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Sour grapes: *ressentiment* as the affective response of grievance politics

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This article examines the psychological orientations and political preferences of citizens ‘in *ressentiment*’, a particular psychological state that is a characteristic feature of contemporary grievance politics. Similarly to the Fox in Aesop’s ‘Fable of the sour grapes’, in *ressentiment* the value of an impotent self and a desirable but unattainable object change to a morally superior self and an unwanted object, while maintaining an aura of victimhood [Demertzis, 2020. *The Political Sociology of Emotions. Essays on Trauma and Ressentiment*. London: Routledge; Salmela and Capelos, 2021. “Ressentiment: A Complex Emotion or an Emotional Mechanism of Psychic Defences?” *Politics and Governance* 9 (3): 191–203]. The complex conceptualization of *ressentiment* often deters its empirical operationalization, and explains the lack of available instruments. We address this double empirical lacuna by presenting a novel 6-item scale of *ressentiment* launched in the 7th Round of the World Value Survey in Greece, and applying it to examine its political manifestations in a populist European context. Our findings point to its toxic and complex hostile emotionality that extends beyond anger, its low efficacy and negative relationship with political knowledge and scientific evidence, its reliance on conservation and reactionary values and its aversion to emancipatory values, its inactive political stance, and its hollow social contact and precarious collective identities. We discuss the implications of recognizing *ressentiment* as a significant affective driver of far-right, populist, nativist, and nationalist politics.

Keywords: *ressentiment*; World Values Survey; core values; emotions; democracy

Introduction

In this article, we focus on *ressentiment*, as the central affective response of grievance politics, we examine its link with psychological orientations and political preferences and discuss its implications for understanding populist, and also nativist, far-right and nationalist politics. *Ressentiment*, often conflated with ‘resentment’ or misunderstood as ‘anger’, is a technical term introduced by Nietzsche ([1884] 1961), and expanded upon by Scheler ([1915] 1961) that refers to the chronic, frustrated and bitter devaluing of what one desires, into something unworthy and undesirable. While ‘resentment’ merely denotes moral and efficacious anger (Hoggett 2018; Demertzis 2020; Salmela and Capelos 2021; Nussbaum 2016), *ressentiment* is the complex psychological experience

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which involves a deeply emotional response to an individual's recurrent inability to acquire an object that is desired but repeatedly unattainable or denied (Salmela and Von Scheve 2017, 2018; Demertzis 2020). *Ressentiment* is popularized in Aesop's parable of the 'Fox and the Sour Grapes',¹ and eloquently presented by Aphra Behn (1687) in this short poem:

The fox who longed for grapes, beholds with pain
The tempting clusters were too high to gain;
Grieved in his heart he forced a careless smile,
And cried, 'They're sharp and hardly worth my while'

'What is *ressentiment*' is contested among scholars in rich theorizations, approaching it as a lasting mental attitude (Scheeler 1961), a complex 'cluster' emotion (Demertzis, 2004, 2006, 2019, 2020; TenHouten 2018), a chronic compensatory emotional mechanism (Salmela and Capelos 2021), an affect (Aeschbach 2017) or an enduring psychic disposition (Rodax et al. 2021). Despite these ongoing debates which have been in detail discussed elsewhere (see Demertzis 2020; Salmela and Capelos 2021) scholars agree on three principles: (a) *ressentiment* is not a pathology; (b) while every person or collective could be a subject of *ressentiment*, this affective experience is discernible among the passive, the humiliated and the weak of society; (c) *ressentiment* is not a cognitive negation response similar to cynicism or hypocrisy but it has a bitter affective core, marked by powerlessness and centered around victimhood.

'What breeds *ressentiment*' is simpler to pinpoint. As the affective undercurrent of grievance politics, *ressentiment* is stimulated by socio-political realities experienced as crises or traumatic occurrences (Demertzis 2020; Salmela and Capelos 2021). The 'crisis of recognition' and the need of individuals 'to be seen' (Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016) provide breeding ground for the insecurities and frustrations that sow the seeds of *ressentiment* in citizens (Salmela and Capelos 2021). What is often misidentified as 'indignant anger', or 'need for chaos' (Kimmel 2013; Petersen, Osmundsen, and Arce-neaux 2020; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017) is an affective response to the 'perfect storm' of socio-political and economic crises experienced around the globe: institutional challenges like the crisis of European integration, immigration and globalization, financial challenges like the global subprime mortgage crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis, the crisis of misinformation and post-truth politics (Capelos et al. 2021). We anticipate evidence of *ressentiment* in the growing support of populist parties (Rooduijn et al. 2019; Forgas, Crano, and Fiedler 2021), the rise of anti-preferences and the upsurge of anti-establishment sentiment (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Hoggett 2018; Solomon 1994).

Recent theoretical and empirical applications distinguish *ressentiment* from cynicism (Demertzis 2020) and identify it as the affective force behind vulnerable collective narcissism (Capelos et al. 2021). It is also noted as the affective driver of reactionism (Capelos and Katsanidou 2018; Sullivan 2021) and right-wing populism (Salmela and Von Scheve 2017; Kiss 2021). It explains dormant support for violent and illegal political action (Capelos and Demertzis 2018), as well as fanaticism and radicalism (Mishra 2017; Katsafanas forthcoming; Kaya 2021). According to Pirc (2018), *ressentiment* is evident in the contempt towards political elites, experts, and the media, expressed by the silent majorities of populist politics. *Ressentiment* is worth studying further because it is not a mere indication of angry politics: it blends generalized discontent, repressed aggression, bitterness, victimhood and frustration, as well as envy and shame from feeling left behind,

forgotten and dishonored. As such, its implications for democratic politics can be serious and long lasting.

The conceptual complexity of *ressentiment* explains, but does not excuse, the scarcity of attempts towards its empirical measurement and the lack of appropriate instruments in extant large-scale surveys. The aim of this article is to address this double lacuna by operationalizing *ressentiment* with a dedicated measure, and testing its empirical relationship with political preferences more broadly, and democratic engagement specifically. Our analysis spans across affective, cognitive and motivational dimensions of grievance politics that involve how individuals feel, think and act. What are the emotions experienced by ‘individuals in *ressentiment*’² and are these emotions empirically reducible to anger? How does *ressentiment* fair alongside political knowledge and orientations towards science? Is *ressentiment* associated with particular core values? What are the political expressions of this affective experience and how does it link with orientations towards democratic politics?

In our article, we use a novel 6-item scale of *ressentiment* and original data from the 7th Round of the World Value Survey in Greece to address these questions and examine the psychological and political correlates of *ressentiment* in the context of Greek populist politics. *Ressentiment* has a sound base in the Greek social and political context. It has been identified as the core emotional climate of this national political culture, which consistently adopts the perpetual stance of an inferior (but often morally / culturally superior) righteous victim nation in comparison to its EU partner nations (Demertzis 2020). Populist and nativist parties have capitalized on the insecurities and frustrations of the Greek electorate in the last 40 years, which intensified particularly in the context of the 2009 financial crisis (Marangoudakis 2018; Davou and Demertzis 2013). A large section of Greek society succumbed to financial hardships as unemployment rose to 27% (OECD 2016). We know that Greek citizens display low levels of life satisfaction and institutional trust, as well as weak bridging social capital (Demertzis 2020). What we do not know is the prevalence of *ressentiment* and how it links empirically with political engagement measures, different forms of political participation, and orientations towards democracy. From our analysis, we can learn how *ressentiment* presents in the context of grievance politics. Related debates feature in the academic works presented in the following section and give rise to our hypotheses that motivated this empirical study.

