Territory and abandonment: The impact of neighborhoods on system responsiveness beliefs

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Abstract

The study of political disaffection has become particularly relevant in recent years with the emergence of populist narratives and the polarization experienced by different consolidated and emerging democracies. In this context, the link between territory and the decline of citizen attitudes has not been sufficiently studied. Using data from the Chilean region of Valparaíso, we analyze the territories play on the development of external political efficacy, i.e., system responsiveness beliefs. Our results suggest that citizens who live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of low-educated individuals tend to feel that the political system is not responsive to them. Interestingly, the education at the individual level and the concentration of poverty is not significant. This leads us to support the notion of "places that don't matter," where feelings of abandonment and political inefficacy are generated.

Keywords: Geography of discontent; external political efficacy; territorial inequalities; political disaffection; political attitudes

1. INTRO

In response to the emergence of populist and nationalist narratives in various developed democracies, the recent literature has suggested that citizen discontent should not only be analyzed at the individual level but also from a territorial dimension. Under this paradigm, data suggesting the existence of "places that don't matter" and "people and places left behind" have been reported. Thus, the triumph of Trump, Brexit or the results electing European nationalist movements, to name a few, cannot be solely explained by the voter's education, socioeconomic level or employment status (M. Goodwin & Heath, 2016), but also by the emergence of places that lived through better times and that today feel abandoned. The latter is especially relevant because it incorporates a territorial element that could help us understand the potential feeling of abandonment. And, in turn, by understanding this potential feeling of abandonment, we could better analyze the populist narratives or polarized discourses that have appeared in consolidated and emerging democracies.

To date, various authors have demonstrated how economic decline or specific characteristics of certain places, such as employability or education, translate into a preference for a certain political project. Nonetheless, the disaffection provoked by belonging to a certain place has been, until now, insufficiently explored. The question that guides this paper, more specifically, is whether there a link between territory and feelings of abandonment prior to and underlying the vote?

In order to meet our objective, we utilize a concept not covered in the literature on the "geography of discontent": external political efficacy (EPE). This attitude has been widely studied in other areas of the social sciences and is usually associated with political affection, reflecting individual feelings that the political system responds to citizens' interests.

Using data from the 2019 and 2020 P!ensa Foundation Political Opinion Survey, conducted in the Chilean region of Valparaíso (totaling 3,300 in-person interviews), we explore the phenomenon of the "geography of discontent" from an attitudinal and intraregional dimension. We test whether living in neglected neighborhood – proxied though those with a high concentration of low-educated families – is related to a lower propensity to feel that authorities and the political system are responsive to the needs of citizens.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section presents the current literature on the "geography of discontent." Then, the best way to measure the feeling of abandonment is defined and recent findings related to the relationship between territory and abandonment are explored. The second section describes the data and explains the methodology used, which incorporates traditional elements and some other spatial considerations. The third section presents the results and the fourth, and final section, discusses our conclusions, the limitations of this paper and the opportunities for further research derived from the findings.

The literature on the "geography of discontent" is relevant today and has generated global interest because of its impact on current political systems. Our study contributes to this existing literature in several ways. First, it provides results on a country in the southern hemisphere, specifically Chile, a region that has been absent from the global discussion thus

far. Second, our study seeks to explain the impact of territory not only on the vote but also on the attitudinal aspect of discontent, which is a more stable and difficult element to encompass.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Measuring the feeling of abandonment

The "feeling of abandonment" has become a relevant concept in the recent literature on territory and discontent. When we talk about "places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, 2020) and "people and places left behind" (M. J. Goodwin & Heath, 2016), we usually focus precisely on this attitudinal dimension. However, this is not just a matter of citizen dissatisfaction but rather a deep personal feeling also understood as a "feeling of political disempowerment" (Olivas Osuna et al., 2021).

For decades, the political science, sociology and communication literature has focused on this same feeling of disempowerment. In the 1970's, Di Palma examined disaffection in a way that tried to accurately capture the feeling of disempowerment. For Di Palma (1970), the feelings of disempowerment, cynicism and lack of confidence would generate apathy in the citizenry and they would distance themselves from the political process and democratic institutions without necessarily questioning the democratic system in rational terms (Di Palma, 1970; Torcal & Montero, 2006); However, before that, a political attitude already existed that sought to precisely understand the feelings described by Di Palma: political efficacy.

