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# Classified out of society? How educational classification induces political alienation through feelings of misrecognition

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## Abstract

Less educated citizens are both descriptively and substantively outnumbered by higher educated citizens in political and societal institutions. While social science has devoted much time to explain why such education effects exist, it has largely neglected the role of feelings of misrecognition in inducing political alienation among less educated citizens. We argue that education has become so central in processes of economic and social stratification that it is likely that less educated citizens feel misrecognized due to their marginal presence in societal and political institutions, which would then lead to their political alienation. This would in particular be the case in societies that are more 'schooled', that is, societies where schooling is a more dominant and steering institution. We analysed data from 49,261 individuals in 34 European countries and found that feelings of misrecognition were strongly related to political distrust, dissatisfaction with democracy, and vote abstention. These relations explained a significant part of the difference between higher and less educated citizens in political alienation. We also found that this mediation effect was larger in countries that are more schooled.

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## KEYWORDS

education, misrecognition, political alienation, political trust, satisfaction with democracy

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Based on the observation that both *descriptively* and *substantively* less educated citizens are heavily outnumbered by highly educated citizens in political institutions, Bovens and Wille (2017) argue these societies can be characterized as 'diploma democracies'. *Descriptively*, parliaments in Western democracies tend to be populated with predominantly highly educated individuals (Bovens & Wille, 2017), partly due to a proclivity towards (educational) homophily among political parties (Van de Wardt et al., 2020). Higher educated people are also more likely to participate in almost any political initiative (Hillygus, 2005; Persson, 2015; Verba et al., 1995), including political innovations such as deliberative initiatives (Spruyt et al., 2018). Analyses of *substantive* representation have likewise shown that members in (Dutch) parliament hold attitudes more in line with highly educated than less educated voters. This way, the opinions of higher educated citizens are more likely to be translated into policy (Schakel & Hakhverdian, 2018; Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). More broadly, there is evidence of a strong divide between the elite and the public in political opinions in European countries, with elites holding opinions much closer to the average highly educated individual than to a less educated individual (Raines et al., 2017). The ultimate consequence of all this, Bovens and Wille (2010, p. 418) argue 'may very well be that the less educated will become a politically visible group with a clear shared interest, demanding equal rights or an improved position [...]'.

Social science has not yet reached a full understanding of this tendency. Indeed, although educational differences in institutional attitudes (e.g., political trust, institutional trust more broadly, satisfaction with democracy, support for populism) are well documented and relate to events such as Brexit and the election of Trump (Hobolt, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), scholars continue to debate the exact origins of these differences. Traditional explanations often point towards material resources (Verba et al., 1995), the role of political knowledge or cognitive skills (Galston, 2001), one's network position (Nie et al., 1996), or even genetic differences (Alford et al., 2005; Persson, 2014). But it is likely that these attitudes are also driven by concerns related to people's social identity such as social status and their struggle for recognition (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Noordzij et al., 2019; Piketty, 2020). Gidron and Hall (2019) note explicitly the role that feelings of misrecognition can play in political alienation and call for more research in this area (see for instance Steiner et al., 2022).

Feelings of misrecognition refer to the extent to which people have the feeling that they do not play a meaningful role in society, possess a (stigmatized) identity that is looked down on, and feel less valued than other social groups. Because such feelings arise not so much due to experiences as unique individuals, but due to exclusion based on group membership, feelings of misrecognition direct the attention to the area of intergroup relations and social identities. In this paper we engage with and build on this emerging literature that approaches educational differentials from an intergroup perspective (Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015; Stubager, 2009, 2013). We draw attention to the particularities of education-based status processes and the long-term transformation towards what neo-institutional theorists refer to as the growth of 'schooled societies' (Baker, 2014; see also Meyer, 1977), of which 'diploma democracy' (Bovens & Wille, 2017) is but one concrete manifestation. According to this perspective, the educational institution has become increasingly central to societies' stratification processes, but also plays an increasingly strong cultural role. In this role it influences notions of failure and success, and through that it has a profound effect on societies' status hierarchy. We argue that the status hierarchy constructed by educational classification, especially in more schooled societies, induces feelings of misrecognition among less educated individuals which consequently lead to political alienation, evidenced by less satisfaction with democracy, less political trust, and more vote abstention.

In the empirical part of the paper we focus on the relationship between education and political alienation and the (mediating) role feelings of misrecognition play in this relationship. We use data from the second and fourth wave of

the European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound, 2017). Across the two waves, we have data on 49,261 individuals in 34 (European) countries. We focus on three indicators of political alienation: dissatisfaction with democracy, political distrust, and vote abstention.

## 1.1 | Theoretical background

In this section we build our argument in two steps. First, we draw attention to the growing centrality of education in society and the particularities of education-based classification. Subsequently, we explain how this might be related to feelings of misrecognition and the importance of these feelings for people's opinions about political institutions and democracy and how this might differ across countries that are more or less schooled.

