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The Spiral of Ressentiment: Emotions and Stigma in Populist Radical-Right Party Activism

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Abstract
Why are populist radical-right party activists intensely motivated to become involved in their party? These activists combine disaffection with politics, anxiety and the emotion dynamic known as ressentiment on the one hand, with high-intensity, low-reward political activism and a sense of long-term political efficacy on the other hand. This article contributes to a better understanding of the expressive, emotional and identity-based incentives behind party activism. It proposes a Spiral of Ressentiment model. In this model, individuals' complex emotions of ressentiment are transformed into collective ressentiment through relationships within the party. The party relieves this ressentiment by providing a sense of belonging and hope for the future, but party messages and stigmatization then reignite ressentimentful feelings. This study uncovers the feedback loop through which populist radical-right parties both alleviate and encourage ressentiment emotions by analysing 50 in-depth interviews with Vlaams Belang local activists and party representatives.

Keywords: populism; emotions; radical right; ressentiment; activism

Political parties around the world have struggled with stagnating and declining membership bases (Van Biezen et al. 2012), whereas populist radical-right parties (PRRPs) have sought (Albertazzi and Van Kessel 2021; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016) and achieved (Rooduijn 2015) a broad and stable base of support. PRRP activism can be difficult to explain, and not just because it goes against broader political party trends.

PRRP supporters tend to be dissatisfied with the political system (Spruyt et al. 2016), cynical (Hameleers et al. 2018: 394–395), disillusioned (Maher et al. 2018), lonely (Langenkamp and Bienstman 2022: 935) and spurred to action only in the short term by crises (see Bergmann 2020: 24–26, 46; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Taggart 2000: 5). Citizens most likely to vote for PRRPs are also those most likely to stay home on election day (Akkerman et al. 2014: 1343; Spruyt et al. 2016: 342). Why do PRRP

activists overcome disaffection to not only vote, but also become intensely involved in the party? Research on this question highlights the contradictory impulses acting on PRR supporters.

First, members of all parties are more likely to be trusting and politically interested than non-members (Dassonneville and McAllister 2023). However, populist radical-right voters are likely to have feelings of low political efficacy, often articulated in a 'highly fatalistic way' with little hope in political improvement (Spruyt et al. 2016: 341–344). Dissatisfied individuals are also more likely to vote for populist parties (Voogd and Dassonneville 2020). Paradoxically, distrustful citizens who turn against the establishment place their trust in parties that glorify the national group. PRRP activists overcome a low sense of efficacy to engage deeply in a political party.

Second, scholars identify fear (Bonikowski 2017: S193; Wodak 2013), anxiety (Betz and Johnson 2004: 321; Crick 2005: 627; Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Kinnvall 2018) and the emotion dynamics of ressentiment (Capelos and Demertzis 2022; Capelos et al. 2022; Salmela and Capelos 2021; Salmela and Von Scheve 2018) as key factors behind the rise of PRRPs. Less clear is why these feelings do not lead to disengagement, passivity or paralysis. While anger might initially motivate voters (Jacobs et al. 2024; Rico et al. 2017; Whiteley et al. 2021: 646), in the long run existential anxieties lead to disconnection from groups and isolation from politics (Bettache and Chiu 2018: 103). Research on anti-establishment and reactionary trajectories show corresponding dynamics in both non-voters and PRRP supporters (Kemmers et al. 2016; Sullivan 2021). How do longer-lasting emotions sustain activism?

Finally, PRRP membership is associated with significant stigmatization. A recent study of the Sweden Democrats shows that about 60% of members are wary of disclosing their party identity in public (Ammassari 2023b: 730). Costs of stigmatization include losing job opportunities, losing relationships with close relatives and friends and being shamed for their party identity (Zulianello 2021: 234). General incentives or social network models of party activism struggle to explain how activists overcome such obstacles against engagement. Paradoxically, citizens who feel victimized and relatively deprived join a party likely to lead to further victimization.

This article focuses on the emotional drivers behind PRRP activists' investment in their political party. It analyses emotion and social identity mechanisms that motivate members to join and remain active. We propose a three-step model that explains how ressentiment drives PRRP activism. Our argument is in three stages. (1) Individuals' ressentiment resonates with party stances and rhetoric, and is transformed into collective ressentiment within the party. (2) Involvement in the party organization provides relief to party members through a sense of belonging and hope for the future. Finally, (3) the party encourages a feedback loop in which experiences of party activism reinforce ressentiment and radicalize activists further.