***Ressentiment*: a complex psycho-social affective experience**

At the individual level, the psychology of *ressentiment* goes beyond discrete emotions like anger or sorrow: among others, it involves repressed envy, shame, inefficacious anger, victimhood and powerlessness as well as vindictiveness and hatred (Demertzis 2020; Capelos et al. 2021). Internally *ressentiment* employs psychic defenses that deliver transvaluation (a change in the value of the self and the value of the coveted and unattainable object). This psychological maneuver is an attempt to evade inferiority and negative emotions of the self, like envy, shame, humiliation and inefficacious anger. It is stirred by frustration, regulated by ego-strength, and seeks to maintain a persistent aura of victimhood (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Upon its consummation, what was originally desired, for example a job, a material object, a social role, is disavowed; and the value of self that was originally impotent in acquiring what was desired and felt as a victim, is now revised, experienced as a morally superior victim, no longer a loser (Demertzis 2020). Externally, in social interactions that validate a new sense of the self, the outcome of *ressentiment* is other-directed emotions that vent frustration, such as resentment,

indignation and hatred. New and old scapegoat targets (elites, immigrants, the media, political establishment, minorities) are vilified, blamed and assigned a negative moral tag of ‘inferior and bad’. Social sharing in like-minded peer groups maintains the transmutation of inferiority and impotence into a sense of moral superiority, reinforcing elevated collective identities of victimhood (Salmela and Capelos 2021).

Ressentiment has been described as a seething cauldron of cognitions, emotions, and motivations (Yankelovich 1975). Reviewing its psychological elements allows us to draw links between this complex psycho-social experience and concepts used extensively in empirical models of political behavior. The latent inefficacious and impotent victimhood of *ressentiment* could be manifested in measures of political efficacy, agency and action; its complex affectivity based on frustration, sorrow, shame, envy, and blunted anger allows us to draw parallels with studies of political emotions (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Its largely unconscious process of transvaluation could be glimpsed through an analysis of the core values individuals hold when *in ressentiment*. Its preoccupation with spoiling and its attachment to internal and external idealized objects denotes a failure of reality-checking likely to be related to stances towards critical knowledge and orientations towards science (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Its social sharing function could be witnessed in the ways in which *ressentiment* is featured in the context of collective identities, group belonging and national attachments (Salmela and Von Scheve 2018). Its repressed vengeful appetite for establishing what is ‘righteous and fair’ might be traced in its disinclination for participation (Demertzis 2020), and its perceptions on the qualities of democracy and sound leadership (Kiss 2021). These insights, drawn from analytical and theoretical examinations of the phenomenon of *ressentiment*, require empirical investigation.

The socio-economic conditions that breed envy, inefficacious anger, and shame

Socio-economic indicators such as income and social class are an obvious starting point for understanding grievance politics. Scholars observing the rise of reactionary orientations and populist preferences offer explanations focusing on socio-economic factors like economic insecurity or cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019). These studies raise interesting questions about grievances that form at the intersection of socio-economic and psychological realities. The so-called ‘losers of globalization’ have been noted to have compromised conceptions of democracy, prefer strong leaders and strong states, and reject ‘check and balances’ institutional procedures (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014). They engage in aggressive devaluation of outgroups (Back et al. 2013) and display strong nationalism and nativism.

These socio-economic experiences bare striking resemblance to the ways of social interaction that describe the powerless and inefficacious individual of Schelerian and Nietzschean accounts of *ressentiment*. Low-income groups lack political influence and perceive government as less responsive than their more affluent counterparts (Lindh and McCall 2020). They do not possess economic or symbolic capital, feel left behind (Betz 1993; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012), and these deep frustrations can fuel *ressentiment*. It is indeed reasonable to expect *ressentiment* to be higher in individuals and groups that are more financially vulnerable, less politically efficacious, and with lower perceived status. The lack of empirical measurement of *ressentiment* has limited the testing of this hypothesis. To examine the socio-economic foundation of *ressentiment* we could test whether it is linked to low scores of perceived efficacy and agency, while taking into account whether income or social class also matter. We expect these relationships would hold.

The hostile emotionality of resentment should not be conflated with anger

Studies of backlash politics highlight the role of anger in mobilizing political grievances. 'Angry' middle class men, white supremacists, and Trump supporters, are often placed at the center of these investigations. Hochschild (2016) highlights the bitter and angry emotionality of white men of the American South, Kimmel (2017) makes a similar point about the rage of the 'everyday American man', while Faludi (2019) discusses gender wars and the anger felt against the challenges of traditional masculinities. Electoral studies also point to the angry voters that support populist party choices in Europe and around the world (Ford and Goodwin 2010; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). This apparent anger is certainly worth exploring further. But what if, as we posit here, the affective experience often (mis)identified as 'anger' harbors the inefficacious anger, envy and shame of *resentment*?

According to Yankelovich (1975), *resentment* is rife with frustration, and individuals *in resentment* approach political issues and public debates as frustrating experiences. Salmela and Capelos (2021) note the envious and self-reproaching core of *resentment*, while Salmela and Von Scheve (2017) note the role of shame as an emotion that triggers *resentment* among those who feel powerless and insecure about the value of their identity or status. *Resentment* also has a punitive side, linked to the motivation to punish, which, due to its impotence to deliver the punishment, is experienced as inefficacious anger (Hoggett 2018). As Hoggett notes, *resentment* is a 'cocktail of envy, shame and grievance' (2018, 402). If the emotionality of *resentment* is hot, sour and a lot more, as its theoretical models suggest, the implications for how we measure and understand it are significant. Discrete measures of anger might be a tempting proxy but psychologically they tap a different emotional experience to *resentment*.

Here is why: First, *resentment* displays in ways outside our typical models of aversive and anxious emotionality. While in appraisal theories anger is associated with efficacy, and fear is associated with low efficacy (Roseman 1996; Lazarus 1991), we expect the spiteful anger of *resentment* to be inefficacious and repressed (Capelos and Demertzis 2018). An individual *in resentment* will not simply attack in anger or recoil in fear in line with the fight versus flight hypothesized effects of these two discrete emotions (Marcus 2021). Instead, it will express dormant support for aggression or violence. Second, by distinguishing *resentment* from anger and fear, we can shed light to the motivations behind its avoidance for action: while passivity is often explained as a result of uncertain threats (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), we expect that individuals *in resentment* will be avoidant and lack hope because of their powerlessness and self-victimization. In this sense, *in resentment* one is hostage of its own self (Jovanov 2020). Third, we expect differences of degree and depth of affectivity: the aversion experienced *in resentment* will not be of moderate strength, and it will not be limited to specific political objects. Rather, it will be spiteful and frustrated, and spanning across political objects. If the 'anger' that citizens express conceals an injury and is *resentment*-ful, we expect that it invokes a deeper, long-lasting emotional orientation towards politics in general compared to discrete sentiments, which are of shorter duration and link to specific stimuli.

Resentment and long-lasting core values

Resentment-imbued individuals ruminate. They bring to mind 'past injuries and injustices' which cement their 'victimhood' and generate self-pity (Scheler 1961). Yet, they cannot imagine taking revenge for the humiliation and the traumas they have suffered.