## 1.2 | Education, competence, and the emergence of 'schooled society'

Due to the central and authoritative position of the educational system, modern societies are called 'schooled societies' (Baker, 2014). In these societies, education has obtained a crucial position in the distribution and legitimation of social status and the allocation of individuals to positions of higher and lower social status. In fact, education has supplanted or incorporated most, if not all, other sources of social status and positioned itself as the best way to develop the capacities of individuals (Baker, 2014, p. 2). For instance, education now plays a pivotal role in labour markets where it is represented both as the 'great equalizer' by being able to provide social mobility to those successful in education, but simultaneously as the main culprit in the reproduction of societal inequality (Hout & DiPrete, 2006).

Education, however, is not merely an institution that allocates individuals to different positions in society. It also provides a substantial justification for why one fails or succeeds in education. In education, success or failure is construed as matter of merit, that is, individual success that one attains based on the two meritocratic factors of natural endowments and effort (Mijs, 2016; Young, 1958). As such, educational credentials function as 'badges of ability' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 64) that position higher educated individuals as more competent in general. In part, this is due to the privileging of a certain type of competence based on cognitive ability that has increasingly been the main required skill in education (Baker, 2014). According to Baker, this form of competence 'has become such a dominating cultural construct that it shapes our ideas about general human intelligence' (2014, p. 43). This form of competence maintains its relevance outside the realm of schooling. In this way, education is a potent force in constructing the idea that the people it classifies as higher educated are not only fit for the specific role that someone with a specific diploma is trained for, but as more generally competent.

This social construction of higher educated people as more generally competent also functions as a justification for the construction of a social status hierarchy. Van Noord et al. (2019) demonstrate that indeed such an education-based social status hierarchy is perceived, experienced, and generally seen as legitimate by all educational groups in Western societies. The existence of such a hierarchy was also found in research concerning identification with education which found that people are reasonably likely to identify with their educational level, but the strength of the identification is much higher among higher than less educated people (Kuppens et al., 2015; Stubager, 2009). 'Less educated' is in that sense a negative or even stigmatized identity, defined primarily in terms of what it is lacking: a 'good' and 'respectable' education.

We are interested here in the political implications of such education-based status. Obviously, the higher status and competence accorded to higher educated people translate into greater access to elite positions in societal institutions generally, and an overrepresentation of higher educated citizens in politics, specifically. This is likely to have a significant (negative) influence on group relations between higher and less educated people. As Meyer (1977, p. 73) argues: 'education expands roles and sets them into proper relation with the rest of society', for instance, when the role of 'doctor' is created, 'other people do not simply become nondoctors, they become patients'. Higher educated

people are, due to their higher education-based status, not only more likely to be allocated to positions of authority, less educated individuals are also more likely to be put in a dominated position where they have to submit to the authority of higher educated people.

### 1.3 | Misrecognition and political alienation

The previous section explains why education's societal role goes beyond allocating people to societal positions, as this allocation goes along with normative ideas about people with different educational levels. In other words, educational differences are also about institutionally guaranteed (mis)recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Misrecognition can be seen as resulting from 'institutionalized patterns of cultural value [that] constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2003, p. 29) and thus impedes groups of people from participating equally in the political domain. We use feelings of misrecognition to refer to the extent that people feel they do not play a meaningful role in society, possess a (stigmatized) identity that is looked down on, and feel less valued than other social groups.

The concept of recognition was revived in the 1990s to understand new social movements and 'identity politics' (Honneth, 1996; Taylor, 1994). This notion of recognition has also recently been employed as an explanation for the 'cultural backlash' (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) that resulted in the rise of (right-wing) populism in Western societies, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S.A (Gest, 2016; Gidron & Hall, 2019; Hochschild, 2018). The main demographic cleavage central in these accounts is education (Rooduijn, 2017; Stubager, 2013; Zhang, 2018) as they revolve around conservative less educated groups who struggle for recognition of their values, traditions, and status, in a world in which they (increasingly) feel excluded or marginalized by the impact of globalization and immigration, with increasing political alienation as a result.

Recent research has indicated that having a lower education is strongly tied to a lower subjective social status and greater feelings of misrecognition (Van Noord et al., 2019, 2021). In a range of Western countries, the lower one's educational level, the more they reported a lower subjective social status and felt misrecognized and, in the case of feelings of misrecognition, this effect was stronger in countries that were more 'schooled' (i.e., had a higher share of the population that finished higher education). Other recent research has demonstrated more broadly that education-based identity, status, or social meaning affects political attitudes or behaviour. For instance, Stubager (2013) demonstrates that the authoritarian-libertarian cleavage is (partly) rooted in education-based identities and an education cleavage. Spruyt et al. (2016) found that educational groups not only differ in their support for populism, but that this education gap increases the more less educated individuals identify with their educational group, potentially indicating a recognition of an educational conflict wherein less educated people are the subordinate group. Noordzij et al. (2019) demonstrate that affinity with elite culture partly explains the gap in political trust between higher and less educated. Based on this, they theorize that the superiority signalling of higher educated politicians could increase the political alienation of less educated citizens. Indeed, Sevenans and Walgrave (2022) found that politicians evaluate the opinions of less educated citizens as less thoughtful than those of higher educated citizens, showing that feelings of alienation are not without grounds.

