Disaffection

Outcome	Never Mean (N)	Intermittent Mean (N)	Persistent Mean (N)	SU exposure share b (SE)	p
Populist attitudes	2.996 (382)	3.125 (267)	3.219 (173)	.234 (.087)	.007
Political trust	5.213 (978)	4.897 (639)	4.571 (397)	– .634 (.138)	< .001
External efficacy	0.456 (986)	0.438 (644)	0.387 (400)	– .094 (.027)	< .001
Democratic satisfaction	6.255 (951)	6.015 (634)	5.752 (388)	– .375 (.138)	.007

[Table 1 near here]

Political trust moves in the opposite direction, from 5.213 to 4.897 to 4.571. External efficacy declines from .456 to .438 to .387, and democratic satisfaction declines from 6.255 to 6.015 to 5.752.

The same conclusion appears when repeated exposure is modeled continuously at the person level. Controlling for the respondent's share of overqualified years, moving from no observed skill underuse to skill underuse in every observed year is associated with + .234 points on the 1–5 populism scale ($p=.007$), – .634 points of political trust ($p<.001$), – .094 on external efficacy ($p<.001$), and – .375 points of democratic satisfaction ($p=.007$). All four coefficients survive false-discovery-rate adjustment.

Figure 1 displays the same pattern after orienting and standardizing the outcomes: the substantive result is a monotonic concentration of political disaffection across repeated skill-underuse histories rather than an outcome-specific anomaly.

These skill-underuse associations are estimated net of respondents' overqualification histories; the next section compares the between- and within-person components of both forms of occupational mismatch directly.

[Figure 1 near here]

4.2 Between-Person Concentration versus Within-Person Change

Table 2 decomposes both skill underuse and overqualification into between- and within-person components. The central contrast concerns skill underuse, for which the between-person associations are substantially larger than the corresponding within-person estimates. Overqualification provides a comparison across the same models. The within-between decomposition shows that this political differentiation lies primarily between workers. In the outcome-specific samples, the between-person skill-underuse coefficient is .180 for populist attitudes ($p=.007$), $-.490$ for political trust ($p<.001$), $-.067$ for external efficacy ($p=.001$), and $-.307$ for democratic satisfaction ($p=.002$). Workers who spend more of their observed years in skill-underused employment are therefore consistently more disaffected across the four outcomes.

Table 2
Within-Between Decomposition of Occupational Mismatch and Core Political Outcomes

Outcome	SU between b (SE)	SU within/FE b (SE)	p(B = W)	OQ between b (p)	OQ within b (p)	N / persons
Populist attitudes	.180 (.066)	.005 (.024)	.013	.005 (.946)	.040 (.141)	3030 / 1389
Political trust	$-.490$ (.101)	$-.057$ (.053)	$<.001$	$-.002$ (.988)	.018 (.794)	7149 / 3292
External efficacy	$-.067$ (.021)	$-.020$ (.012)	.048	.042 (.058)	$-.001$ (.969)	7224 / 3315
Democratic satisfaction	$-.307$ (.101)	.020 (.064)	.006	$-.105$ (.333)	.076 (.320)	6998 / 3239

The corresponding within-person coefficients are much smaller: .005 for populist attitudes ($p=.838$), $-.057$ for political trust ($p=.288$), $-.020$ for external efficacy ($p=.088$), and $+.020$ for democratic satisfaction ($p=.752$). External efficacy is the only outcome showing even weak evidence of movement in the expected direction, and the estimate remains small relative to the between-person association. Respondent fixed-effects estimates are numerically identical to these within coefficients on the same estimation samples.

Most importantly, the between-within contrast is not inferred from comparing significance levels. Formal tests reject equality of the two coefficients for every core outcome: $p=.013$ for populist attitudes, $p<.001$

for political trust, $p=.048$ for external efficacy, and $p=.006$ for democratic satisfaction. All four contrasts remain below .05 after Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment.