The article begins with a review of the General Incentives Model of party activism and the role of emotions in activism, and presents our theoretical model. This model is developed through our analysis of extensive empirical data from 50 interviews with local activists and political representatives from the Belgian Vlaams Belang (Flemish

Interest) party. This study speaks to the literature on how PRRPs maintain a mass membership organization (Albertazzi and Van Kessel 2021; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). It also contributes to a research agenda (see Gauja 2015) which emphasizes the need for qualitative research to understand 'what the experience of membership actually means to individuals' (Ammassari 2023b: 738). It refines our understanding of how emotions combine to motivate activism.

General Incentive Model of party activism

We begin by discussing the most comprehensive approach to party activism (Power and Dommett 2020: 507). The General Incentive Model (GIM) argues that parties offer both rational and social psychological incentives to motivate individuals to take collective action (Whiteley 1995; Whiteley and Seyd 2022). The GIM focuses on 'high intensity participation' beyond the 'low-cost activity' of voting (Whiteley and Seyd 1996: 215). The model focuses on selective incentives, those available only to people who take part in activism or membership. It identifies four categories of incentives: outcome, process, ideology and expressive.

Outcome incentives are individualized benefits resulting from participation, such as being elected to office, obtaining a staff position, a salary or preferential access to decision-makers (Clark and Wilson 1961: 134; Whiteley and Seyd 1996: 219). Process incentives are benefits from taking part in activism. These include enjoyment, entertainment or catharsis from political activism (Whiteley and Seyd 1996: 219), as well as status and personal satisfaction (on solidary incentives, see Clark and Wilson 1961: 134–135).

Purposive or ideological incentives suggest that people participate in politics to express their political beliefs and pursue change in the direction of their worldview (Klandermans 2004). The party is a vehicle to carry their personal purpose forward. Sofia Ammassari (2023a) argues that PRRPs seek to foster a sense of increased efficaciousness (the belief that activism will have an impact) in members, a feeling which motivates activism.

Expressive incentives emphasize internalized feelings of belonging and tying one's identity to the fate of the party (Whiteley and Seyd 2022: 55–56). In contrast to processual benefits, these affective attachments are about a deeper sense of loyalty and affection for the party. What happens to the group feels personal. Researchers have developed scales of partisan identification and internalized partisan identity, and found that such attachments correlate with deep engagement on behalf of the party (Huddy et al. 2015: 4; Poletti et al. 2019: 161).

Studies have applied the GIM to PRRPs (Ammassari 2023a; Favero and Zulianello 2023; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016). Focusing on why parties value membership, these studies conclude that PRRPs often favour a mass party with a grassroots base and highly articulated local organizational structures (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016: 241–242). Party representatives see members as crucial for campaigning, legitimizing the party and ensuring the survival of the organization (Albertazzi and Van Kessel 2023; Favero and Zulianello 2023). Our study looks in more depth at the emotional experiences of members themselves and considers how party representatives steer these experiences.

PRRP activism and emotions

Researchers have emphasized fear (Scheller 2019; Wodak 2013), anger (Rico et al. 2017; Whiteley et al. 2021: 646), sadness and disgust (Widman 2021: 169–170) as key drivers of PRR support. Whether studying populist leaders (Martella and Bracciale 2022) or those receptive to their message (Rico et al. 2017), scholars find a complex mix of emotions. For example, scholars attribute different roles to fear and anger in populist appeals (Hameleers et al. 2017: 876) while recognizing that both emotions are used together in practice (Scheller 2019: 592).

Psychological research finds that humans often feel a blend of many emotions at the same time (Berrios et al. 2015), including ambivalent emotions (Larsen and McGraw 2011). Recognizing this, scholars advocate for the study of mixed emotions rather than discrete emotions. A prominent approach focuses on a complex emotion cluster called ressentiment (Capelos and Demertzis 2022; Salmela and Von Scheve 2018: 441, 446). Ressentiment arises from people feeling powerless and losing control over their lives. To evade pain and uncertainty, this sense of victimhood is transformed into a morally superior victim stance that justifies resentment, indignation and hatred. Scholars have argued that ressentiment is best understood as a mechanism that ties together all these emotional dynamics (Salmela and Capelos 2021). At the core of ressentiment is a transvaluation mechanism that denigrates what is desired or valued yet unattainable as undesirable and transforms one's own self as inferior into something noble and superior (Salmela and Capelos 2021: 192).

Ressentimentful individuals translate their bitterness into attacks against the broadest range of scapegoats perceived as responsible for their situation (Capelos and Demertzis 2022: 11). This emotional cluster is a driver of authoritarian values, reactionary movements, support for populism and willingness to resort to violence (Capelos and Demertzis 2022: 117–120).