These findings lead to two crucial insights. First, all these elements refer not so much to individual characteristics of citizens (e.g., knowledge, people's social network position) but refer to relational elements associated with social identity processes. In contemporary schooled societies education-based classification is so central, that people have become aware of educational categories and their associated stereotypes. A full understanding of educational differentials in political thought and behaviour should take this into account. Second, the misrepresentation of less educated is thus likely to instil a sense of distrust towards these political and social institutions, as people are expected to submit to the authority of institutions that they do not feel represent them. Recent empirical research also points more specifically in this direction. Feelings of social marginalization were related to more populist attitudes for several low status groups in Germany (Steiner et al., 2022) and Noordzij et al. (2021) demonstrate for The

Netherlands that perceived cultural distance to politicians explains differences in anti-establishment politics (e.g., political trust) between higher and less educated people. Our research extends these studies by investigating similar relationships in a large number of European countries, using three different measures of political alienation, analysing the mediating role of misrecognition, and how that differs between countries.

In this study, we see political alienation as 'a relatively enduring sense of estrangement from existing political institutions, values and leaders' (Citrin et al., 1975, p. 3). We measure this with both attitudinal (by way of satisfaction with democracy and political trust) and a behavioural indicator (vote abstention). These outcomes were primarily picked due to these being used often as indicators of political alienation or political dissatisfaction (Citrin et al., 1975; Fox, 2021; Gidron & Hall, 2019). This was also limited by data availability. We could not measure, for instance, feelings of political (in)efficacy or powerlessness (cf. Fox, 2021). Further, for all three indicators, higher educated citizens are less likely to be alienated: higher educated citizens are generally more satisfied with the functioning of democracy, display higher trust levels, and are more willing to vote (Verba et al., 1995). The attitudinal indicators measure alienation more 'purely', as a behavioural indicator measures the behavioural reaction to feelings of alienation. It is also possible that political alienation is not expressed behaviourally, as political alienation is primarily an attitude (Citrin et al., 1975; Fox, 2021). This also means that it is likely that relationships of misrecognition are smaller with the behavioural indicator than with the attitudinal indicators.

Based on this, we formulate the following hypotheses.

- H1.** Less educated individuals experience more feelings of misrecognition than higher educated individuals.
- H2.** Less educated individuals experience more political alienation (high dissatisfaction with democracy, political distrust, and vote abstention) than higher educated individuals.
- H3.** Feelings of misrecognition are positively associated with political alienation.
- H4.** The educational differences in feelings of misrecognition explain a significant part of the differences in political alienation.

## 1.4 | Schooled societies

From the perspective laid out in this paper, these processes should be understood in their societal context. Specifically, the crucial role of education and misrecognition depends on the centrality of the educational institution in society, and thus how 'schooled' a society is (Baker, 2014). Thus, in those societies that are more schooled, and thus put more emphasis on educational credentials, or where educational level is more strongly related to social status and societal opportunities, etc., this marginalization of those with lower educational levels is likely to be stronger (Van Noord et al., 2021). Based on this, we expect that the mediation effect of feelings of misrecognition (i.e., the strength of the effect of education on political alienation *through* feelings of misrecognition) is larger in those countries with more higher educated people (Van Noord et al., 2019). We formulate the following hypothesis.

- H5.** The mediation effect of feelings of misrecognition of political alienation is stronger in countries with a larger share of higher educated.

## 2 | DATA AND MEASURES

To test our hypotheses, we rely on data from Wave 2 (fielded in 2007) and Wave 4 (2016) of the European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound, 2017). The number of individuals and countries included in the analyses depend on the available data, but combined describe 49,261 individuals across 34 countries. See Table A1 in the Supplemental Material for the included countries and number of respondents per sample and Tables A3-A6 in the Supplemental Material for the number of respondents per analyses. All variables are operationalized in an identical way between the two datasets, unless indicated in the text below.

*Education* was grouped into three levels based on ISCED levels: 0-2 for less educated (primary education), 3-4 for middle educated (secondary education), and 5-8 for higher educated (tertiary education).

*Feelings of misrecognition* was constructed with two items. These two items tap into different aspects of misrecognition. The first ('I feel left out of society') revolves around a personal difficulty of perceiving one's place in society as meaningful and the second ('I feel that the value of what I do is not recognized by others') revolves around an assessment of the judgement of others. Hence, despite only modest correlations (Pearson's  $r$ : 0.43 and 0.49 for Wave 2 and 4), we feel that these two items together form a proper assessment of one's feelings of misrecognition. We also analysed our data with the two items separately, and these findings were similar (results of mediation analyses available in Tables A9 and A10 in the Supplemental Material). The dataset does provide us with a third item, but this item mentions explicitly 'job situation or income'. We left this item out of the battery to only use the two items that do not focus on any explicit reasons for the feelings of misrecognition.