This lasting rumination, in the form of a persistent pre-occupation with the past, does not allow an individual *in ressentiment* to move forward (Hoggett 2018). The nostalgia of *ressentiment* carries grievances about the present, projected into the past and to enemy-others (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Because *ressentiment* is also inefficacious in its core, we expect it has a negative relationship with values that favor independence, stimulation, innovation and desire for change. Having nowhere else to go but backwards, *in ressentiment* individuals are likely to turn to tradition and the imagined, nostalgic account of a ‘better past’.

In the context of grievance politics, the bitter backward gaze of *ressentiment* feels at home in reactionism which also demonstrates a preference for values of tradition, and the desire to bring back and revive an imagined past (Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Capelos et al. 2021). As such, the return to traditional values in *ressentiment*-ful reactionism is sentimental rather than ideological. Moreover, to the extent that *ressentiment* is a defensive response to cultural changes like the ones identified by Inglehart (1997) and Norris (2005), we also expect an individual *in ressentiment* to oppose post-materialist values of multiculturalism and equality, and position itself against (post)modernization.

Reality testing in ressentiment

Post-truth politics pose a sinister challenge to democracy (Farkas and Schou 2020), but living in falsehood is not a problem for the individual *in ressentiment* who has a compromised relationship with the truth. Aesops’ fable describes a fox that feels insubstantial, insecure, and ungratified. This fox attempts to change the meaning of its painful and frustrating reality through transvaluation which is actually a double open-ended process of devaluation and reevaluation; i.e. the value of what was desired (sweet grapes) turns to something unwanted (sour grapes) while the value of the previously impotent self becomes noble and wise. This lasting psychological condition, offers an opportunity to leave reality from the ‘backdoor’ (Hoggett 2018), avoiding objective facts, which are substituted by personal beliefs. Social and political realities can be denied with this psychological maneuver to avoid mental pain and cognitive dissonance (Salmela and Capelos 2021).

The inability of individuals *in ressentiment* to relate fully with reality invites us to take a close look at its empirical link with political knowledge, orientations towards science and political interest. We would not expect *ressentiment* to enhance attentiveness to facts through ballanced political information search. Instead, we would expect information and communication avoidance and selective exposure to favoured sources. Its compromised relationship with facts is also likely to manifest as a scorn of scientific thinking and anti-science skepticism. Indeed, extant research indicates that measures of belief in science correlate strongly with measures of reality testing (Dagnall et al. 2014, 2019). Belief in science denotes confidence in the validity of the scientific method, and scientific thinking is strongly linked to consideration of empirical evidence (Farias et al. 2013), whereas those who believe in the paranormal tend to devalue science (Irwin, Dagnall, and Drinkwater 2016). This would also mean that the individual *in ressentiment* lends a favorable ear to the exaggerated, animated and pedantic post-truth performances of populist leaders and political players.

Inefficacious victimhood, impotence, and inaction in ressentiment

According to Ball (1964) *ressentiment* is marked by the desire for passive political opposition, empirically approximated by measures of alienation. Other scholars also associate

ressentiment with apathy and inaction, seen as the triumph of the weak, a re-action attempting to conceal powerlessness (Pirc 2018). So how does *ressentiment* manifest in its every-day political expressions? We do not expect *ressentiment* to be associated with high levels of conventional political participation. This at first appears counterintuitive since anger, a component of *ressentiment*, boosts political action. As we noted earlier, what we think holds the individual *in ressentiment* back, is its inefficacious victimhood.

We therefore expect generalized dissatisfaction across all aspects of political life combined with passivity rather than the assertiveness to implement changes forward. Protest behavior such as taking part in demonstrations, signing petitions, boycotting or striking (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013), is not expected to be a typical *ressentiment*-ful activity. We also expect dissatisfaction with the political system and indications of alienation from mainstream politics. Furthermore, as *ressentiment* contains repressed hatred and jealousy against real or imagined transgressions, we expect it to be associated with dormant support of political violence. Here we point to the key distinction between the inaction or dormant support for action of *ressentiment*, and the active political engagement that can be an indication of resentment.

Hollow social contact and collective identities in ressentiment

Social sharing is an important element of *ressentiment*. While studies of in-group relations show sharing experiences and belonging to a group leads to social cohesion, indicators of social cohesion *in ressentiment* are theorized to be shallow³ (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Sloterdijk (2016, 784) writes of the ‘culture of long-term *ressentiment*’ where individuals compete to present themselves as victims, while at the same time express the elevated rating of their group in reference to another group. Capelos et al. (2021) argue that *in ressentiment* social bonds are similar to those in collective narcissism, but with a twist: *in ressentiment*, one’s own group is not just better, but the other group is stripped of its moral value (Hornqvist 2021).

Turning to intergroup relations, unlike in the case of nationalistic pride and social cohesion ties, *ressentiment* is not expected to display an authentic spirit of togetherness. While being part of a like-minded collective which reinforces the transvaluated version of the world, the individual *in ressentiment* lacks empathetic togetherness, and feeling part of a collective is precarious (Salmela and Capelos 2021). This allows us to distinguish the bonds of *ressentiment* from the bonds of social cohesion, togetherness and solidarity that groups in society often share (Huddy 2013). Principally, *in ressentiment* we expect low levels of identification with abstract notions of imagined communities, for example low levels of national pride, low connectivity with collectives such as one’s town, country, or seeing oneself as a citizen of the world, low interpersonal trust, and low levels of volunteerism showing caring and concern about others.

Empirical measurement of ressentiment

It is not a simple task to move from the complex and highly debated conceptualization of *ressentiment* to its operationalization. While the majority of scholars have adopted phenomenological and macro-historical sociological approaches (Demertzis 2004, 2006; Ferro 2010; Moruno 2013) only a handful have attempted its empirical measurement (León et al. 1988; Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Capelos et al. 2021). Drawing on theoretical accounts on the complex nature of *ressentiment*, León et al. (1988) operationalized *ressentiment* with a scale tapping its cognitive and emotional components. Their study

contained 51 binary (yes/no) questions and their *ressentiment* scale included 28 key items, nine of which originated in the Lie/Social Desirability (L) dimension of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ).⁴ The composite proxy measure of *ressentiment* created by Capelos and Demertzis (2018) combined anger, anxiety and low political efficacy and contrasted this with ‘resentment’ approximated by anger and high efficacy.⁵

The aim of our study is to investigate the psychological and political relationships of *ressentiment* in the context of grievance politics, while offering a conceptually sound operationalization that captures its key elements: victimhood, indignation, transvaluation, powerlessness, sense of injustice and destiny. With this instrument, we seek to test empirically the expected relationships between *ressentiment* and low sense of efficacy (H1), its association with emotional reactions of shame, sorrow, anger, fear, and hopelessness (H2), its link with reactionary backward looking values (H3), and its negative relationship with political realities (H4). We also expected *ressentiment* to be passive and display low engagement in politics (H5), low propensity for political action (H6), a passive orientation towards illegal and violent actions (H7, H8), a cynical and non-ideologically structured or consistent view of democratic politics (H9) and shallow social bonds (H10).

Methodology

Data was collected through the Greek component of the 7th round of the WVS (Haerpfer et al. 2020). The study was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1200 participants (36% response rate) between 8 September 2017 and 16 October 2017. The survey was delivered via telephone interviews, using Random Digit Dial, and the questionnaire involved approximately 320 items, the majority of which are standard across all national samples.