Perhaps surprisingly, even research on single discrete emotions suggests that ressentiment is the underlying explanation. Using an anger scale including French words such as 'haine, amertume, et ressentiment' (hatred, bitterness and ressentiment), George Marcus and colleagues (Marcus et al. 2019: 126) find that this type of anger is associated with increased support for the French Front National, whereas mere fear is not. Guillem Rico and colleagues (Rico et al. 2017: 450–451) find that anger correlates with populist attitudes in Spain, but they include 'powerlessness' as part of their anger measure. This is a stark contrast with the way in which researchers usually associate anger with a strong sense of control, political engagement and enthusiasm (Huddy et al. 2015: 3).

Ressentiment can arise from cynicism (Hameleers et al. 2018: 394–395), loneliness (Langenkamp and Bienstman 2022: 935) and disillusionment (Maher et al. 2018). A common explanation is that the anxieties behind ressentiment stem from socio-economic transformations, such as the need to adapt to post-industrial capitalist society, globalization, neoliberal governance and new technologies. The breakneck pace of these changes has led to people taking refuge in nationalist and populist identities (Betz and Johnson 2004: 321; Bonikowski 2017: S202–S204; Crick 2005: 627; Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Kinnvall 2018). Western cultures leave citizens vulnerable and isolated, and place the sole responsibility for success on their individual

efforts (see Alvares and Dahlgren 2016: 48; Salmela and Von Scheve 2018: 444). PRRPs have broken new ground during moments of crisis such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015–2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bergmann 2020: 24–26, 46; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022).

One of the most studied sources of PRRP ressentiment is relative status deprivation. People who feel they have lost relative status, compared to the past or to other groups, might be particularly sensitive to what they perceive as material and identity threats (Gest et al. 2018; Manunta et al. 2022), as status anxiety makes them fearful of falling even further down (Gidron and Hall 2017, 2020: 1034).

Ressentiment is expected to lead to passive, bitter individuals who have a lower interest in politics (Capelos and Demertzis 2022: 112). They are inefficacious and 'will not actively engage in democratic participatory acts or collective action' (Capelos et al. 2022: 387). High ressentiment individuals are cynical and hopeless, believing that everything is inevitably going downhill. Low subjective social status is also correlated with passivity, particularly abstention from voting (Gidron and Hall 2020: 1038). It is not clear why these people would spend time and energy on a PRRP rather than staying at home to ruminate on their grievances, rejecting the society that spurned them. They also tend to be less connected to imagined communities, for instance those that relate to their own nation (Capelos and Demertzis 2022: 113). This finding clashes with research revealing that PRRPs are highly nationalistic (Filsinger et al. 2021).

The spiral of ressentiment

In this section, we detail our model, which emphasizes processual and expressive incentives but also shows how they are tied to purposive and efficacy drives. While previous theories suggest that ressentiment is consolidated in social interactions with others (Salmela and Capelos 2021: 195–199), our approach is unique in revealing how dynamics within the party can explain how both ressentiment and high motivation for political participation are sustained in the long term.

Our model adopts the GIM assumptions that members are motivated by selective and emotional benefits that stem from activism. Like GIM, our model also focuses on high-intensity participants. Activists retelling their individual experiences of participating in the party bring to light the rich constellations of motivations behind their activism, an approach adopted in other studies of party membership (e.g. Gomez et al. 2021). Moreover, we borrow from social identity research which finds that people are motivated to collective action to rectify 'a subjective sense of disadvantage' grounded in their social identity (Van Zomeren et al. 2008: 505).

In the first step, individual ressentiment attracts people to the party, and then becomes collective ressentiment as they join it. Individual ressentiment – powerlessness, anxiety, bitterness, resentment, a sense of victimhood, of not receiving what one deserves – can arise for many reasons, including an individual's personality (Bakker et al. 2021; Thielmann and Hilbig 2023), ideological and moral affinities (Bos and Minihold 2022; Franco and Pound 2021) and varied sensitivity to threats (Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). Ressentiment distorts perception and, as many authors note, perceptions from PRRP militants often clash with

political or economic reality (Bergmann 2020: 24–25; Gest et al. 2018: 1699–1700; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018: 1674; Smeekes et al. 2021: 93). We focus in this article on how these feelings motivate and sustain party activism rather than explaining the rise of ressentiment itself.

Potential party members encounter the party message (via friends and family, the media or in public spaces), and it resonates with them. PRRPs distinguish themselves from other parties by being more likely to use negative emotions (Bos and Minihold 2022: 54, 56; Martella and Bracciale 2022; Nai 2021; Widman 2021), which resonate with individual ressentiment. These negative emotions and antagonistic attitudes match PRRPs' two primary ideologies: populism, which emphasizes an antagonistic conflict between the 'pure' people and elites, and nativism, which frames migration and migrants as a threat to the nation and its people (Mudde 2014).