This measure differs slightly from measures used in other research. It is strongly different from the standard measure of subjective social status (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019; Van Noord et al., 2019). Whereas that measure relies on an abstract status ladder, feelings of misrecognition measure *explicit* feelings of being left out of society. That is, it is not merely a measure of status, but rather a measure of the feelings that low status might engender. Secondly, we differ from the approach of Steiner et al. (2022) who focus on domain specific forms of misrecognition. While that approach proved fruitful, our approach is more general and potentially also takes into account sources of misrecognition that do not fall in the pre-specified domains. Thirdly, we differ from Noordzij et al. (2021) that, next to feelings of misrecognition also (and primarily) focus on perceived cultural distance to politicians. We focus solely on feelings of misrecognition in relation to wider society.

We conceptualize political alienation with three indicators: (1) satisfaction with democracy, (2) political trust, and (3) vote abstention. Vote abstention is a political behaviour and the other two are political attitudes, it is possible that these are also connected. Indeed, those with lower satisfaction with the way democracy functions and lower political trust levels might be more inclined to abstain from voting (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007). However, these causal relationships fall outside of the scope of this article and we do not investigate these.

*Dissatisfaction with democracy* was measured with a single item: 'On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?'. Low scores on this question do not (necessarily) indicate low support for democratic values and principles (Linde & Ekman, 2003). This item thus probes the satisfaction with democracy *in practice*, and not democracy in principle. The item was reverse coded so that higher scores mean high *dissatisfaction* with the functioning of democracy. This item was only measured in Wave 4.

*Political distrust* was measured with (the mean of) two items, and was included in both waves. These items are trust in parliament, and trust in government. With these items we combine measurements of trust in the legislative and the executive branch. These items correlate highly (Pearson's  $r$ : 0.78 and 0.81 for Wave 2 and 4). The resulting variable runs from 1 to 10, with higher scores reflecting higher political *distrust*.

*Vote abstention* was only included in Wave 2. Answer categories denoting spoiled/blank ballots or not eligible to vote were coded as missing. The resulting variable is dichotomous, where one indicates that the individual did not vote in the last country election.

For control variables we used four different demographic indicators that were demonstrated to affect political alienation and are also related to education (Anderson & Singer, 2008; Gidron & Hall, 2019; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). *Gender* is a dichotomous variable where 0 indicates male and 1 female. *Age* is a continuous variable. We have removed all respondents under the age of 25 as many (predominantly those ending up with higher education diploma's) are likely to not have finished their education yet. *Ethnic minority status* is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether at least one parent of the respondent was born outside of the respondents' country of residence. *Income* was measured in (equalized by country) quartiles with values 1-4.

For exploring differences between countries we relied on three different indicators, with the latter two being the control variables. *Share of higher educated* was measured with the share of 25-64 year-olds with a tertiary level of highest attained diploma. Following others, we consider this a rough proxy of the centrality of education in a country

or how schooled a society is (Van Noord et al., 2019, 2021). GDP per capita was measured in current prices in Euro per capita (divided by 10,000 for ease of interpretation). *Income inequality* was measured with the Gini index of equivalised disposable income before social transfers. All three country-level indicators were taken from Eurostat (2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

We have standardized by one standard deviation and grand-mean centred all continuous individual-level variables for ease of comparison. In Table A2 in the supplementary material, we list all variables with their descriptive statistics.

### 3 | ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Analytical overview

The analyses proceeded in five steps. First, we analysed the relationship between education and feelings of misrecognition. Second, we chart the well-known relationship between education and political alienation in the datasets we use. Third, we analysed the relationship between misrecognition and political alienation for all four indicators. In the fourth step, we analysed to what extent misrecognition explains differences between higher and less educated individuals in political alienation. In the fifth and final step, we explored how the mediation effect differs across countries.

We used the R package *mediation* (Tingley et al., 2014) to calculate the mediation effects. This package is based on the *general* approach to mediation analysis formulated in Imai et al. (2010), that provides a single framework that accommodates analysis of both linear and nonlinear mediation relationships. However, support for multilevel models is still limited in this package. To circumvent this problem we used (single-level) regression with country dummy variables to model country differences. Since our relations of interest exists only on the individual level, this is both methodologically and theoretically valid. One further limitation is that the sensitivity analyses are not possible for binomial logit, but only binomial probit. Hence, we also used binomial probit models to estimate the effects of our independent variables on vote abstention. These models give effectively similar results as binomial logit.

How the mediation effect differs across countries was analysed with multilevel analyses with cross-level interactions between share of higher educated and (individual-level) education and feelings of misrecognition. These full results can also be found in Tables A9 and A10 in the Supplementary Materials.

#### 3.2 | Education and feelings of misrecognition

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analyses on feelings of misrecognition. Since feelings of misrecognition was standardized (and mean-country centred), these coefficients can be interpreted as standardized coefficients and are comparable across the different waves. In both waves, education was, in line with H1, significantly related to feelings of misrecognition, where a higher level of education was related to less feelings of misrecognition. Though our goal was not to chart changes over time, there were larger coefficients for Wave 4 (fielded in 2016) than Wave 2. Having a high level of education, compared to a low level of education, was associated with 0.168 (Wave 2) and 0.295 (Wave 4) standard deviations of lower levels of misrecognition. These are not large effects, but larger than, for instance, being a member of an ethnic minority group.