Campbell et al. (1954) originally proposed political efficacy as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e. that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties"(Campbell et al., 1954, p. 187). Regarding the conditions that determine political action, the authors suggested that the perception that the political system was permeable, and that engagement – beyond voting – could provoke change, played a central role.

Although political efficacy was initially understood as a one-dimensional concept, subsequent research proposed a distinction between two different aspects: one related to the feeling of "political competence" and another related to the feeling of "trust in system responsiveness" (Coverse, 1972). These two dimensions would later be known as internal political efficacy and external political efficacy, respectively (Balch, 1974). In the following decades, both internal efficacy and external efficacy became central to the study of political behavior and democratic values (Abramson, 1987; Acock et al., 1985; Craig et al., 1990; Finkel, 1985). Today, for example, political efficacies have helped us understand the true democratizing role – empowerment effect – of new digital platforms (Fierro et al., 2021; Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2015; Sasaki, 2016, 2017).

For this paper, political efficacies are import for analyzing the feeling of abandonment, especially when we talk about external political efficacy. As mentioned beforehand, external political efficacy can be defined as the feeling of system responsiveness (Abramson, 1987;

Finkel, 1985) or, in other words, as the personal belief that authorities and institutions listen to and accept citizens' demands (Balch, 1974; Craig et al., 1990). Under this logic, the feeling of abandonment or of feeling "left behind" could be understood, more precisely, as the absence of external efficacy, feeling that the system is impermeable and that it does not listen, which is another way of understanding that "feeling of political disempowerment." Furthermore, external efficacy would be something related to but different from disaffection or disinterest and represents an attitudinal element of disempowerment that has been associated with "institutional disaffection" in Latin America (Maldonado Hernández, 2013; Torcal & Montero, 2006).

2.2. Territory and abandonment

In recent years, there have been important efforts to understand the territorial roots of discontent in order to explain the support for populist and nationalist narratives in Europe and the United States. This interest is based on a classic idea that the political vision of individuals is interrelated with local contexts and networks. There are historical, geographical, institutional, economic and political aspects that determine, among other things, the narratives, identities and even the "structures of feelings" of residents (McQuarrie, 2017). In other words, the "environment plays a crucial role in affecting the social flow of political information" (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987, p. 1197). From this perspective, the interaction between the individual characteristics of citizens and local economic characteristics reveal certain patterns reflected in what is known as the "geography of discontent" (Los et al., 2017). As Dijkstra et al. (2018) suggest, studies on populism usually focus on the individual characteristics of "anti-system" voters (i.e., age, working class, gender or income) despite evidence showing that the decline of certain locations impacts support for these proposals (Dijkstra et al., 2018).

The aforementioned ideas have been contrasted in different realities. In Austria, for example, and related to the case of Vienna and its support for right-wing populism, Essletzbichler and Forcher (2022) suggest that the economic conditions of neighborhoods have even more impact on voting than the economic conditions of voters, identifying other aspects associated with territory that are relevant in explaining support for right-wing populism, such as rapid population growth. Nonetheless, the greatest efforts to understand the "geography of discontent" have arisen from explaining Trumpism in the United States and the triumph of Brexit in the UK. Regarding the latter phenomenon, territory has been an essential element in explaining the propensity to vote for the Leave option (Alabrese et al., 2019; Los et al., 2017). Harris and Charlton (2016), for example, show that areas with a larger older adult population, a higher proportion of unskilled workers or with residents born outside the UK but within the EU, were more likely to support the UK's exit from the European Union (Harris & Charlton, 2016). Similarly, Becker et al. (2017) suggest that places with low levels of education and income and low-wage jobs were more likely to support Brexit (Becker et al., 2017). Thus, Harris and Charlton, who argue that "ultimately, the story is perhaps less about the EU itself but one of industrial decline and growing social and economic inequality" should be understood within this context (Harris & Charlton, 2016, p. 12). And finally, several authors have tried to explain the territorial root of Brexit and others have tried to explain the "geography of Trump's victory." Some authors have suggested, for

example, that the problem that emerged in 2016 is the disconnection between national parties and a regional experience of decline (McQuarrie, 2017).