Two batteries exclusively used in the Greek component of the WVS-7 were six items measuring *ressentiment*, and six discrete emotions measuring reactions to the financial crisis.⁶ The *ressentiment* battery was based on an adapted index from León et al. (1988) dovetailing closely theoretical analyses of its key components: resentment, victimhood, powerlessness, transvaluation, injustice, and destiny (Demertzis 2020; Salmela and Capelos 2021). The statements were worded as follows: ‘People enjoy better standard of living with less effort’ (resentment); ‘I feel that many people take advantage of my kindness’ (victimhood); ‘I feel I do not have people’s respect’ (powerlessness); ‘Many seem important but they should not get such attention (transvaluation); ‘Everything goes wrong in my life, why me?’ (injustice); ‘My hopes and dreams will never come true’ (destiny). The selection of these six items was parsimonious, as they map closely the theoretical dimensions of *ressentiment* while complying with the space constraints of the survey instrument.⁷ The items ranged from 1 to 10 (do not agree at all – fully agree). As the data collection took place in 2017, following eight years of economic downturn and hardship from the 2009 financial crisis, the ‘emotions towards the crisis’ battery included anger, anxiety, shame, sorrow fear and hope. The items ranged from 1 to 10 (not at all – completely).

The questionnaire also included as standard the following measures of interest for our analysis: a proxy of political efficacy as agency and control in one’s life; measures of the Schwartz core values tapping on individual’s desire for conservation, desire for new experiences and post-materialist values (Schwartz 2012); three items of political knowledge (we computed a 0–10 scale of correct responses with mean 5.48, sd 3.55); six items on orientations towards science (we computed a 0–10 scale of average scores with mean 6.23, sd 1.37); measures of the importance of politics, interest in politics,

and frequency of discussion of politics with friends; eight items measuring political activity and activism; five items on propensity for anomic behavior, two items on propensity for political violence and extremism; six items on orientations towards democracy; nine items on the appreciation of essential characteristics of democracy; and four items measuring satisfaction with democracy in Greece. As indicators of social proximity / cohesion we identified five items on group attachments, an item on national pride, seven items on social trust, and 11 items on volunteerism. The questionnaire also contained a measure of ideological leaning (left-right), feeling security (not at all-very) and attitudes towards societal change (radical change, gradual change, conservation), as well as standard demographics as income, social class, education, gender and age. Detailed wording of the above variables is available in Appendix 1. For all analyses, variables and constructed scales are recoded 0–10 (with missing / don't know responses as 5).

The construction of the resentment scale

We constructed a 6-item scale of *resentment* with alpha reliability of .75 (N 1200). Deleting any of the items did not improve the scale. This is an improvement from the original scale by León et al. with alpha reliability of .65 (1988, 346, 349). Inter-item correlations are available in Table 1. While some items are more closely linked than others correlations do not rise above .59 (with the closest relationships between powerlessness and victimhood).

The individual item mean scores from highest to lowest (0–10 scale) were: Transvaluation mean 7.68 (sd 2.24); Resentment mean 7.60 (sd 2.23); Victimhood mean 4.98 (sd 2.83); Injustice mean 4.72 (sd 3.05); Destiny mean 3.89 (sd 2.80); Powerlessness mean 3.30 (sd 2.95). The *resentment* scale is the average of the 6 items with mean 5.36, median 5.33, and mode 5.17 (N 1200).

Next, we ran *resentment* scale performance tests. To identify its key components, we regressed each item on the scale score in OLS regressions. In Table 2, while all items present similar coefficient sizes (from .48 to .39) the items with the highest predicted variance are the ones indicating victimhood (adj R² .55) and powerlessness (adj R² .56). Looking at the regression coefficients, a unit change in victimhood results in a .47 units increase in *resentment*, and a unit change in powerlessness results in a .46 units increase in *resentment*.

Next, we examined the construct validity of the *resentment* scale by comparing it to its empirical proxies. Capelos and Demertzis (2018) operationalize *resentment* vs. resentment based on a composite index of anger, fear, and political inefficacy as a proxy for powerlessness. They applied these measures to show that resentful (angry

Table 1. *Resentment* scale inter-item correlations.

	Resentment	Transvaluation	Victimhood	Powerlessness	Injustice	Destiny
Resentment	1.000	.532**	.341**	.258**	.239**	.199**
Transvaluation	.532*	1.000	.297**	.267**	.205**	.260**
Victimhood	.341**	.297**	1.000	.590**	.422**	.244**
Powerlessness	.258**	.267**	.590**	1.000	.444**	.338**
Injustice	.239**	.205**	.422**	.444**	1.000	.359**
Destiny	.199**	.260**	.244**	.338**	.359**	1.000

Note: values are correlation coefficients. ***p* < .01 (2 tailed).

Table 2. *Ressentiment* scale, with single items as coefficients.

	Item effects Regression coefficients	Adj. R ²
Resentment	.48 *** (.02)	.35
Transvaluation	.48 *** (.02)	.35
Victimhood	.47 *** (.01)	.55
Powerlessness	.46 *** (.01)	.56
Injustice	.41 *** (.01)	.48
Destiny	.39 *** (.02)	.38
N		

Note: Values are regression coefficients, DV is the *ressentiment* scale, IV each item. Simple OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < .05$.

and efficacious) citizens engaged in overt illegal and violent political action while their ‘*in ressentiment*’ counterparts (angry and inefficacious or afraid and inefficacious) displayed dormant support for illegal and violent actions.

We use the measures available in the WVS to replicate the *ressentiment* vs resentment measures of Capelos and Demertzis (2018). We label scores ‘7 or above’ as ‘high’ and ‘3 or below’ as low, for anger, fear, and agency (proxy for efficacy). Combining these variables, there are 130 participants that scored high on anger and high on efficacy, labeled ‘Angry Resentful’ (AR); 163 participants that scored high on anger and low on efficacy, labeled ‘Angry *in Ressentiment*’ (AiR); 110 participants that scored high on fear and low on efficacy, labeled ‘Fearful *in Ressentiment*’ (FiR). We also identified 204 participants that scored above 7 on the new 6-item *Ressentiment* scale (RSc). What we are interested in examining here is the relationship between the different measures tapping the same concepts. We are, in other words, looking for significant and positive correlations between the different *ressentiment* measures, and insignificant correlations between *ressentiment* and resentment.

As we see in Table 3, the correlation between those who scored at the top of the *Ressentiment* scale (RSc, 204 participants) with ‘Angry *in Ressentiment*’ (AiR, 163 participants) is significant ($p < .05$) and positive (.235). It is also significant and positive (.256) for ‘Fearful *in Ressentiment*’ (FiR, 110 participants). The correlation between AiR and FiR is also significant and positive at .616 showing the close connection of the two operationalizations of *ressentiment*. Furthermore, there is no significant correlation

Table 3. *Ressentiment* and empirical proxies: construct validity test.