#### 3.3 | Education and political alienation

In Table 2 (Model 1) we list all coefficients of the regression models with the political alienation variables as dependent variables and education and the control variables as independent variables. These are linear models for dissatisfaction



TABLE 1 Results of linear regressions with feelings of misrecognition as dependent variable.

	Wave 2	Wave 4
(Intercept)	0.197*** (0.043)	-0.436*** (0.035)
Less educated (ref.) Middle educated	-0.080*** (0.016)	-0.170*** (0.014)
Higher educated	-0.168*** (0.021)	-0.295*** (0.017)
Gender (1 = female)	-0.019 (0.013)	0.005 (0.011)
Age	-0.029*** (0.007)	-0.021*** (0.006)
Household income	-0.184*** (0.007)	-0.157*** (0.006)
Ethnic minority	0.063** (0.020)	0.083*** (0.017)
Number of respondents	21,607	27,654
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.149	0.158

Note: \* $p < 0.010$ , \*\* $p < 0.050$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.010$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , standard errors in brackets. Country-fixed effects are included, but not reported for brevity.

TABLE 2 Summary of regression coefficients of education without (Model 1) and with (Model 2) feelings of misrecognition on political alienation, and, results from mediation analyses.

	Dissatisfaction with democracy	Political distrust		
		Wave 2	Wave 4	Vote abstention
Model 1				
Middle educated	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.025 (0.016)	-0.022 (0.014)	-0.181*** (0.029)
Higher educated	-0.147*** (0.017)	-0.209*** (0.020)	-0.197*** (0.017)	-0.418*** (0.039)
Model 2				
Feelings of misrecognition	0.174*** (0.006)	0.129*** (0.007)	0.156*** (0.006)	0.130*** (0.012)
Middle educated	0.013 (0.014)	-0.014 (0.016)	0.004 (0.014)	-0.171*** (0.029)
Higher educated	-0.097*** (0.017)	-0.187*** (0.020)	-0.151*** (0.016)	-0.397*** (0.039)
Mediation				
Mediated effect	-0.050 [-0.057; -0.043]	-0.022 [-0.028; -0.017]	-0.046 [-0.052; -0.039]	-0.004 [-0.006; -0.003]
Direct effect	-0.097 [-0.129; -0.066]	-0.187 [-0.225; -0.146]	-0.151 [-0.182; -0.12]	-0.078 [-0.092; -0.063]
Total effect	-0.147 [-0.179; -0.115]	-0.209 [-0.247; -0.168]	-0.197 [-0.227; -0.165]	-0.083 [-0.097; -0.067]
Proportion mediated	0.340 [0.270; 0.440]	0.106 [0.076; 0.139]	0.233 [0.191; 0.284]	0.052 [0.035; 0.071]

Note: \* $p < 0.010$ , \*\* $p < 0.050$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.010$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in brackets for Models 1 and 2; 95% CI in brackets for Mediation results. The *mediation* package reports coefficients for binomial probit mediation analyses (vote abstention) as the increase in probability. The Total effect and Direct effect of the mediations correspond to the Higher educated coefficients of Model 1 and 2. The Mediated effect is the difference between these two coefficients. All mediated effects are significant at  $p < 0.001$ . Full regression results are displayed in Table A3 and A4 in the Supplemental Material.

with democracy and political distrust, and probit models for vote abstention. Dissatisfaction with democracy and political distrust were measured on the same scale (standardized within dataset, with mean = 0 and SD = 1) and hence the coefficients are comparable between the two waves.

These coefficients show that education had a significant positive effect on *all* political alienation variables. These coefficients indicate that being higher educated versus being less educated was associated with a decrease of

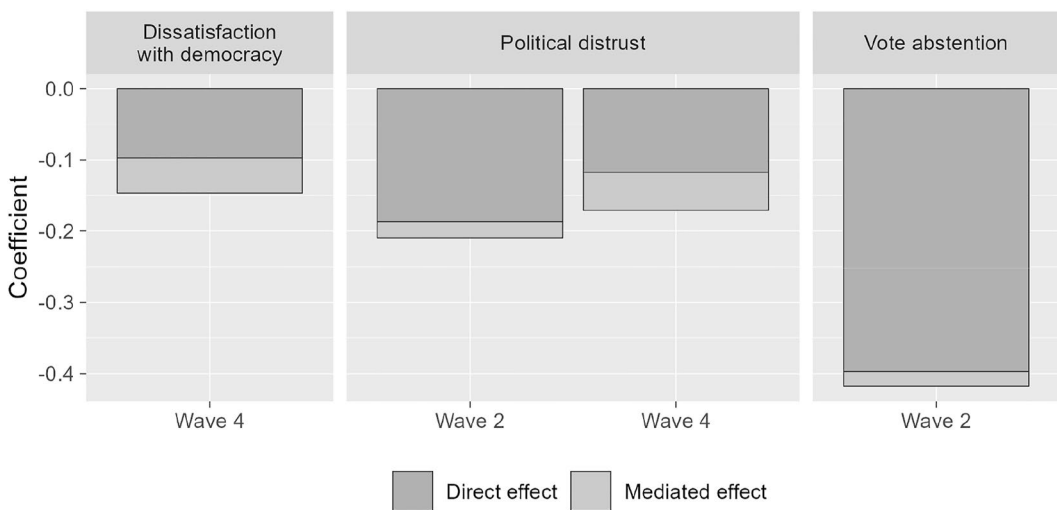
0.147 to 0.209 standard deviations of dissatisfaction with democracy and political distrust, and a decrease of 0.418 log-odds in vote abstention. Hence, it is clear that higher educated individuals experienced significantly less political alienation than less educated individuals—in line with existing literature and H2.