Various other studies suggest that the phenomena of discontent are not only explained by economic aspects that influence the decline of certain places, and consequently, foster discontent and nurture populist and nationalist narratives. As Gordon (2018) points out, the issue appears to be a more complex phenomenon in which economic-geographical aspects interact with cultural influences linked to cosmopolitanism and localism (Gordon, 2018). This idea of "peripheralization" has been specifically considered in the case of Brexit, where it is argued that certain discourses in favor of the Leave option were diffused in those particular places where local identities were perceived to be at risk, expanding political distrust (Olivas Osuna et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the distinction is not necessarily about urban/rural sectors or poor/rich places but rather about urban environments that, for various reasons, feel left behind by the system. This is where an attitudinal element appears – feeling left behind – that should be further explored.

In spite of the evidence and issues raised, economic aspects are generally used as an approximation when discussing "places left behind" with the use of variables such as "unemployment" or "income" to identify those sectors that have not progressed. And from this perspective, electoral preference is explained. However, Becker et al.
 (2017) suggest that the Brexit referendum represented an opportunity for those "left behind" to "express their anger." That, after all, it seemed to promise "taking back control" or "…[to] take back control of their own lives and express anger over a ruling class that has not addressed reduction congestion of public services…" (Becker et al., 2017, p. 615). Along these lines, feelings such as abandonment, anger, disempowerment or frustration, should be explained before the results of the vote.

Finally, in recent years, the impact of territory has been analyzed as a "proxy" of discontent such as, for example, in the preference for populist projects or Eurosceptic proposals. However, as some authors have suggested, this is not enough to capture the multidimensionality of the phenomena of discontent (Díaz-Lanchas et al., 2021), which are often explained by the assumption that economic self-interest is the main driver of electoral behavior, ignoring the possibility that there is also a wide range of attitudes, feelings and perceptions that also explain preferences (Garretsen et al., 2018). Nonetheless, and unfortunately, preceding and more complex elements than the direction of the vote have rarely been incorporated into the discussion. For the UK, Garretsen et al. (2018), for example, argue that there are certain personality traits typical of particular regions that explain the Brexit victory, highlighting the relevance of "psychological openness"(Garretsen et al., 2018). This particular interest has not been expanded to the study of other political attitudes, such as external efficacy, which is closer to the feeling of abandonment that we aim to capture. Despite the lack of evidence, several of the aforementioned studies start from the assumption that decline leads to the feeling of abandonment – understood by us as a lack of system responsiveness beliefs (i.e., the lack of external efficacy) – and that, this feeling of abandonment leads to populist voting. In this paper, we seek to test this first premise based on the following hypothesis:

H1: Those who live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of low education – places that don't matter – are less likely to feel that the political system is responsive to them (external efficacy).

2.3. Case Study

Our case study focuses on Chile, specifically the urban areas of the Chilean region of Valparaíso, the second most populated region in the country. This paper is particularly interesting for three main reasons. First, our case study expands the existing literature on the "geography of discontent" to include the southern hemisphere, while incorporating a novel attitudinal approach. Second, our study expands the available evidence on territorial differences at the neighborhood level. Current studies mostly focus on the differences between European nations or regions. Only exceptionally has the phenomenon of the "geography of discontent" been studied in an intra-urban dimension, i.e., explaining the differences within the same regions or the same cities (Essletzbichler & Forcher, 2022). Lastly, Chile's own political experience in recent years and its exacerbated centralism, which manifests itself in national and subnational terms (OECD, 2009), offer a unique case for analysis. Historically, Chile has been recognized for having solid institutions and a robust rule of law (Mainwaring & Scully, 2008); however, it also shares the challenges of an emerging democracy. The country has experienced a process of discontent and a crisis of representativeness over the last decade (Gamboa & Segovia, 2016; Luna, 2016; Segovia & Gamboa, 2012) after massive protests and violent mobilizations resulted in a constitutional process still in progress. Chile is a country with a unique social and political context, making it an especially appealing case for analyzing the territorial elements of discontent.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data

The data used in this paper derive from two versions (2019 and 2020) of the P!ensa Foundation Political Opinion Survey, which was carried out by the global company IPSOS. Each version of the survey includes 1,650 in-person interviews conducted in individuals at least 18 years old and living in the urban areas of the ten most populous municipalities of the Chilean region of Valparaíso. The ten municipalities included in the study account for approximately 72% of the region's population (Censo, 2017). The fieldwork for the 2019 version of the survey was conducted from April 15 to May 22, 2019; five months before massive protests began which were unprecedented in Chile's recent history. The fieldwork for the 2020 version of the survey was conducted from February 17 to April 22, 2020. For the 2020 survey, 1413 in-person interviews were completed and 237 interviews were conducted by telephone due to the COVID-19 sanitary measures implemented by the Chilean government. The timing of these surveys allowed us to gather data on citizens' perceptions before and after Chile's social unrest. The surveys were conducted in the region of Valparaíso, one of the focal points for the massive protests. Finally, the survey data is geo-referenced, allowing for territorially disaggregation and merging it with other databases such as Chile's national census. Our paper takes advantage of this particular characteristic to

analyze the perceptions of intra-city external efficacy, allowing us to compare, in more depth, between groups in the same territory.