[Table 2 near here]

The strict common sample leads to the same conclusion. Standardized and oriented toward disaffection, the between-person associations range from .229 to .307 standard deviations, whereas the within-person estimates range from $-.055$ to .069 standard deviations (Fig. 2). Overqualification provides a useful contrast. Its between-person coefficients are essentially zero for populism and trust, modest and only borderline for external efficacy, and negative but imprecise for democratic satisfaction. Its within-person coefficients are also null across the four outcomes. The political profile is therefore tied much more clearly to experienced skill underuse than to reporting more formal education than the job requires.

[Figure 2 near here]

4.3 Locating the Between-Person Profile

The next question is how much of the recurrent skill-underuse profile is concentrated in conventional educational and occupational location. Table 3 uses the strict four-outcome common sample and holds the estimation sample constant before and after adjustment. The unadjusted standardized between-person association is .229 SD for populist attitudes, .306 SD for representative political distrust, .255 SD for low external efficacy, and .243 SD for democratic dissatisfaction. Adding age, tertiary education, and broad occupational level attenuates all four coefficients. The adjusted estimates are .095 SD for populist attitudes ($p=.252$), .224 SD for representative political distrust ($p=.003$), .153 SD for low external efficacy ($p=.049$), and .158 SD for democratic dissatisfaction ($p=.040$). The attenuation is therefore largest for populist attitudes, while the association with trust in representative politics remains most clearly estimated after conventional social-location adjustment.

Table 3 Social-Location Adjustment of the Between-Person Skill-Underuse Association				
Outcome	M0 standardized b (SE)	p	M3 standardized b (SE)	p
Populist attitudes	.229 (.090)	.011	.095 (.083)	.252
Political trust	.306 (.079)	< .001	.224 (.076)	.003
External efficacy	.255 (.082)	.002	.153 (.078)	.049
Democratic satisfaction	.243 (.078)	.002	.158 (.077)	.040

[Table 3 near here]

This pattern should not be read as proof that political trust is categorically different from the other outcomes. In a stacked cross-outcome model, the adjusted skill-underuse coefficients for distrust, low external efficacy, and democratic dissatisfaction are statistically indistinguishable from one another ($\chi^2(2) = 1.85, p = .398$). Equality across all four outcomes, including populism, is also not rejected ($\chi^2(3) = 3.50, p = .321$), and the populism coefficient does not differ significantly from the mean of the three institutional-disaffection coefficients ($p = .189$). The evidence therefore supports a coherent between-person political profile while remaining agnostic about fine-grained cross-outcome differences in adjusted magnitude.

4.4 Observed Entry and Exit Do Not Produce a Common Political Response

Transition analyses provide a more intuitive temporal check by asking what happens when annual skill-underuse status changes (Table 4). Observed entry is associated with a small increase in populism (+.028, $p = .391$), a decline in political trust (-.198, $p = .011$), a small decline in external efficacy (-.021, $p = .216$), and a small decline in democratic satisfaction (-.052, $p = .594$). The trust estimate is the strongest transition signal, but it falls just above the .05 threshold after correction across the pre-specified institutional-disaffection family (q approximately .055). It is therefore better interpreted as localized evidence than as a family-wide transition effect. Observed exit is similarly inconsistent with a common reversal. The estimates are +.014 for populism ($p = .707$), -.089 for political trust ($p = .304$), +.009 for external efficacy ($p = .602$), and -.122 for democratic satisfaction ($p = .248$). None indicates a systematic recovery in political support when skill underuse ends. Because annual Work interviews interval-censor the underlying employment transition, these results are supporting evidence rather than sharply timed event effects. They nevertheless reinforce the central decomposition: the large differences between recurrently underused and other workers are not reproduced as a broad political shift at observed annual changes in mismatch status.