### 3.4 | Feelings of misrecognition and political alienation

In the next step we added feelings of misrecognition to the previous set of models. These models described the effect of feelings of misrecognition on political alienation controlled for education and the other control variables. The coefficients for education from these models are listed in Table 2 (Model 2). Feelings of misrecognition had significant positive relationships with political alienation across all indicators and across both waves, in line with H3. The strength of these relationships are comparable. The effect sizes range from 0.130 to 0.174. In the next step, we will establish to what extent feelings of misrecognition explained differences in political alienation between higher and less educated individuals.

### 3.5 | To what extent can differences be explained by feelings of misrecognition?

In Table 2 (Mediation) we summarize the results of the mediation analyses. These mediation analyses were performed with the *mediation* package in R (Imai et al., 2010; Tingley et al., 2014). The table reports the mediation effect (i.e., the effect of education as mediated by misrecognition) and the direct effect (i.e., the effect of education net of the mediation effect). It also reports the total effect and the proportion mediated, which are, respectively, the initial effect of education without taking into account the effect of feelings of misrecognition (i.e., the effect reported in Table 2 [Model one] which is equal to the mediation plus the direct effect), and the proportion of the total effect that is mediated by feelings of misrecognition. All these coefficients are significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) for the comparison between higher and less educated. This indicates that the effect of higher versus less educated on each indicator of political alienation was significantly mediated by feelings of misrecognition, in line with H4. The proportion mediated by feelings of misrecognition ranges from 5.2% to 34.0%. We have illustrated the total, direct, and mediated effects in Figure 1. Further, we found



**FIGURE 1** Direct effect of education and mediated effect of education through feelings of misrecognition on political alienation indicators. The mediated effect in lighter grey indicates the part of the education effect that is mediated by feelings of misrecognition. Total stacked bar indicates the total effect of education on the political alienation indicators. See Table 2 for coefficients, SE's and/or confidence interval of total, direct, and mediated effects.

that the political alienation indicators measured in 2016 (i.e., dissatisfaction with democracy and political trust in Wave 4) were mediated more strongly by feelings of misrecognition than the indicators measured earlier in time. Especially the mediation effects in Wave 2 are small (5.2% and 10.6% proportion mediated). In Wave 4 the proportions mediated are larger, and indicate that a moderate part of the difference in political alienation is mediated by feelings of misrecognition.

### 3.6 | Sensitivity analyses

Using the *mediation* package (Imai et al., 2010; Tingley et al., 2014) we performed sensitivity tests that give an indication of how strong a potential confounder must be for the mediation effect to disappear. These  $\rho$  values ranged between 0.11 and 0.17. While these values are difficult to interpret substantively, they were not particularly high. For this reason we identified two variables in our datasets that might be potential confounding variables (life satisfaction and societal (economic) satisfaction). When including these variables the relationships became slightly weaker, but the  $\rho$  values diminished only slightly and remained positive. Hence, these relationships were not confounded by these prominent variables. See the Supplementary Material for more details.

### 3.7 | Differences across countries

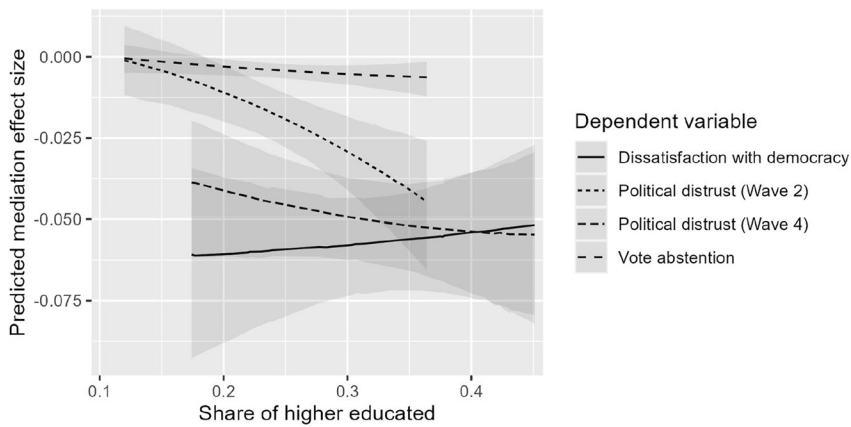
In the final step of the analyses we explore differences across countries. We assume that when a society shares the characteristics of a 'schooled society' education differences will more strongly lead to differences in misrecognition and then political alienation. Therefore, we can expect that the extent to which differences in political alienation is mediated by feelings of misrecognition is larger in those societies that can be seen as more schooled. The share of higher educated of a country has been used before as an indicator for how schooled a society is (Van Noord et al., 2019, 2021). We performed multilevel regression analyses on both sides of the mediation to investigate to what extent this mediation is related to a country's share of higher educated (full results available in Supplemental Material). We also control for GDP per capita and income inequality (Gini index).