	Angry Resentful AR (N = 130)	Angry <i>in</i> <i>Ressentiment</i> AiR (N = 163)	Fearful <i>in</i> <i>Ressentiment</i> FiR (N = 110)	<i>Ressentiment</i> Scale (High) RSc (N = 204)
AR	1	-.138	-.111	-
AiR		1	.616	.235
FiR			1	.256
Mean Scores <i>Ressentiment</i>	Mean 5.47 (sd 1.77)	Mean 6.4 (sd 2.05)	Mean 6.67 (sd 2.1)	1

Notes: values are correlations coefficients (r), significant at $p < .05$. Last row values are means, standard deviations in parenthesis.

between ‘Angry Resentful’ (AR, 130 participants) and RSc. In fact, AR is negatively correlated with AiR (−.138) and FiR (−.111). We also examined the mean scores of these groups on the *Ressentiment* scale. While the AR scored 5.47 (sd 1.77), the AiR scored 6.4 (sd 2.05) and the FiR scored 6.67 (sd 2.1).

Testing hypotheses on the psychological and political correlates of *ressentiment*

Now we turn to the examination of our hypotheses, focusing on the psychological and political correlates of *ressentiment*. Our first hypothesis (**H1**) expects the negative relationship of *ressentiment* with self-perceptions of agency and security, in line with *ressentiment*’s core of impotence and self-victimization. Our second hypothesis (**H2**) involves the relationship between *ressentiment* and discrete measures of emotionality regarding the financial crisis, as an indicator of its short-term responses to political stimuli. Our third hypothesis (**H3**) expects a positive relationship between *ressentiment* and core values that point to reactionary long-term political orientations. Our fourth hypothesis (**H4**) involves the expected negative relationship between *ressentiment*, and political knowledge and orientations towards science as proxies of measures of reality testing. We discuss our analyses comparing with findings from extant research in the field.

As we have noted earlier, frustration, insecurity and overall disaffection characterizes *ressentiment*. We find a significant ($p < .05$) negative correlation with having control and choice in one’s life (−.201), feeling secure (−.096) or being hopeful (−.091) confirming **H1** on the perceived precariousness in which individuals *in ressentiment* find themselves. Looking at its affective content, *ressentiment* displays bitterness and sourness. It is significantly ($p < .05$) and positively correlated with sorrow (.307) anxiety (.271), anger (.256), fear (.243), and shame (.174). These relationships highlight, as per **H2**, that the affective nature of *ressentiment* is complex and extends beyond discrete emotions of anger and fear.

Our analysis also shows that the long-lasting values linked to *ressentiment* are also these that the individuals with reactionary orientations find appealing. The *ressentiment* scale correlates significantly ($p < .05$) and positively with valuing obedience (.122), good manners (.102), hard work (.087), perseverance (.083), and faith (.069) and it is negatively correlated with determination (−.096), selflessness (−.094) and imagination (−.082). What becomes apparent is that *ressentiment*, as per **H3**, is not conducive to new experiences, self-direction and autonomy, marking individuals with low agentic capacity. Critical function and reality-testing are likely to be reflected in knowledge and orientations towards science. Confirming **H4**, the *ressentiment* scale has a significant ($p < .05$) negative correlation with the orientations towards science scale (−.091) and a stronger negative relationship with political knowledge (−.186). Individuals on the top 33% of *ressentiment* scored consistently and statistically significantly lower ($p < .05$) on the overall knowledge scale compared to individuals on the bottom 33% of *ressentiment* (5.00 vs 6.3).⁸

Turning to the ideological correlates of *ressentiment*, we find a weak significant ($p < .05$) relationship with left-right ideological positioning (.073), suggesting a right-leaning orientation of individuals *in ressentiment*. Because *ressentiment* is theorized as the affective predictor of reactionary orientations (Capelos and Demertzis 2018) this finding is not surprising. To interrogate it further, we examined the relationship between *ressentiment* and radical and conservative approaches to governance. We find a negative significant ($p < .05$) relationship with the desire for forward (radical) political change (−.079) and no significant relationship with a conservative or gradual change. This finding supports the passive stance of *ressentiment*, and aligns with studies that find

reactionary change pointing to the opposite direction of its radical counterpart (Capelos, Katsanidou, and Demertzis 2017).

Bringing together the affective, motivational and cognitive psychological correlates of *ressentiment*, we conducted a regression analysis, using the *ressentiment* scale as dependent variable and predictors the above discussed measures. Presented in Table 4 are the effects of these variables when holding the other variables in the model at their mean. Efficacy/agency has a significant negative effect ($-.055$) pointing to the inefficacious nature of *ressentiment*. Sorrow (.099) and anger (.069) are its key emotional expressions, pointing to the powerlessness that compromises potential for action. Conservation (opposition to gradual or radical change) had a significant positive effect (.138). Significant values were obedience (.030) and good manners (.023), blended with low determination ($-.027$). We also noted the expected and significant negative effects of political knowledge ($-.043$).

Turning to the demographic indicators, we expected that traditional socio-economic explanations would contribute to the understanding of *ressentiment*. We see social class self-placement (from lower to upper) has a negative effect ($-.181$) absorbing the effects of income and rendering it insignificant. Age has a negative effect ($-.013$) pointing to younger cohorts scoring higher in *ressentiment*. Education does not have an independent significant effect after accounting for the effects of knowledge and agency. Left-

Table 4. Psychological and socio-political predictors of *ressentiment*.

	<i>Ressentiment</i>	
<i>Constant</i>	5.540***	(.448)
<i>Efficacy/Agency</i>	$-.055^{**}$	(.022)
<i>Sorrow</i>	.099***	(.024)
<i>Anger</i>	.069**	(.023)
<i>Fear</i>	.001	(.025)
<i>Anxiety</i>	.031	(.027)
<i>Shame</i>	$-.007$	(.018)
<i>Hope</i>	$-.020$	(.017)
<i>Conservation</i>	.138*	(.087)
<i>Determination</i>	$-.027^{*}$	(.011)
<i>Obedience</i>	.030+	(.013)
<i>Good Manners</i>	.023**	(.013)
<i>Hard work</i>	.034	(.012)
<i>Tolerance</i>	.016	(.011)
<i>Responsibility</i>	$-.003$	(.011)
<i>Independence</i>	.007	(.012)
<i>Imagination</i>	.000	(.014)
<i>Frugality</i>	$-.014$	(.013)
<i>Faith</i>	.011	(.012)
<i>Political Knowledge</i>	$-.043^{**}$	(.015)
<i>Ideology (left-right)</i>	.022	(.023)
<i>Social Class</i>	$-.181^{***}$	(.032)
<i>Income</i>	.018	(.029)
<i>Education</i>	.020	(.027)
<i>Age</i>	$-.013^{***}$	(.003)
<i>Gender (female)</i>	.011	(.010)
<i>N</i>	1147	
<i>Adj R squared</i>	.196	

Note: values are OLS regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. All variables range 0–10. Significance marked with asterisks: $+p < .1$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

right ideological leaning is not significant when accounting for the effect of other factors in the model, particularly conservation and core values. This suggests that *ressentiment* is best understood as a psychological experience with political implications, rather than a political experience motivated by ideological considerations.

Ressentiment and democratic politics

Our next set of hypotheses (**H5-H10**) involve the relationship between *ressentiment* and political preferences and orientations. We expected a negative relationship with measures of interest in politics, appreciation of the significance of politics, and political discussions with friends (**H5**) pointing to its passive nature. Along the same lines, we examined *ressentiment* along measures of active political engagement and participation to test our expectation of their negative relationships (**H6**). We also expected the relationship between *ressentiment* and support for illegal and violent political action to point to passivity and inaction (**H7**), as well as dormant support for violence (**H8**). Our expectation regarding the essential components of democracy was that *ressentiment* would be associated with cynical and reactionary political stances (**H9**). Finally, our hypothesis involving social relations expected weak group belonging and national attachments (**H10**).