Table 4
Political Change Around Observed Skill-Underuse Transitions

Outcome	Observed entry b (SE)	p	N / entrants	Observed exit b (SE)	p	N / exits
Populist attitudes	.028 (.033)	.391	961 / 148	.014 (.036)	.707	534 / 157
Political trust	-.198 (.078)	.011	2312 / 355	-.089 (.086)	.304	1180 / 359
External efficacy	-.021 (.017)	.216	2348 / 361	.009 (.018)	.602	1193 / 367
Democratic satisfaction	-.052 (.097)	.594	2229 / 349	-.122 (.106)	.248	1160 / 357

[Table 4 near here]

4.5 Specificity and Robustness

The trust result is not driven by a single representative institution. In the adjusted common sample, recurrent skill underuse is similarly associated with confidence in government, parliament, politicians, and political parties, and a joint test does not distinguish among the four coefficients. The pattern is weaker for confidence in the legal system and police. However, the difference between the representative-political trust index and a legal-order/police index is not statistically conclusive. The evidence therefore suggests some specificity to representative politics, but not a sharp institutional boundary.

Nor does recurrent skill underuse appear to be part of a general pattern of political disengagement. Political satisfaction closely reproduces the trust result, which is unsurprising given its correlation of about .94 with the trust index. Other outcomes point in a different direction. In the broad Politics sample, recurrent skill underuse is associated between persons with higher internal efficacy and somewhat greater political interest. These associations, however, are not stable in the stricter Populism-Barometer common sample, while participation is consistently unrelated to skill underuse. Taken together, the more robust pattern concerns distance from representative politics and democratic functioning rather than generalized political withdrawal.

The main findings are also insensitive to several measurement and specification checks. The populism results are similar when using all six available Populism Barometer items, alternative completeness rules, and the separate August and November post-Work observations. Four-state fixed-effects models likewise show little systematic within-person political movement in overqualification-only, skill-underuse-only, or double-mismatch years relative to fully matched years. Importantly, this weak political updating does not mean that changes in skill underuse have no detectable consequences. Within the Work panel, increases in skill underuse are associated with lower work-content satisfaction and fewer perceived learning opportunities; in the broader work sample, they are also associated with lower overall job satisfaction and recognition. Skill underuse therefore registers more clearly within the domain of work than in political evaluations.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The central finding is a clear gap between where political disaffection is concentrated and what changes within the same individuals over time. Recurrent skill underuse identifies workers who are more populist, less trusting of representative politics, less externally efficacious, and less satisfied with democracy. These are not small descriptive differences confined to one measure: in the common sample, the unadjusted between-person coefficients cluster between roughly .23 and .31 standard deviations of greater disaffection. Yet the same individuals show little corresponding political movement in years when their skill-underuse status differs from their own average exposure, and the between-within contrasts are formally significant for all four outcomes. The implication goes beyond occupational mismatch. When persistent group differences are interpreted as evidence of individual change,

longitudinal data should show that the proposed exposure and outcome actually move together within people. Otherwise, the finding may still reveal an important social cleavage, but it identifies concentration rather than production.

This distinction clarifies what longitudinal evidence adds to explanations of political disaffection rooted in labor-market disadvantage. Cross-sectional and trajectory-based studies can correctly identify politically distinctive disadvantaged groups without establishing that a particular disadvantage generated those political attitudes. Voces and Caínzos (2022) show that overeducated workers can report lower efficacy and democratic satisfaction; Van Hoogegem *et al* (2025) show that precarious employment trajectories differ in political trust. Those findings describe meaningful social differences. Our results ask the additional question of political updating and show that recurrent skill underuse can mark a broad disaffection profile without functioning as the annual experience that reproduces that profile within workers.

The result is consistent with, but extends beyond, earlier evidence of limited political spillover. Bauer (2018) shows that unemployment strongly changes life satisfaction but has much weaker within-person effects on trust and democratic satisfaction. Wiedner (2022) finds that qualification mismatch matters substantially for work outcomes while producing little corresponding political change. Skill underuse sharpens that conclusion because it is closer than formal overqualification to the experienced utilization of capacities and shows demonstrable within-person consequences in the work domain. The lack of a broad political response does not mean that skill underuse is inconsequential. Instead, it marks a limit to how occupational experience carries over into political evaluation.