Results show that the share of higher educated significantly affects the effect of education on feelings of misrecognition, but only for Wave 2 ( $b = -1.066$ ,  $se = 0.399$ ,  $p < 0.010$ ). Earlier research (Van Noord et al., 2021) demonstrated that specifically the link between education and misrecognition is moderated by share of higher educated. For Wave 2 we find similar results as Van Noord et al. (2021), we did not for Wave 4 ( $b = 0.449$ ,  $se = 0.403$ ,  $p > 0.050$ ).<sup>1</sup> We did find that the link between feelings of misrecognition and political distrust was also significantly moderated by share of higher educated in both Wave 2 and Wave 4 ( $b_{\text{wave 2}} = 0.322$ ,  $se = 0.135$ ,  $p < 0.050$ ;  $b_{\text{wave 4}} = 0.383$ ,  $se = 0.121$ ,  $p < 0.010$ ). We thus find a moderation of the mediation effect for three of the four political indicators. For political distrust in Wave 2 and vote abstention this is due to a moderation of the effect of education on feelings of misrecognition, for political distrust in Wave 4 this is due to a moderation of the effect of feelings of misrecognition on political distrust. There was no significant moderation of feelings of misrecognition on either dissatisfaction with democracy or vote abstention by share of higher educated ( $b_{\text{dissatisfaction with democracy}} = 0.322$ ,  $se = 0.135$ ,  $p < 0.050$ ;  $b_{\text{vote abstention}} = 0.383$ ,  $se = 0.121$ ,  $p < 0.010$ ).

We also display the predicted mediation effects based on the coefficients from the multilevel models in Figure 2.<sup>2</sup> Here we see a downward trend (strengthening the negative mediation effect) for the three political alienation indicators for which we found a moderation, namely political trust (Wave 2 and 4) and vote abstention. There is no such negative trend for dissatisfaction for democracy. Though to a large extent the mediation effect is stronger in countries with a larger share of higher educated, results are not entirely conclusive as we do not see this pattern across the board.

## 4 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The dominant position of higher educated people in societal and political institutions reflects the general status hierarchy constructed by education and education-based classification (Baker, 2014; Bovens & Wille, 2017). In this



**FIGURE 2** Predicted mediation effect size of feelings of misrecognition on political alienation across share of higher educated based on multilevel models. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. Predictions were made across the empirical range of share of higher educated, which differs between Wave 2 and Wave 4 as the share of higher educated has increased for all countries.

paper, we argued that the status hierarchy and the lower position that less educated people take in this hierarchy lead to stronger feelings of misrecognition, either directly, through the associations between education and status, and the connotations of having a certain educational level (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Van Noord et al., 2019, 2022), or indirectly through the weak descriptive and substantial representation of less educated citizens in the political domain (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). Subsequently, these feelings of misrecognition increase political alienation (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Steiner et al., 2022). In this way, so our argument goes, educational differentials in political alienation not only result from individual resources and knowledge, but also from status and genuine intergroup processes.

We investigated this argument in 34 European countries and we found that, indeed, less educated individuals experience stronger feelings of misrecognition than higher educated individuals and these feelings explain a part of the difference between higher and less educated individuals in satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and vote abstention. We argue that people's satisfaction about how their democracy functions, the trust they have in political institutions, and their (un)willingness to vote is also culturally embedded: cultural notions of what it means to be less or higher educated in contemporary society, and what status is attributed to these social groups, are fundamental to people's feeling of belonging to a society or feeling left out of it. These findings are consistent with recent findings on how feelings of subjective social status, misrecognition, and social exclusion affect political alienation (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Noordzij et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2022). In this paper, we advance these findings by demonstrating these relationships from education to political alienation across a large number of European countries and for multiple indicators of political alienation. Additionally, we provide tentative evidence that the mediation of the relationship between education and political alienation by feelings of misrecognition is stronger in more schooled societies.