As members become involved, ressentiment is transformed from a personal sentiment to a collective feeling. Members come into contact more intensely with the party's programme and interact with fellow activists. This contact turns lonely and distressful feelings into a communal sense that ressentiment is shared and justified. Research on collective emotion – emotions that arise from interpersonal interactions and reciprocal influence within groups – found that such emotions are characterized by emotional alignment between group members, mutual awareness of each other's emotions and a feeling of togetherness (see Chung et al. 2024). The movement from personal to collective identity, and the increasing salience of collective identity, is a key driver of social movement participation (Klandermans 2004: 365). The party ingroup is linked to a broader community of meaning, which for PRRPs is usually an exclusive and ethnic conception of the 'people' and the nation (Filsinger et al. 2021; Smeekes et al. 2021: 92–93; Van Haute et al. 2018).

In the second step of our model, party engagement relieves and decreases key components of ressentiment. Belonging to a group of likeminded allies alleviates existential anxieties and hopelessness as activists form friendships and support each other. They are relieved to come out of their loneliness and isolation to find partners who share their distressful emotions. Furthermore, participating in this exclusive group provides the valued status that society is denying them (Klandermans 2004: 367).

Ressentiment is also alleviated by hope for change. Nostalgia for a lost heartland paired with hope that these traditions could be restored someday in the imagined future (on nostalgia, see Betz and Johnson 2004; Wohl et al. 2020) plays an important role in this process. Experimental studies have found that feeling nostalgic does not increase populist attitudes, but that being exposed to populist rhetoric creates nostalgia (Van Prooijen et al. 2022). This collective nostalgia generates feelings of hope and belonging, higher self-esteem and a sense of meaning in life (Van Prooijen et al. 2022: 953). Activism is propelled by this community working for a shared dream.

Populist narratives act as a 'fantasy' sheltering people from everyday frustrations, anxieties and vulnerability (Kinnvall 2018). Collective nostalgia repairs activists' sense of ingroup continuity, of being connected to their nation and their own 'people' (Smeekes et al. 2018). Such sentiments have been associated with behavioural intentions such as wanting to volunteer for the group (Smeekes et al. 2023: 199–200). Populism, speaking on behalf of the 'ordinary' people, is a crucial element of the party's emotional appeal. This simultaneous presence of anxiety and hope has been found in

many cases of right-wing populism, for instance as playing an important role in the rise of Rodrigo Duterte to power in the Philippines (Curato 2016).

Ressentiment is justified rather than resolved because the party directs resentment and bitterness away from the individual towards outgroups who are responsible for their sense of victimhood. The betrayal of political elites, a key feature of right-wing populism, justifies the ressentimentful stance and validates members' personal feelings (see Kemmers et al. 2016: 764). While some citizens might have already projected their bitter emotions towards outgroups – and the party confirms their suspicion – others likely adopt the party's aggressive stance towards others because it relieves pressure on the self to direct it towards outside objects. Ingroup solidarity against an antagonist can elicit empowerment, a transformation where individuals believe they can challenge perceived relations of dominance (Drury and Reicher 2009: 708).

In the last step of the model, the experience of PRRP activism reignites ressentiment and produces a feedback loop, reminding members of their feelings of alienation and rejection. Stigma is an important part of this phase. Accusations of racism, social rejection and condemnation for being a PRRP member provokes a return to feelings of victimization, anxiety and bitterness. Perceived past victimhood has been shown to mobilize PRRP members (Rovamo and Sakki 2024). Moreover, party messages contribute to this revival of ressentiment by fomenting an atmosphere of constant crisis, emphasizing issues like crime, immigration or lifestyle threats.

This inescapable trap of ressentiment leads to an escalation in the form of a spiral, where activists recommit to the party, sever ties to the rest of society and radicalize their stance. Some emotions are intensified by this feedback loop, such as the loneliness, bitterness and powerlessness from being attacked for their new identity and anxiety from facing a constant stream of threatening information. New emotions also emerge from confronting these emotions together rather than alone: aggressive hate towards outgroups, a sense of superiority and pride for being the only ones doing the 'right' thing, and hardening of stances that rejects any compromise with 'enemies'. PRRP members transform their victimhood into resentful heroism.

Emotion-infused populist and nativist ideological positions thus create divisions between PRRP supporters and supporters from mainstream parties; PRRP members both receive and express the highest level of antipathy in society (Harteveld et al. 2022). Stigma can be a source of solidarity, even across different marginalized groups (Chaney et al. 2018). However, because of their ressentiment, PRRP activists believe that they are uniquely victimized, and they attack any outgroups as responsible for their situation. Their nativism and generalized ressentiment precludes any empathy for other marginalized groups. The party becomes a closed-off microcosm where 'the personal world is built within the boundaries' of the organization (Zulianello 2021: 234). This closed social world and the conflict inherent to PRRPs' underpinning ideologies 'pave the way to the development of hate feelings over time' (Martínez et al. 2023: 704).