The negative relationship between *ressentiment* and political knowledge earlier is corroborated by the significant ($p < .05$) negative correlation between *ressentiment* and interest in politics ($-.083$) and discussing politics with friends ($-.078$). We did not find a significant relationship between *ressentiment* and the importance of political engagement. Based on this evidence we can say that as *ressentiment* increases, citizens appear to be less politically engaged, confirming **H5**.

Next, we checked the relationship between *ressentiment* and engaged activism, demonstrated through petitions, boycotting, participating in demonstrations or strikes and contacting officials. Unsurprisingly, we found significant ($p < .05$) negative correlations between *ressentiment* and signing petitions ($-.091$), boycotting ($-.121$), donating money to a group ($-.113$), contacting public officials ($-.058$), encouraging others to take action ($-.087$), and encouraging others to vote ($-.066$). We found no relationship with participating in demonstrations or striking. There was also no significant relationship regarding activity in Labour Unions, party membership or membership in environmental groups. Taken together the above results confirm **H6**.

In **Table 5**, we present the results of mean comparisons on *ressentiment* scores for three levels of engagement across different political activities. What we note consistently

Table 5. *Ressentiment* average scores for political action potential.

	Have done it	Might do it	Would never do it
Petition	5.27 (1.70) ^a	5.16 (1.85) ^a	5.61 (1.77) ^b
Boycott	4.87 (1.73) ^a	5.26 (1.80) ^b	5.52 (1.79) ^c
Demonstrations	5.48 (1.74) ^a	5.21 (1.81) ^b	5.49 (1.84) ^a
Strikes	5.48 (1.76) ^a	5.08 (1.86) ^b	5.51 (1.68) ^b
Donate to group	5.18 (1.80) ^a	5.17 (1.77) ^a	5.66 (1.80) ^b
Contact official	5.36 (1.83) ^{ab}	5.13 (1.92) ^a	5.55 (1.64) ^b
Encourage action	5.43 (1.92) ^a	4.93 (1.85) ^b	5.53 (1.73) ^a
Encourage vote	5.41 (1.80) ^a	4.98 (1.83) ^b	5.51 (1.77) ^a

Note: Values are means, standard deviation in parenthesis. *Ressentiment* scale is 0–10. Different superscripts indicate statistically significant differences in means, at $p < .05$.

is that mean *ressentiment* scores among participants who reported ‘would never do it’ are significantly higher compared to participants who reported ‘might do it’ or ‘have done it’, as indicated by the different superscripts between the third vs. the first two columns of Table 5.

Our next hypotheses involved the relationship between *ressentiment* and justifications for anomic and illegal (H7) or violent behaviors (H8). Our correlations of *ressentiment* with measures of illegal behaviors point mostly to non-significant relationships verifying our expectation for its passivity. Accepting bribes was significantly ($p < .05$) negatively correlated with *ressentiment* ($-.082$) and there were no significant relationships with claiming benefits one is not entitled to, avoiding to pay a fare on transport, stealing, or cheating on taxes. Turning to propensity for violence (H8), we did not find a significant relationship with justifying the use of terrorism but we did find significant ($p < .05$) correlations of *ressentiment* with support for violence against individuals. This provides a sneak preview into its hostility and vengefulness: as *ressentiment* rises, finding political violence justifiable also rises (.060), and so does the appropriateness of displaying violence towards other people (.081).

The next hypothesis (H9) involves the relationship between *ressentiment* and liberal, authoritarian and economic notions of democracy. Our expectation was that *ressentiment* would align with authoritarian and reactionary visions of democracy. Our analyses show a complicated picture of what we interpret as inconsistent appreciations of democratic politics and practices. On one hand, we find significant ($p < .05$) positive correlations between *ressentiment* and a mix of economic and liberal notions: the state making peoples’ incomes equal (.212), the government taxing the rich to subsidize the poor (.160), choosing leaders in free elections (.064), ensuring civil right protections from state oppression (.081). These appear alongside significant correlations with authoritarian notions of governance, such as the negative correlations with the importance of honest elections ($-.078$), and positive correlations with how good it is to have the option of army rule (.112), the justification of army taking over when government is incompetent (.105), and people obeying the rules (.081). We did not find a significant relationship between *ressentiment* and socially-minded policies like people receiving state aid for unemployment, or women having the same rights as men. Taken together, we think that political and economic notions that one would expect to relate negatively (for example army rule vs electing leaders, or taxing the rich and promoting social policies) appear to be integrated loosely in the mental schema of *ressentiment*.

An alternative explanation is that instead of originating in the mental schema of a mind *in ressentiment*, these anomalies can be attributed to the upheavals of the political scene in Greece brought about from the disillusionment with the Radical Left, and the harsh measures taken by the Center-Right and Socialist-Left amidst the sovereign debt crisis. While the wider context is indeed significant, we think any context-specific discrepancies would be evident among those scoring high and low in *ressentiment*. We tested this alternative hypothesis further by comparing the significant ($p < .05$) correlations between economic notions of democracy (tax the rich, equal incomes) and authoritarian notions (army, obedience, state oppression) among individuals scoring in the top third and bottom third of the *ressentiment* scale. In high *ressentiment*, taxing the rich is significantly positively correlated with state ensuring equal incomes (.258) while this relationship is negative in low *ressentiment* ($-.101$). Taxing the rich is also correlated with choosing leaders in free elections (.204) and protecting civil rights from oppression (.155) (both not significant in low *ressentiment*). Ensuring equal incomes in addition to taxing the rich is positively correlated with the army taking over (.226) but negative in

low *ressentiment* (−.113). Ensuring equal incomes is also more weakly correlated with people obeying the rules (.119) in high *ressentiment*, compared to low *ressentiment* (.215). The preference for choosing leaders in free elections was negatively correlated with the army taking over in low *ressentiment* (−.108), but it was not significant in high *ressentiment*. Choosing leaders in free elections was positively correlated with protecting civil liberties (.183) in high *ressentiment*, but more in low *ressentiment* (.286), an indication of liberal notions of democracy. In high *ressentiment*, the army taking over (in addition to equal incomes) was correlated positively with people obeying the rules (.254) (a non-significant relationship in low *ressentiment*), taxing the rich (.101) (negative in low *ressentiment* −.172), and also religious authorities interpreting the laws (.439) (weaker in low *ressentiment* .166). The above indicate that an individual *in ressentiment* does not mind inconsistencies, a phenomenon identified as mental compartmentalization in the analysis of the psychic defenses of *ressentiment* (Salmela and Capelos 2021; Demertzis 2020).

To stress the point further, we examined the relationship between *ressentiment* and preferences relating to authoritarian versus democratic types of governance with an analysis of mean comparisons. In Table 6, we compared the mean scores of *ressentiment* across the four responses on importance and preference for types of governance (very important, rather important, not very important, not at all important). We see that *ressentiment* is significantly higher among those who undervalue the importance of honest elections and the democratic system (last column), or prefer strong leaders and support army rule (first column).

Another interesting finding was that while *ressentiment* correlated significantly ($p < .05$) and positively with the importance of living in a democratic country (.097), a stance likely to be a socially desirable and held by most respondents, it correlated negatively with satisfaction with the degree of democracy in the country (−.097), and national pride (−.088). These low levels of satisfaction with democracy urged us to examine indications of social cohesion in relation to *ressentiment*.