3.2. Variables

External efficacy:

To measure external efficacy, we followed Bollen et al.'s (2008) recommendations and adapted the phrasing used by Hansen and Tue Pedersen (2014). Along these lines, the following questions were used:

(efex1) Politicians don't really care what voters think
(efex2) You can usually trust that political leaders will do what is best for the country
(efex3) Politicians waste a lot of taxpayer money
(efex4) Citizens like me don't influence the decisions of parliament and government

Each question was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Some variables (efex1, efex2, efex3, efex4) were recoded as 1 = low efficacy and 5 = high efficacy.

Following Bollen et al. 2008, a reliability test was performed to construct the general external efficacy factor (Table 1), which suggested eliminating the efex2 variable from the model.
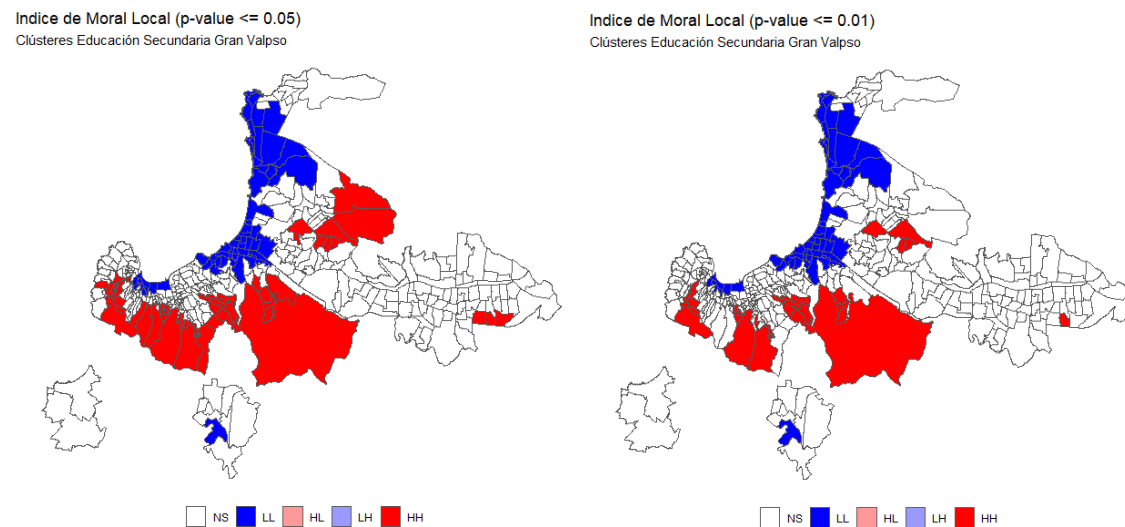
Table 1 Reliability Test

Factor	Variable	Question	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
External Efficacy	efex1	Politicians don't really care what voters think	0.549	0.625
	efex3	Politicians waste a lot of taxpayer money	0.4714	
	efex4	Citizens like me don't influence the decisions of parliament and government	0.5556	

Source: Fundación P!ensa EOP polls for 2019-2020.

Education clusters

This variable was constructed based on the percentage of people from Chile's 2017 census with a secondary education at the census tract level. For this purpose, Moran's I statistic was used to determine those areas where the territories with the lowest educational achievement are concentrated at a significance level of 0.05 (Cluster_05) and 0.01 (Cluster_01). Once the clusters were determined (Figure 1), the survey responses and the census tracts were spatially merged to create a categorical variable whose value is 1 if the observation is located in an area with high spatial autocorrelation of low education attainment, referred to as HH (High-High) in Figure 1, and 0 if it is not. At the descriptive level, 102 observations fall into the Cluster_01 category and 234 into the Cluster_05 category.