The more stigmatized and hopeless activists become, the more the party becomes central and essential to help members regulate their emotions. Party identity is a buffer against social rejection (on the rejection-identification model, see Jetten et al. 2001). Scholars have shown that being discriminated from the mainstream is associated with anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem and often compensated by increased identification with a specific group (Schmitt et al. 2003). This increased identification, in turn,

intensifies collective emotion shared with the group and the adoption of more and more of its radical ideological programme. Because this identification isolates activists further from the rest of society, they cling to the party in a downward spiral.

Our analysis addresses four research question to assess our model and answer our initial question of why PRRP activists become intensely involved in their party:

1. What emotions do PRRP activists express about the motivation behind their involvement in the party?
2. How do activists describe their experience of joining and being involved in a PRRP?
3. How do PRRP representatives perceive the emotions and motivations underpinning activists' involvement in the party?
4. How do party representatives try to influence activists' emotions and motivations regarding the party?

Method

This article focuses on the case of Vlaams Belang (VB). VB is a well-established and typical PRRP in Flanders which has achieved significant electoral success and maintains a party membership of over 20,000 members (Sijstermans 2021). The party's ideology is dominated by nativism, with a secondary emphasis on Flemish independence. Electorally, VB increased its vote share from 5.9% of the Flemish electorate in 2014 to 21.8% in 2024, a 3% increase on its result in 2019 albeit lower than polling had suggested (Haeck et al. 2024). The party achieved this success despite the *cordon sanitaire*, an agreement where other Belgian parties vowed never to include VB in their coalitions.

Literature on VB relies on surveys (Hooghe and Stiers 2022; Pauwels 2011) or discourse analysis (Coffé 2008; Moufahim and Chatzidakis 2012), or situates it in comparison to other parties (Coffé 2008; Sijstermans 2021). We centre our analysis on the emotional lives of its party members and, as such, we use in-depth interview data. 'In-depth interviews might contribute to revealing the emotional experiences' associated with PRRPs (Salmela and Von Scheve 2018: 450). Our semi-structured interviews were inspired by life-history interviews which encourage respondents to reflect on their everyday life in the party (Klandermans 2020).

Twenty-five activists provided recollections of joining the party and their experiences of activism (we count 24 interview files because one interview was conducted with two activists at the same time). Questions did not mention emotions directly. Some examples include: 'What made you interested in politics?', 'What was your route into party membership?', 'What keeps you motivated to stay in the party?' and 'What does the party stand for or against?'

Activist interviews were complemented by 26 party representative and staff interviews. Party representatives were asked to reflect on members' motivations, including questions such as: 'What are the most important reasons people become a member of the party?', 'What are the benefits/downsides of becoming a member?' and 'What is the best way of mobilizing people in the party?' Representatives were consulted to explore the role of the party itself in eliciting emotional incentives in their members.

Interviews were conducted during an Economic and Research Council-funded multilingual project involving a large research team. Judith Sijstermans conducted interviews in Flanders in 2019 and early 2020, but after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, interviews continued online. Access to conduct research was secured from the party executive prior to the start of this project. Subsequently, interview respondents were contacted directly through details on party websites and formal institutional websites (parliament, local councils). The Supplementary Material to this article provides further information on respondents' roles, regions and dates of interviewing while maintaining confidentiality.

Members and representatives from three regions (East Flanders, West Flanders, Antwerp) were included to ensure respondents came from areas with different levels of electoral and organizational strength. Members younger than 18 were excluded. Respondents were predominantly between the ages of 45 and 54 (37.5% of respondents) with an equal spread across other age groups, from 18 to 75. Across all interviews, 22% of respondents were women. This split reflects a tendency for the populist radical right to be dominated by men, and a reluctance from women members to be interviewed due to doubts about whether they 'knew enough' for an interview.

Sijstermans, who is bilingual, transcribed interviews directly from Dutch to English. Transcripts were anonymized and analysed in English due to the collaborative nature of this project. Local activists are noted throughout with M (M33–M56) and party representatives with R (R6–R32). We exclude pilot interviews R1–R5 from our analysis since the interview schedule changed significantly after these were conducted.

Interviews were analysed through qualitative content analysis using the NVivo software. Philippe Beauregard conducted this analysis iteratively, in the first instance doing a thorough reading of the interviews to inductively build a thematic coding scheme. The analysis considered the four GIM incentives, discrete emotions (fear, anger, disgust, pride, joy, hope), emotional metaphors and terms that connote emotionality (see Koschut 2017). After this initial reading and a review of the literature, a different coder validated the coding scheme. The codes retained for the analysis, and key words associated, are enumerated in Table 1. Table 1 also provides an overview of the data, while the rest of the analysis draws on selected quotes from the transcripts.