Here we expected to find shallow social bonds (H10) in the form of negative relationships with variables that indicate connecting and caring about others in society, driven by the theorized strong links between *ressentiment* and collective narcissism (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Our analysis of values earlier showed that *ressentiment* did not show a relationship with core values of tolerance and respect for others. Examining measures of group identification, we see that *ressentiment* is significantly (p

Table 6. *Ressentiment* scores and preferences for types of governance.

	Very important	Rather important	Not very important	Not at all important
Honest Elections	5.30 (1.76) ^a	5.47 (1.89) ^a	5.30 (1.76) ^a	7.24 (2.06) ^b
	Very Good	Fairly Good	Fairly Bad	Very Bad
Strong Leader	6.15 (1.69) ^a	5.62 (1.79) ^{ac}	5.08 (1.80) ^b	5.37 (1.81) ^c
Experts make decisions	5.87 (1.97) ^{ac}	5.01 (1.81) ^b	5.28 (1.77) ^{bc}	5.47 (1.78) ^c
Army Rule	6.50 (2.30) ^a	6.18 (1.89) ^a	5.42 (1.76) ^b	5.28 (1.80) ^b
Democratic system	5.33 (1.75) ^a	5.38 (1.99) ^a	6.44 (2.22) ^{bc}	5.85 (1.66) ^{ac}
Religious Law	5.72 (1.14) ^a	5.58 (1.79) ^a	5.31 (1.71) ^a	5.32 (1.88) ^a

Note: values are means, standard deviation in parenthesis. *Ressentiment* scale is 0–10. Different superscripts indicate statistically significant differences in means, at $p < .05$.

<.05) negatively related to feeling close to Europe (−.058, p .045) and the world (−.074, p .011), and not significantly related to feeling close to one's own town, district or country. We also examined the correlations between *ressentiment* and interpersonal trust. *Ressentiment* was significantly (p <.05) negatively correlated with trusting others (−.099) and trusting personal acquaintances (−.145). We also examined correlations between *ressentiment* and volunteering. We found significant (p <.05) negative correlations with church groups (−.087), political groups (−.064), environmental groups (−.117), professional associations (−.106), humanitarian groups (−.073), and self-help groups (−.085). We think this consistently negative relationship with proxy measures of social cohesion and the negative relationship with national pride can reflect a sour outlook characteristic of *ressentiment*, which does not offer many opportunities for connecting and caring for others in society. First and foremost, this *ressentiment*-ful outlook discloses socially isolated individuals as depicted in Dostoyevsky's *Underground* (Dostoyevsky [1861] 2010).

Conclusion

A growing body of research examines the waves of populism and nativism around the globe including the USA, Brazil and India (Mudde 2019), and puts forward empirical models to understand why the support for populist parties in Europe in the last 20 years has grown threefold (Lewis et al. 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Here we proposed *ressentiment* as an affective forerunner of grievance politics and outlined the psychology behind this complex affective phenomenon marked by toxic grievance, impotence, self-victimization, blunted vindictiveness and vengeance. We also offered a novel empirical measurement of *ressentiment* based on a validated and tested 6-item scale, using data from the 7th round of the Greek WVS component. In our analyses, we examined how *ressentiment* relates to the way individuals think about politics, what matters to their emotionality, and what they value most in politics. We have also identified preferences for styles of governance and evaluations of democracy that correlated with *ressentiment*, to start an evidence-based conversation about its broader implications for democratic capacities and engagement.

Our analysis documented the significant relationships between *ressentiment* and low efficacy, discrete emotions of shame, anger and hopelessness, an affinity for values of tradition and aversion of change, and a loose link with right-leaning ideological orientations. These findings align with our hypotheses and with extant studies using proxy measures of *ressentiment* (Capelos and Katsanidou 2018; Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Can we then 'profile' the individual of *ressentiment* based on these psychological and political correlates? Our answer is one of caution. We have approached *ressentiment* as a complex psychological experience that can involve any citizen. While certain conditions can facilitate how an individual falls 'in *ressentiment*' or whether it resists it (temporarily or for extended time), this process depends as much on individual psychic capacities as well as on socio-economic experiences, both individual and collective. Once in *ressentiment*, individuals can display the psychological and political responses we have outlined here. Using these indicators as 'markers', to profile '*ressentiment*-ful' individuals would constitute an oversimplification of their experience and would not align with our aim for a fuller, deeper psychological account of this complex phenomenon.

What are the important take-home points of our analysis? First, we noted that it is important to distinguish *ressentiment* from anger. While anger is a discrete emotion with a clear object (one can be angry towards a party, a leader, a policy), *ressentiment*

is a complex all-encompassing experience that affects how citizens relate to politics. *Ressentiment* does not have firm individual targets; it can be directed against outgroups or social categories that fit the agenda of populist rhetoric. Expanding on our findings that *ressentiment* does not require consistent political thinking nor is it strongly linked to specific ideologies, these targets do not need to be selected on the basis of ideological considerations. In *ressentiment*, frustration in the form of hatred can be vented towards anything and anyone seen as morally inferior. By questioning anger as the main explanation of populist and nativist electoral behavior, we put forth a more nuanced understanding of the affective undercurrent of grievance politics drawn from Nietzsche's and Scheler's theoretical legacy. *Ressentiment*, far more complex than anger, offers a broader conceptual framework for the causal explanation and the interpretative understanding of the demand and the supply side of the populist phenomena.

Our analysis also elaborated on the limited role of ideological leaning as predictor of *ressentiment*. This important finding demonstrated that *ressentiment* is a psychological experience with political implications rather than a political experience prompted by ideological considerations, and invites important examinations of its implications in the context of populist politics. In line with extant studies in the field we also saw evidence of scorn and hatred in its condoning of violence, passivity and disengagement from political action, a confused, non-ideological and often inconsistent approach to elements of democratic governance, and a shallow engagement with others through lack of social cohesion bonds (Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Salmela and Von Scheve 2018).

How then does *ressentiment* help us understand current political phenomena like the contempt against the 'mainstream media', elites, experts, Brexit in the UK, the storming of Capitol Hill in the USA, or the recent antivax protests in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to name just a few? Are the citizens taking part in animated demonstrations, or those participating in illegal and violent acts, experiencing *ressentiment* or are they angry? We again urge caution against dualisms that split affective experiences into 'either-or' categorizations. Citizens can display, and indeed experience, at the same time, anger, sorrow and a range of other emotions. When anger and sorrow blend with efficacy and a positive forward outlook, as Capelos and Demertzis (2018) show, they are unlikely to reflect *ressentiment*. When they bind with painful and under-acknowledged envy and shame, powerlessness, victimhood, low efficacy, perceived inferiority, and jealousy, they are likely to signify a *ressentiment*-ful stance. More important than attributing a label to an emotional experience, is to understand what it signifies for the individual that holds it. We think our analysis of the psychological correlates and political expressions of *ressentiment* brings us closer to this aim.