Figure 1 Secondary Education Clusters of Greater Valparaíso

Indice de Moral Local (p-value <= 0.05)
Clústeres Educación Secundaria Gran Valpso

NS | LL | HL | LH | HH

Indice de Moral Local (p-value <= 0.01)
Clústeres Educación Secundaria Gran Valpso

NS | LL | HL | LH | HH

Periphery

We constructed a variable to consider the effect of the municipality in which inhabitants live. Those municipalities that encompass the political center of the region – Viña del Mar, Valparaíso and Concón – took the value of 0. The remaining seven municipalities took the value of 1 and are considered "Periphery" (Figure 2). Since there is a high level of national and subnational centralism in Chile, this variable becomes relevant when examining political attitudes in the country (Fierro et al., 2021). Furthermore, 37% of inhabitants in the entire region are concentrated in the three municipalities located in the political center.

Figure 2 Central and Peripheral Municipalities

Unique Values: Sample
Non_Surveyed (26)
Periphery (7)
Center (3)

#obs=36
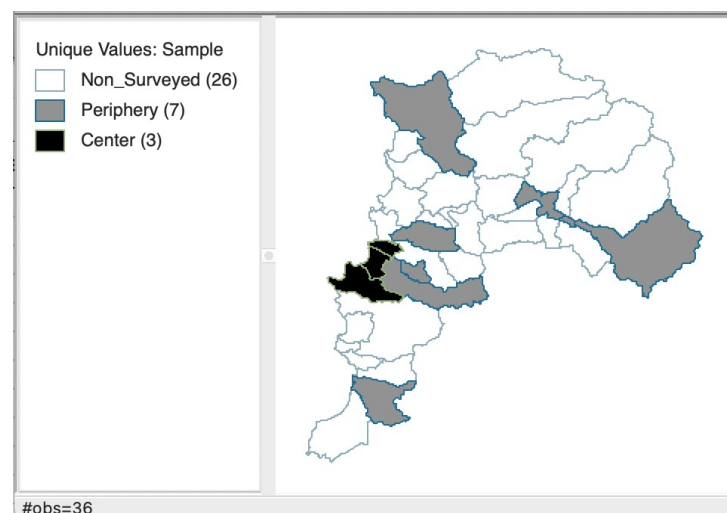
Ideology

The ideology of the respondents was considered at the individual level. Each respondent was asked which political position they identified or sympathized with the most. Three

dichotomous variables were created for each option: the right (13.32%), the center (10.81%) or the left (21.07%).

Sociodemographics

A series of sociodemographic variables usually associated with the development of political attitudes were considered at the individual level. These include gender (xxx), age (xxx), socioeconomic status (xxx) and education (xxx). The latter is especially relevant, considering that the territorial clusters were created based on the concentration of household heads with low education. However, as shown in Table 2, there is a low level of correlation between territorial clusters, the periphery variable and education at the individual level (Table 2).

Table 2 Spearman Correlation between Education Clusters, the Periphery and Individual Education

	Cluster_01	Periphery	Individual Education
Cluster_01	1		
Periphery	-0.0763	1	
Individual Education	-0.061	-0.0605	1

|	Cluster_05	Periphery	Individual Education
Cluster_05	1		
Periphery	-0.1148	1	
Individual Education	-0.0861	-0.0605	1

3.3. Analysis

A structural equation model (SEM) was used for the analysis since it allows us, among other things, to estimate a latent factor (external efficacy), and at the same time estimate the relationships that exist between this factor and other observed variables. As described in Figure 3, in our model, external efficiency is explained by sociodemographic and territorial variables associated with the concentration of clusters with low education levels.
In addition, affinity to political sectors was included to determine whether it is a relevant factor in explaining the feeling of system responsiveness.
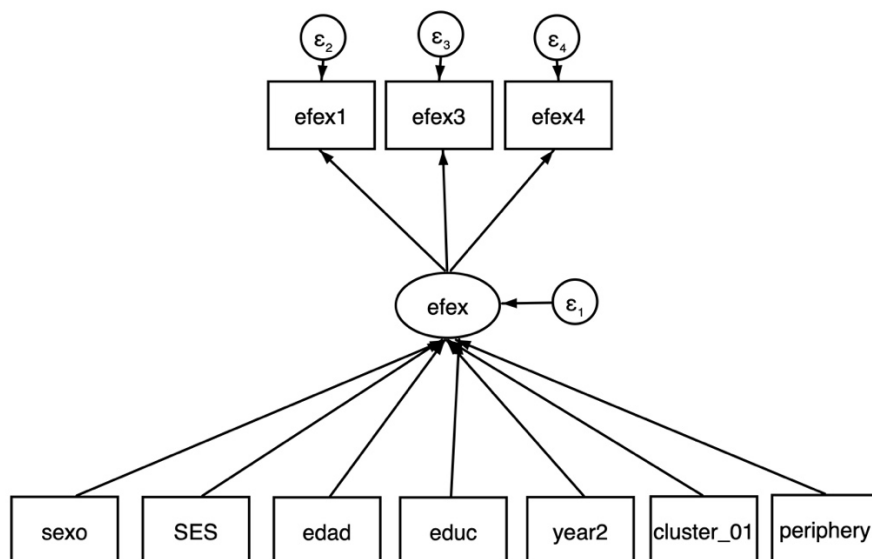
The model considers time fixed effects, between the years evaluated, since we expect the shock produced by the social unrest initiated in 2019 to generate changes in people's perception of external efficacy.