In our coding of party representatives' interviews, the same emotional themes were applied but not to representatives' retelling of their own experiences. Instead, we considered how they perceive ordinary members and their involvement in the party. Taking inspiration from previous ressentiment measures (Capelos and Demertzis 2022: 114), our analysis detects ressentiment by focusing on feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, bitter resentment and shame, and narratives of injustice and victimhood.

Results

Table 1 provides key words for each of our emotion categories, as well as the percentage of activists and representatives that referred to these emotions in their answers.

First, our method is a hard test for our model because our interview questions do not explicitly mention emotions. Nevertheless, emotions and themes related to ressentiment come up in a majority of activist interviews (58.3%), even though we attempted to separate ressentiment from discontent (54.2%), anger (16.6%) and fear

Table 1. Percentage of Interviews Mentioning Emotions behind Party Activism

Emotion	Activists (%)	Representatives (%)	Examples of key words
Ressentiment	58.3	46.2	Lost hope, intimidated, insecure, unsafe, everything going wrong, ashamed, alienation, revenge, sick of society, disillusionment, resentful
Discontent	54.2	34.6	Corrupt politicians, let down by government, broken justice system, against the establishment
Fear	25.0	23.0	Frightened, world is scary, fear about the future, freaking out
Anger	16.6	26.9	Angry, offended, upset, outrageous, indignation
Hope	45.8	19.2	Hopeful, improving society, making a difference, better world, for the children
Joy	37.5	19.2	Joy, happy, pleasant, fun, *gezellig* (cosy)
	N = 24	N = 26	

(25%). Representatives also perceive ressentimentful emotions as the most important feelings for members to become active in the party (46.2%).

Second, despite PRRPs' association with negative emotions, positive emotions such as hope (45.8%) and joy (37.5%) also play a substantial role in motivating activists. This suggests that we need to articulate the relationship between ressentiment and positive emotions to explain long-term activism.

In the following sections, we detail the substantive qualitative findings of our analysis. We recognize the need to be careful about how party activists reconstruct the memory of their initial motivation to join the party as some recount events from many years earlier.

Individual and collective ressentiment

We identify the cluster of emotions associated with ressentiment as the dominant emotions expressed in activists' recollections. The data suggests that ressentiment frequently pre-dates VB membership, as the activists remember these feelings from childhood and early adulthood. One respondent talked about growing up in the 1980s, and 'being tormented by many left-wing and communist inspired terrorist groups' who 'tried to disrupt municipal order and our society' (M43). They added that these feelings 'drew out in me a kind of resistance … it pushed me in the direction, in the political direction that I chose'. Another younger member, whose memory might be fresher, recalled the 2016 attacks at Brussels' Zaventem Airport claimed by Islamic State and noted that these attacks led to him 'giving my opinion on Facebook about Islamization and Muslim terrorism' (M45). Another member discussed confronting anti-Flemish sentiments, stemming from the perception that Flemish nationalists were collaborators in World War II. They noted: 'we had a [German-sounding] name that wasn't welcome in the countryside … as a child you start to think: who am I, where am I from, and what

is this all about?' (M44). Activists' childhoods were punctuated by moments which caused fear, anger and alienation.

When asked about their reasons for joining the party, respondents reported feelings of loss, lack of safety and bitterness. Interviewees often answered the question of how they joined not with the practical circumstances – meeting people in the party or getting their membership card – but by detailing their recriminations about social problems. Party members described no longer feeling safe on the streets they grew up on or not feeling safe letting their children go to the park (M41, M54). They told stories of losing their sense of identity and continuity of meaning, wondering 'what will be left for my children in terms of Flemish norms, our society, our European foundations?' (M40).

Government failures are blamed for this lack of safety. One respondent explained that they had been out of health insurance due to a period of unemployment, and that 'our government has no safety net for people' (M46). Other respondents echoed, 'the government isn't working as it should' (M48), and 'the quality of education went downhill' (M44). Discontent with the government and dominant parties is the second most frequently expressed emotion by party activists (54.2%), and is closely related to ressentimentful feelings of being left behind or losing what was there before.