With this in mind, we also presented a novel empirical examination of how *ressentiment* relates with reality testing and recognizing the external world for what it is, through approaches towards scientific inquiry. Our findings highlight its usefulness for understanding the origins of anti-science and anti-climate change preferences, and recently vaccine hesitancy and misinformation. Its negative relationship with hope allowed us a glimpse of the loss of the ideal that marks the nostalgic mind in *ressentiment*. Its powerlessness came across in its preference for submission to authority, disengagement and lack of political interest. We recognize of course that *ressentiment* is not experienced in isolation, and other factors can be co-determinants of these relationships. This can explain the mild yet statistically significant (and therefore reliable) correlations between *ressentiment* and some of the political preferences and orientations we examined here. While it is clear that approaches to politics are most certainly affected by a number of psycho-social variables in complex interrelationships, the impact of *ressentiment* still appears

significant. This highlights the value of developing and using dedicated *ressentiment* instruments in empirical analyses, and suggests that the examined factors jointly, rather than in isolation, can serve as proxies for *ressentiment* in the absence of specialized instruments.

We have also noted that *ressentiment* should not be approached only as an individual-level reaction to political frustrations, inabilities and grievances. Turning to socio-political factors, we saw that *ressentiment* is a response to degraded social status and generational effects, whereas income and education did not have a direct role. Its positive correlation with lower class self-placement and younger age is likely to reflect blocked social mobility, experienced as individual destiny and expressed as political malaise. Along these lines, Mutz (2018) found that family income was not associated with support for Trump in the USA, and Citrin and Stocker (2018) noted the higher level of political discontent and anti-establishment sentiment among young people who appear not as invested in democracy as older generations, and display anti-government attitudes. When young people, politically and socially withdrawn, turn sour and bitter in *ressentiment*, the future of democratic citizenry is at stake. Unlike anger that mobilizes towards political change, *ressentiment* retreats, ruminating imagined losses. Its despairing is not one based on critical judgement, and therefore does not seek solutions that consider the well-being of others. The danger with the frustration of *ressentiment*, in contrast to the frustration of anger, is that *ressentiment* is socially toxic and inherently disintegrating.

Our conceptualization and operationalization of *ressentiment* also distinguish it from its twin emotional term of resentment, which we see as one of its outcome emotions. This way we divert from scholars who argue that both concepts refer to a unified emotional experience, with *ressentiment* standing for a ‘general’ and resentment for a ‘specific sense’ (Meltzer and Musolf 2002, 242–3, 251). We also separate our approach from scholars who suggest that resentment is a generic moral emotion, while *ressentiment* is a nineteenth century onwards specific version of resentment, prompted in competitive societies (Moruno 2013). We make a case for coming full circle, from the study of anger, to resentment, to the study of *ressentiment*. Resentment, as moral anger (Nussbaum 2016), is more relevant to the populists’ political morality (Müller 2016) than plain anger. *Ressentiment*, as a psychological experience, is significantly more complex than any one of its outcome emotions.

Taking the above into consideration, what have we learned about *ressentiment* in contemporary Greek society? The 2009 financial crisis and its lasting implications for the years to come, combined with the demagogic-populist political climate, the weak nexus of check and balances in the process of interest intermediation, and the widespread cynicism against political personnel and institutions generated fertile ground for experiences of *ressentiment* among citizens. Powerlessness and victimhood, an inactive approach to politics, distrust, low political knowledge, low appreciation of science, were a combination of factors associated with lower class status. The self-victimization and social isolation of *ressentiment* raise a warning bell for these segments of society that repeatedly fail to gain recognition and status. As frustrated inabilities turn bitter, core values and perceptions of the self are inverted; forward visions for change turn backwards, where rumination offers temporary relief, but not a lasting solution, to internal and external pressures. The vengeful gaze of *ressentiment* is susceptible to demagoguery and populist narratives that vilify and scapegoat vulnerable groups in society; as such it can find solace in the rise of reactionary politics. For social scientists interested in understanding and predicting the future and quality of democracy, this study offers a good starting point.

Indeed, with a few recent exceptions, *ressentiment* has been understudied in the field of empirical political psychology and the political sociology of emotion (Demertzis 2020). Here we tested and validated an empirical scale of *ressentiment* for scholars that seek to elaborate on the affective core of grievance politics. Although systematic empirical measurement is a step to the right direction, we also recognize the limitations of statistical models in capturing the essence and the vicissitudes of *ressentiment*. Correlations point to important associations between measures but cannot test causal arguments. Complex regression models rely on causal assumptions and do not allow for the reciprocal relationships between indicators of psychological processes, nor do they capture the fluidity of political emotionality. Methodologies that account for over-time change can overcome the shortcomings of static measures limited to snapshot analyses like the ones we conducted here. Identifying changes in the value underpinnings of *ressentiment* can shed light to its *transvaluation* process, when the desired becomes undesired, the good becomes bad, and the impotent self is elevated to higher status. Qualitative engagement with the experiences and frustrations of individuals and groups in society through interviews and focus groups will be particularly helpful in appreciating the nuances of how *ressentiment* affects individual and group-level engagement in politics, belonging, and sense of social cohesion. Discourse analysis of parties, movements and leaders can detect the narratives of *ressentiment* among those who feed and give shape to bitter grievances, frustrated desires and deceptions, without seeking pro-social solutions.

As Hoggett (2018) aptly notes, *ressentiment* is ‘fluid and free-floating’ (403). Being fully in agreement, and mindful of this caveat, we recognize that understanding the effects this ‘psychological dynamite’ (Scheler 1961, 50) has on democratic politics requires interdisciplinary and multi-method approaches based, among others, on longitudinal measures that can account for changes over-time. We invite colleagues to join our efforts to approximate *ressentiment* empirically, while remaining conscious of its conceptual complexity. Understanding *ressentiment*, albeit challenging, is of significant contemporary importance, because unlike a serving of sour grapes, democracy is worth our while.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. The fable of sour grapes might be wrongfully perceived as only involving the devaluation of a previously coveted object. This would indeed be an oversimplified account of *ressentiment*. In-depth elaborations of the sour grapes paradigm in theorizations of *ressentiment* are available in Aeschbach (2017), Demertzis (2020), and Salmela and Capelos (2021).
2. We specifically refer to individuals ‘in *ressentiment*’ to highlight *ressentiment* as a psychological frame of mind, a position, a psychological state, rather than a fixed property or trait-like predisposition of the individual.
3. Salmela and Capelos (2021) offer a detailed theoretical account of the shallow social bonds of *ressentiment*. For a relevant empirical investigation that involves measures of *ressentiment* and measures of social bonding see Capelos et al. (2021).
4. The Lie scale measures an individual’s tendency to fake good (Eysenck, Eysenck, and Barrett 1985). Other components of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) involve twelve items on *psychoticism*, twelve items on *extraversion* and twelve items on *neuroticism*.
5. The data collected in Greece comprised of three waves (January – November 2015) as part of the funded program ‘Thalis’ administered at the University of Macedonia.

6. For the selection of these items see Demertzis and Capelos (2018).
7. Although the ‘resentment’ and ‘injustice’ statements are kin, they differ because the first is premised on interpersonal social comparison and a sense of unfairness, while the second taps an overwhelming undeserved self-image. Likewise, even if both ‘powerlessness’ and ‘victimhood’ statements point to perceived vulnerability, they measure different properties because disrespectful or contemptuous behavior does not necessarily entail or lead to the exploitation of one’s vulnerable status.
8. The mean comparisons across the three knowledge items yielded consistently significant ($p < .05$) differences as well. On Knowledge-Security Council: HighRes .43 vs LowRes .56; on Knowledge IMF: HighRes .40 vs LowRes .57; on Knowledge Amnesty HighRes .67 vs LowRes .77.

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Supplemental data

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