The between-within pattern also fits recent work on political support. Kölln and Aarts (2021) distinguish stable socioeconomic predictors of general democratic satisfaction from short-run evaluative fluctuations. Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) find political trust highly stable in adulthood and weakly responsive to changing individual circumstances, while la Roi *et al* (2025) describe Dutch institutional trust as a settled baseline around which evaluations fluctuate. This does not mean the outcomes cannot change: Theuwis (2026) documents within-person movement in populist attitudes in these LISS waves; Christmann and Torcal (2017) and Erhardt (2023) link changing political evaluations or representation to movement in democratic satisfaction, trust, and efficacy; and Rekker (2026), using a longer LISS panel, finds within-person political discontent linked to changing populist-party support. The narrower point is that changes in skill underuse are not a strong common trigger of political updating.

This matters because explanations of political disaffection often make assumptions about timing. A claim that recurrently underutilized workers are more distrustful can be true even if distrust precedes much of the observed underutilization or if both emerge from slower social trajectories. A claim that underutilization itself erodes trust requires a different pattern: trust should fall as workers enter or experience more underuse and recover as the condition ends. Across the four outcomes, the data provide little evidence for that stronger process.

Education and occupation account for part of the between-person pattern, but they do not exhaust it. Adjustment attenuates the populism association especially strongly and reduces the efficacy and democratic-satisfaction gaps as well. The trust association remains clearest after conventional social-location controls. These results should not be read as a mediation decomposition. Education and occupation help generate mismatch itself, and adjusting for them intentionally changes the social comparison being made. A clearer interpretation is to distinguish structural location from status realization. Education and broad occupational level describe important positions in the stratification system. Skill underuse adds a relational feature: whether the capacities a worker has developed are realized in the job actually held. Workers with similar credentials and broad occupations can differ in this respect. Recurrent underutilization may therefore identify trajectories of blocked or incomplete occupational realization that conventional categories only partly capture.

This interpretation is compatible with status and recognition approaches, but the evidence calls for caution. Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) emphasize social standing, integration, and respect in the politics of anti-establishment support. Lamont (2018) conceptualizes recognition as a dimension of inequality distinct from resource distribution, and Schneickert *et al* (2019) show that workplace appreciation and disrespect are socially stratified and related to democratic satisfaction. Skill underuse may be embedded in such recognition processes, but our measure does not directly observe them. Nor does the residual adjusted association demonstrate that frustrated status realization causes political distrust. Unmeasured class origin, income trajectories, occupational authority, sector, contract security, subjective status, personality, or earlier political socialization may jointly shape both recurrent underutilization and political distance.

The lack of a corresponding within-person effect is informative. It moves the interpretation away from a simple chain in which mismatch generates frustration and frustration directly generates disaffection. A more cautious reading is that recurrent skill underuse identifies workers whose occupational trajectories are not fully captured by current education and broad occupation and who are also more distant from representative politics. The coherence lies in the between-person political profile, not in a common within-person response to skill underuse.

These results do not imply that work is politically unimportant. Geurkink *et al* (2024) show that workplace discussion, voice, open climates, and supportive interaction can be associated with political trust. Such experiences have a direct analogue in democratic politics: they concern whether authorities listen, whether participation is meaningful, and whether disagreement is handled procedurally. They therefore offer a more direct bridge from workplace governance to political governance. Skill underuse is different. It communicates that capacities are not fully used, but it does not specify whether the cause is a supervisor, an occupation, a labor market, an educational system, a life-course choice, or political institutions. It also does not specify a collective "we" whose interests have been violated. For occupational underutilization to become political grievance, additional processes must connect the private or organizational discrepancy to broader judgments about status, responsibility, representation,

and responsiveness. Populism requires an even more specific translation because it organizes grievance around a people-elite opposition and popular sovereignty.