Such loss is often described as a 'theft' and resentment is directed towards migrants. Activists feel offended that newcomers who 'don't speak a word of Dutch' jump the welfare queue and get services like social housing before people 'who were born and raised here' (M41). Another activist noted that when you see migrants 'streaming' into the country and getting more than current citizens, 'then it's logical you begin to revolt against that and defend your rights' (M55). Another bitterly noted that migrants 'get more advantages and they're helped more than the Flemings who have worked here their whole life' (M46). To a lesser extent, this theft was also viewed as perpetrated by Wallonia with its 'money transfers' away from Flanders (M47). Interviewees feel group-level relative status deprivation compared to foreigners.

Party representatives identify loss, anxiety and alienation as key factors for why members join. They note that activists are motivated by 'anxiety of what's happening in our country' (R12) and 'indignation' (R17) regarding the direction of society. Prospective members feel 'alienation' (R20) and social and cultural discomfort; they 'cannot follow any more, the world and society is evolving too quickly' (R22). Representatives believe that for members, the party is 'their last buoy' (R16). VB becomes 'the light in the desert, we are the light at the end of the tunnel' (R32).

Many representatives describe 'the migrant problem' as a motivation for members to join (R8, R12, R17, R22, R29, R30). As such, PRRPs' nativist message is a siren-call to those who already identify migrants as an undesirable out-group. One representative noted that an influx of foreigners 'causes resentment and then people are automatically driven towards the Vlaams Belang' (R18). Another explained that migration causes alienation, as members feel excluded in their neighbourhood: 'You can plant 100 trees in front of her house and put a park there and it doesn't matter. She doesn't feel at home' (R20).

Individual ressentiment is the initial motivator, but more positive experiences occur when interested citizens meet party activists. Activists described existing party members in their first encounter with them as friendly, relatable and approachable.

For instance, one activist joined the party after an event where they spoke with the party leader and discovered that their grandmother lives close to him (M41). Another explains, 'I was welcomed with open arms … It was immediately very friendly and open' (M50). Gatherings as varied as youth association meetings, religious choirs, football games or historical commemorations provide opportunities for meeting party members.

These positive experiences are attributed to the people being on the same ideological and emotional wavelength as one another. In one activist's words, 'All the people are likeminded, so that's also quite easy, to get connections with each other' (M37). Another described the party as fulfilling 'most closely my opinions about the outside world' (M54). A supporter expressed a feeling of 'warmth and a sense of security' in attending party events that leads him to see VB as 'the good guys' (M33). Validating prospective members' ressentiment is thus a crucial factor and over time provides a party community, a sense of collective identity.

Collectivizing ressentiment attaches anxiety emotions to the national group. One member noted, 'Let our Flemish things be as they are. There's nothing wrong with it. In the past, there was nothing wrong with it, so why now' (M55). The personal family, and the extended national family, are key to the party's ideology. One member explained, 'I really want this country to stay my country and that it stays their country for my kids. And that the evolution of more foreigners stops' (M48). Sentiments of alienation and anxiety simultaneously apply to individual members and to the survival of the national community. Shame is not personal, but expressed on behalf of the broader national group.

Finding fellow travellers in ressentiment provides VB activists with a sense of allegiance to one another. These shared emotions and common enemies ensure military-level loyalty to the party: 'I can compare that to the first grenadiers in Germany. There is a slogan: once a grenadier, always a grenadier. And for me it's once Vlaams Belang … always Vlaams Belang' (M36).

Relief from ressentiment

As these positive relationships suggest, activism provides relief from the most disruptive ressentiment feelings through two pathways: community belonging and nostalgia-fuelled hope.

Relief through community

Interview participants experience a strong feeling of belonging and close camaraderie inside the party: 'It's the determination, the love, the camaraderie. We have an unbelievable camaraderie. There is no other political party that has that' (M36). Many respondents, albeit not all, express that the party becomes an important source of friendship, to the point that one member noted, 'my best friends are all in the party' (M40). Their engagement transforms a personal conviction into a collective identity. Engagement is 'something that gives you a certain identity. [You have] your convictions already but when you take that forward in actions and deeds it strengthens a part of your identity' (M45). Representatives argue that this feeling is cathartic for members, as it allows them to 'vent to someone without being called a racist' (R24). The party is a safe space where members are able to 'let things out' with likeminded people (R12).

The party provides such safe spaces by organizing events that have a small political element, such as a short speech or book launch, with more social engagement. Party representatives describe the feeling that they try to elicit as *gezellig* (R23, R29), the Flemish word for cosy and homely. Such events include family days at an amusement park, raffles, meals, balls, football games, fairs, city walks, bingo and barbecues. The party provides base members and representatives alike with a safe home in a world perceived as dangerous: 'when I come home from a meeting with those people, I feel good. You have the same convictions … it's a family, eh? It's really a family. We fit strongly together' (R18).