Figure 3 The Model

(A)
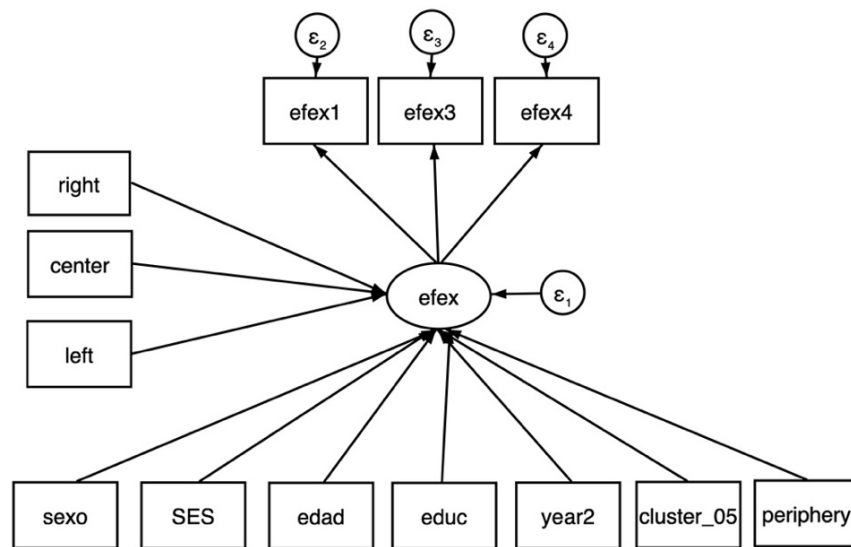
(B)

4. RESULTS

Tables 3 and 4 show interesting results on how external efficacy can be explained more at the group level than at the individual level. As shown in Table 3, sociodemographic variables have little explanatory power with respect to the feeling of system responsiveness. On the contrary, and regardless of the degree of significance used to generate the clusters with low educational levels – both 0.01 and 0.5 – it is possible to ascertain that external efficacy is

highly explained by belonging to these territories. Together with this, we can see that the sign is negative. In other words, the results suggest that living in a neighborhood with a high concentration of low education is related to the propensity of feeling that the political system does not respond to citizen demands, which leads us to accept the hypothesis proposed (H1). Hence, the results demonstrate the perception of abandonment, which strengthens the idea that there are territories that feel excluded from the political system within a city. On the other hand, the periphery variable is not significant for external efficacy which differs in relation to online political efficacy (Fierro et al., 2021). This point is interesting since it could mean that intra-city differences may be more relevant than differences between municipalities in explaining, at least minimally, external efficacy.

Finally, when political ideology is incorporated (Table 4), we observe a lower correlation, although significant, for those who identify with the right. This is noteworthy because, in these cases, although the group perception is negative, individuals have a greater sense of system responsiveness when they have ideas associated with the right which, in Chile, stands out for being more morally conservative and economically liberal.