This helps explain the combination found here: a broad between-person disaffection profile without a common within-person political response. The social and occupational trajectories that lead workers into recurrent underutilization may also place them farther from representative institutions. But the annual experience of underuse, by itself, does not provide the shared attributions and collective meaning needed for systematic political updating. Future panel research should therefore measure the interpretive links directly: changing recognition, subjective status, group-relative deprivation, responsibility attribution, perceived neglect of "people like me," and exposure to political frames that collectivize occupational frustration.

Several limitations bound the argument. First, the four-year window is better suited to detecting short- and medium-run political updating than very slow cumulative change. Repeated disadvantage may matter over a longer portion of the life course, especially for political trust, where evidence points to substantial adult stability and accumulated earlier influences (Schoon and Cheng, 2011; Devine and Valgarðsson, 2024).

Second, annual Work observations interval-censor changes in mismatch. We know that a worker is observed in different mismatch states in adjacent years, but not the exact date at which the underlying job experience changed. The transition analyses are therefore weaker than an event study with sharply dated treatment onset. The within-between and fixed-effects models do not require an exact transition date, but they identify average within-person associations rather than immediate causal effects.

Third, both mismatch measures are self-reported. Overqualification captures respondents' assessment of the relation between their educational level and the education required by their job, whereas skill underuse captures their assessment of whether their knowledge and skills exceed job requirements. Self-reporting is appropriate to these constructs, but perceptions of mismatch may also reflect individual expectations and evaluations of work. Respondent fixed effects absorb stable individual differences when estimating within-person change, but they do not remove time-varying common causes. Employer changes, health shocks, household events, wage changes, or changing expectations may accompany both mismatch and political attitudes. The small within-person estimates provide little evidence of a substantial political response to changes in mismatch, but within-person estimation does not eliminate all sources of time-varying confounding.

Fourth, the Netherlands is analytically advantageous but institutionally specific. The strength of the case lies in the longitudinal leverage provided by LISS, not in an assumption that Dutch levels of occupational mismatch or political disaffection represent Europe more broadly. The within-person comparison identifies whether political evaluations move with changes in underutilization inside the same national setting; the magnitude and political translation of those associations may nevertheless vary across contexts. Welfare-state protection, labor-market mobility, representation, and party competition may all

matter in this respect. The same occupational discrepancy may become more politically salient where mobility is blocked for longer periods or political actors explicitly connect underutilization to elite failure.

Fifth, the outcome family is broad but not exhaustive. Populist attitudes, trust, external efficacy, and democratic satisfaction capture important dimensions of political distance, but they are not equivalent to vote choice or to support for democratic principles. Secondary analyses do not show robust effects on participation, and occupational experiences may affect electoral behavior through routes that do not require changing the attitudinal outcomes studied here. The contribution is therefore about the production of political disaffection, not every political consequence of work.

Occupational underutilization is politically patterned. Workers who repeatedly report that their skills exceed the demands of their jobs are more populist, less trusting of representative politics, less likely to perceive politics as responsive, and less satisfied with democracy. But the same workers do not show a comparable broad political shift when their own skill-underuse status changes. The between-person association and the within-person association are not weaker and stronger versions of the same empirical relationship; they describe different social processes. Explanations of political disaffection should therefore distinguish between social locations in which grievance is concentrated and experiences that actually update political orientations over time. A disadvantaged occupational position can identify where political disaffection is concentrated without being the proximate experience that produced it. Recurrent skill underuse may mark longer trajectories of unrealized occupational position, status expectations, and institutional distance. Political change requires additional processes that make those experiences socially comparative, collectively meaningful, and politically attributable. Occupational disadvantage can supply the discrepancy. It does not, by itself, supply the politics.