Although educational differences in political attitudes and behaviour are well-documented, scholars continue to debate the reasons for these differences. Our analyses do not completely settle these debates, but draw attention to a line of thought which leads to move beyond simple allocation or socialization explanations by taking into account the effects of education as 'an authoritative institution' (Baker, 2014; Meyer, 1977). Our argument aligns with those made by Gidron and Hall (2019) and Noordzij, De Koster and Van der Waal (2019) who point towards the relevance of status politics in the constitution of people's political attitudes or attitudes towards institutions. While our approaches are closely aligned, they also differ. Importantly, we highlight the role of institutions in structuring the status hierarchy that underlies the status politics. Most important of these institutions is education itself, that through categorizing people as less or higher educated and imbuing these categories with judgements of differential (moral) worth *authoritatively*

stacks this status politics in the favour of higher educated people (Baker, 2014; Meyer, 1977; Sayer, 2005; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Due to its authoritative and legitimate role in social stratification education rewards higher educated doubly: not just with higher social status and esteem but also (due to status differentials and differential attribution of 'competence'; Van Noord et al., 2022), with tangible benefits, in this case, important positions in powerful institutions (Bovens & Wille, 2017). All this pushes less educated people to the periphery of society and induces feelings of misrecognition. We argue that this role of institutions and specifically the educational institution is, though often not appreciated as such, central to the status politics in modern society (Van Noord et al., 2019, 2021).

The data we use is cross-sectional and hence we cannot demonstrate the causality of these relationships. However, these concerns do not diminish the importance of cross-sectional research for two main reasons. First, there has been little empirical research on identifying the role of feelings of misrecognition (or similar feelings) in political alienation in general, and specifically around education (though this has increased in recent years, see Noordzij et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2022)—despite theoretical assertions that these do play a role (e.g., Gidron & Hall, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Sandel, 2021). Secondly, feelings of misrecognition propose a fundamentally different mechanism than other explanations that rely more on skills, knowledge, or network position. Hence, a correlational pattern of misrecognition demonstrates that processes that revolve around esteem and cultural worth are likely relevant factors in differences in political alienation between higher and less educated and that these should be taken into account and explored. The empirical relationships indeed demonstrate that, for educational groups, political alienation goes together with the feeling that one is excluded from society, or that one's value is not recognized. This is important as it demonstrates that political alienation is in part inseparable from feelings about one's position in and relation to *society* and not just the political system. If educational differences indeed induce feelings of misrecognition, it is likely that this also translates into a form of political alienation or dissatisfaction. It is also possible that feelings of political alienation are translated into ideas about one's position in society. In this way, political mis- or underrepresentation would induce feelings of misrecognition. Either way, and in line with our empirical results, alienation from the political system goes together with feelings of misrecognition in society.

The role of misrecognition has especially been highlighted in the context of populism and radical right-wing politics (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2019). Beyond this, research has convincingly demonstrated the important role of education as one of the main characteristics that explains the preference for such politics (Rooduijn, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Our findings on dissatisfaction with democracy and political distrust do lend some support to the assertion that feelings of misrecognition underlie the demand for populist parties. Other recent papers have also come to this conclusion (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Noordzij, De Koster and Van der Waal, 2019; Steiner et al., 2022). Noordzij et al. (2021) explicitly note that feelings of misrecognition (among others) can explain differences between educational groups in political dissatisfaction. While their study focuses only on the Netherlands, we extend that analysis across 34 European countries. Additionally, we demonstrate that the extent to which feelings of misrecognition mediate differences in political alienation for educational groups is larger in countries that are more schooled. While this analysis is not definitive, this does lend some support to our assertion that the centrality of education in our societies, and thus the importance we place on the status hierarchy associated with educational differences, can lead to the marginalization of less educated citizens and thus potentially to increased political dissatisfaction and alienation (Solga, 2002; Van Noord et al., 2019, 2021).

Are feelings of misrecognition different from a general societal discontent? In our sensitivity analyses we analyse additional models that includes a control for societal discontent, which compared to the models reported above have a smaller, but still significant, mediation effect of feelings of misrecognition. Empirically these two are thus largely distinct concepts. Theoretically, societal discontent is not entirely separate from the processes that we have described above. Indeed, less educated individuals who perceive their status as low are likely also to be discontent about the status quo of society because of this low status. In this way, societal discontent and feelings of misrecognition are simply two sides of the same coin, one a judgement on society, the other a judgement on how one feels treated by society. While theoretically related, they do refer to different concepts.

In line with a renewed focus on status and misrecognition as a relevant factor in political behaviour and attitudes (Gest, 2016; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Lamont, 2018; Ridgeway, 2014) we argue that education can shape societal

marginalization in western societies by authoritatively classifying individuals in educational groups that vary wildly in inclusion and representation in political and societal institutions. The marginalization of less educated people bears the potential to increase feelings of misrecognition and thereby plays a crucial, yet hitherto often unacknowledged, role in political alienation.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Foundation at [https://osf.io/s56wh/?view\\_only&equals;9cf1ced1e44e46529e9a6953070d3517](https://osf.io/s56wh/?view_only&equals;9cf1ced1e44e46529e9a6953070d3517).

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## ENDNOTES

- While we use the same individual-level data, we use different country-level data and a different selection of control variables. This leads to differences in which countries and individuals are included in the analyses, which likely explains the slightly different results.
- The mediation effects (and SE's) are calculated with the product method with resampling (Bauer et al., 2006; MacKinnon et al., 2004). In this method the a and b coefficient and SE are resampled to a distribution of 10,000 observations (with the coefficient as mean and the SE as SD). These distributions are multiplied to give the distribution and effect size of the mediation effect, which can be used to calculate the confidence interval.

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