Table 3 Structural Equation Model for External Efficacy

	External Efficacy	
	Model A	**Model B**
Sociodemographics		
Socioeconomic Status	-0.0654468†	-0.0658403†
	(.0343843)	(.0343437)
Gender	-0.0358392	-0.033903
	(.0236436)	(.0236324)
Age	0.0416654†	0.0406955
	(.0249777)	(.0249447)
Education (individual)	-0.0301824	-0.0292829
	(.0356053)	(.0355259)
Territory		
Periphery	0.0193123	0.0202878
	(.0239663)	(.0238478)
Education Cluster (0.01)		-0.0811258**
		(.023778)
Education Cluster (0.05)	-0.0631945**	
	(.0239077)	
Year		
2020	-0.0620175*	-0.0564194*
	(.023672)	(.0237395)

Note: p-value < 0.1†; p-value < 0.05*; p-value < 0.01**; p-value < 0.001***
Source: Fundación P!ensa EOP polls for 2019-2020.

Table 4 Structural Equation Model (with ideology) for External Efficacy

	External Efficacy	
	Model A	**Model B**
Sociodemographics		
Socioeconomic Status	-0.0749563*	-0.0754448*
	(.0345559)	(.0345146)
Gender	-0.0348445	-0.0329735
	(.0239877)	(.0239741)
Age	0.0312617	0.0301688
	(.025385)	(.0253524)
Education (individual)	-0.0375918	-0.0367401
	(.036216)	(.0361377)
Ideology		
Right	0.0524206*	0.0529057*
	(.025135)	(.0251002)
Center	0.011382	0.0100899
	(.0249606)	(.0249386)
Left	0.0205185	0.020782
	(.0255048)	(.0254747)
Territory		
Periphery	0.0181287	0.0190098
	(.0240982)	(.0239798)
Education Cluster (0.01)		-0.0809013**
		(.0238814)
Education Cluster (0.05)	-0.0618832*	
	(.0240107)	
Year		
2020	-0.0560098*	-0.050421*
	(.0240127)	(.0240746)

Note: p-value < 0.05*; p-value < 0.01**; p-value < 0.001***
Source: Fundación P!ensa EOP polls for 2019-2020.

5. CONCLUSION

This work sheds light on how belonging to marginal territories with a concentration of low education levels can influence feelings that the political system is not responding to citizens' needs. While low educational attainment may be correlated with individual poverty, this work allows us to highlight that it is not always individual poverty (i.e., the SES variable) that explains these feelings but rather the concentration of large groups living in conditions of intra-city marginality. As shown in Figure 1, the HH clusters are concentrated in peripheral areas, within the city, that usually have less services and infrastructure. This shows that

marginalization at the city level generates effects regarding political perception, which cannot be explained by traditional center-periphery political models.

We believe that our results provide at least three contributions to the discussion on the "geography of discontent." First, our results extend the current discussion – which is focused on Brexit, Euroskepticism and Trumpism – to the global south. In this sense, Chile is an important country for analyzing this phenomenon because despite having solid institutions and a rather stable democracy, Chile is currently going through its biggest political crisis since returning to democracy. In October 2019, discontent in Chile materialized into massive and violent demonstrations. Second, our work presents a novel attitudinal approach which, thus far, suggests a relationship between the decline of certain territories and the propensity to vote for populist or anti-establishment narratives, assuming that feelings of abandonment, anger or disempowerment exist among citizens. In this paper, we test the latter assumption, suggesting a connection between the neighborhood one lives in and the development of lower external efficacy, an attitude usually associated with disaffection. Finally, our work rethinks "abandoned places" in intra-regional terms, and more specifically, analyzes the dynamics occurring within cities and urban centers, where neighborhoods exist that are invisible in the public discussion and which are not necessarily the poorest.

In summary, we believe that our results are an important piece when interpreting discontent and political disaffection in new democracies. Considering the global political context, it is necessary to understand the territorial roots of the feeling of abandonment that usually nourish populist and anti-establishment narratives. In politically centralized societies – as in Latin America – this phenomenon takes on particularly important territorial characteristics.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We are aware that our study has certain limitations. For example, the data only includes city dwellers, without considering those in rural areas. Understanding the impact of rurality on the development of more or less efficacy is also important in assessing political efficacy. Second, the data do not allow us to perform longitudinal analyses, for now, to observe the development of particular political attitudes. The use of panel surveys in the future would allow us to observe these variations. Finally, future research could focus on other aspects related to our findings. For example, comparing whether the reality of the Chilean region of Valparaíso is applicable to other realities in the global south or to the rest of Latin America. Similarly, replicating this work in the future is imperative, considering the long-term impact that Chile's recent social unrest experience may have on the development of system responsiveness beliefs.

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