Declarations

Author Contribution

P.C. conceived and designed the study, conducted the data analysis, interpreted the results, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are from the LISS panel (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences), administered by Centerdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands). The data are available through the LISS Data Archive for scientific and policy-relevant non-commercial research. Access requires users to sign the LISS Data User Statement and comply with the archive's terms and conditions. The datasets and accompanying documentation can be obtained from the LISS Data Archive.

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Figures

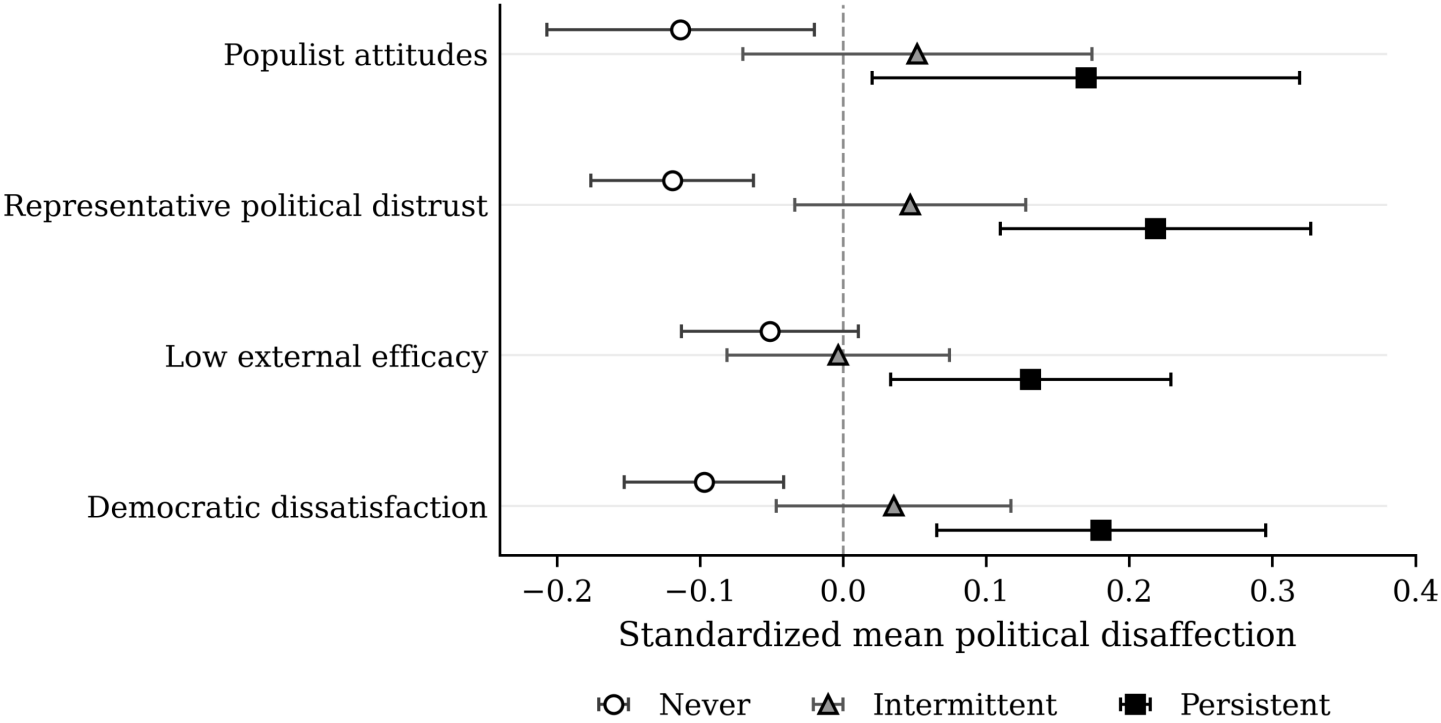


Figure 1

Political Disaffection by Repeated Skill-Underuse History

Note: Points show standardized person-mean group means; horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals based on the person-level distribution within each history group. For each outcome, person-mean political orientations are standardized within the outcome-specific history sample and reoriented so that higher values indicate greater political disaffection. Never, intermittent, and persistent refer to observed skill-underuse histories, not successive stages of a temporal trajectory.

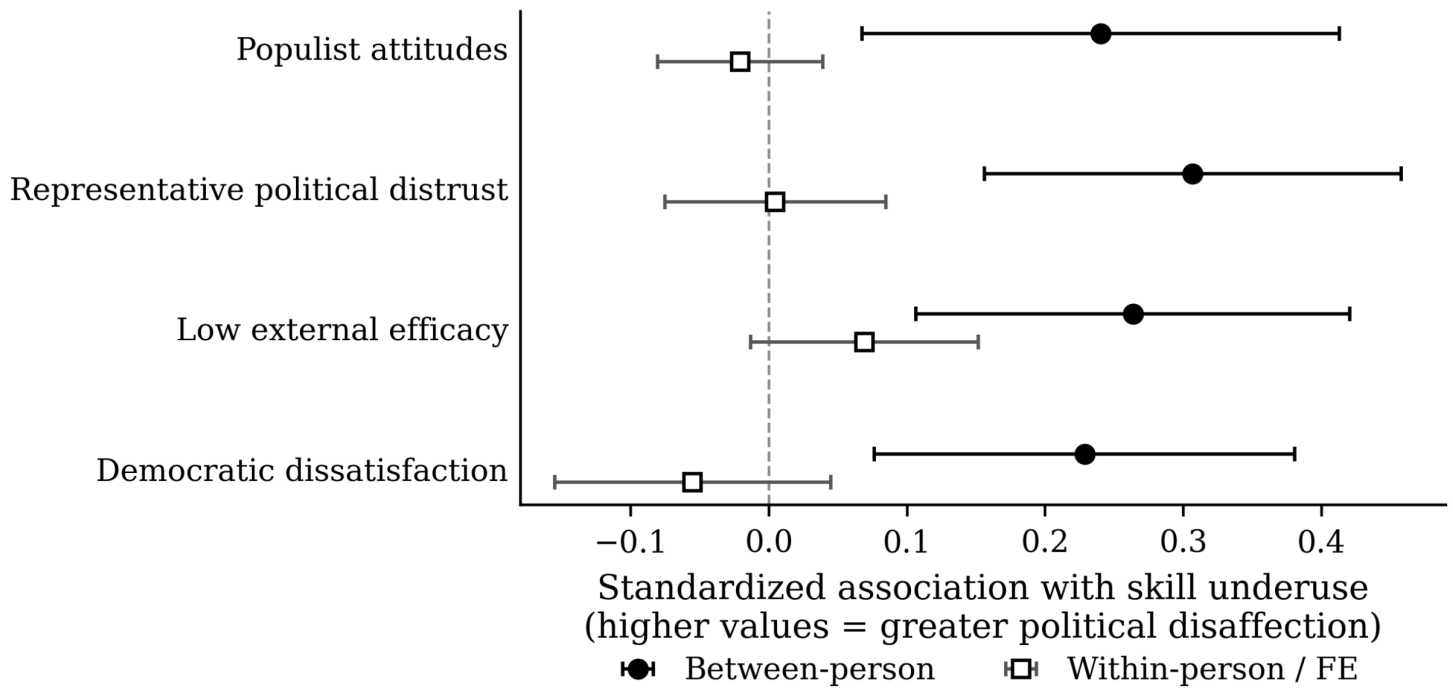


Figure 2

Between- and Within-Person Skill-Underuse Associations

Note: Strict common sample: 2,777 respondent-years from 1,282 respondents. Outcomes are standardized and reoriented so that higher values indicate greater political disaffection. Markers show coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from the exact-sample hybrid models, with overqualification entered simultaneously. Within-person coefficients reproduce respondent fixed-effects estimates on the same observations.