This sense of community also motivates activists to stay in the party. One member explained, 'the social aspect is what I also get the most enjoyment from … That's the coolest aspect of being active in a political party' (M51). A long-time member echoed this feeling, claiming that close friendships mean that 'the diehards like me never gave up' (M36).

Local activists perceive party leaders as close to them – authentic, familiar and warm. This sense of party closeness plays a role in relieving ressentiment. Leaders are 'real men of the people' with whom you could 'grab a pint' (M54). An activist emphasized about the party leader: 'He talks to everyone. For him the ordinary militant is as important as the big political figures. And I think it should stay that way. That's also my motivation in Vlaams Belang' (M36). Leaders' affinity and accessibility is crucial to activists' commitment (M45).

Representatives encourage intra-party solidarity for recruitment purposes and as a way to overcome exclusion from mainstream media channels. One representative explained that people will say to friends, 'Oh, wow, we went to a lecture, and it was really pleasant. Next time, come along' (R23). Mutual care and belonging allows members to transcend loneliness, to 'know that there are other people who think the way I do, there are other people who want to make Flanders a nicer place to live, there are other people who want to give our kids a nice future' (R31). Party activism thus decreases core parts of ressentiment, such as loneliness and anxiety about the future.

Relief through projection of a hopeful future

The party also provides relief by advocating for the return of national values that members feel were stolen. The party promises a bright hopeful future, reinstating the glorious past. Members note that the party stands for 'protecting our roots, our way of living' (M55), fighting because 'our identity can't go away' (M38). Another said, 'The party stands for me, for preserving our norms and values, which have existed for centuries, that we've built up for thousands of years. We defend that' (M56).

The party is the rampart against change. For example, one member noted, 'We want Flemishness back. We want a safe Flanders, a nice, clean Flanders, and a nicer society, where people can be at rest, and our kids, and the future which is really important' (M54). Another member explained that the crux of the party's ideologies is, 'the future of the preservation of our country, in terms of Flanders' (M38).

Membership provides hope for activists because they see themselves contribute to the larger project of rejuvenating the Flemish nation: 'That's the thing that speaks to me the most, that in politics you can really do something, that you can achieve

something' (M51). This is consistent with Ammassari's recent findings that members perceive PRRPs as allowing them to be efficacious in redressing grievances (Ammassari 2023a: 2).

Reigniting ressentiment

While activism relieves some feelings, it reignites others. VB activists feel stigmatized and discriminated against for their party identity. When asked about the disadvantages of party membership, 75% of activists reported practical or legal disadvantages of membership, often referring to friends or acquaintances who had been removed from trade unions. A majority (62.5%) of activists also reported social discrimination, referring to times they had been socially isolated by friends, colleagues or neighbours for their views.

Activists describe being 'demonised' (M33) and representatives note that party members are painted 'as inhuman, as monsters' (R23). Practically, the high costs of their activism include losing their job, being kicked out of trade unions, harassment in the street, being laughed at and losing connection to friends and relatives (M50, M37, R10, R36). When asked about the benefits of being an active member, many interviewees responded that there are few or no benefits (M33, M36, M39, M40, M43, M44, M48, M50, M52, M55).

Representatives expressed that for members, disadvantages often outweigh benefits, arguing that stigmatization 'brings quite a big fear for people' (R11). One lamented that a highly active party member 'would rather not be in photos because of his work, which is a shame' (R23). Representatives even use the language of 'coming out' when talking about revealing party identity publicly (R20).

Many interviewees describe growing up in an atmosphere where the party was generally hated. One interviewee told a story of a young supporter getting into trouble when his family found out that he was a VB member:

> we knocked on someone's door who ordered a flag, but it was the dad who opened the door, and he was very angry. He said, who ordered a flag? And we saw that it was a quite young guy. And he said, this is my son, and I didn't know that. (M50)

Most members indicated that they were aware of the stigma and potential costs before joining. An interview participant even declared,

> I know there was a very aggressive environment there against us, and as a young person that motivates you to put in extra effort for those issues and to think that the party is so hated even though it's not understood why they're hated, ideologically speaking. And it makes me a bit angry on the other side, frustrated and saying, well then we're going to engage ourselves here to feed Vlaams Blok.[1] (M40)

This suggests that the party's collective victimization resonates with members' personal feelings of ressentiment. In fact, they might want to become activists because, and not despite, of the fact that the party is victimized. Collective ressentiment responds to a personal willingness for the recognition and consolidation of a victimhood identity.

In contrast with the GIM, the motivations behind activism might not be best labelled as incentives, but as a willingness to bear the costs proudly. Another member noted, '[When] you felt that your own opinion, which you expressed honestly, you got intimidated for, that only strengthened my motivation and my conviction that this was the right party' (M43). For the ressentimentful individual, 'disincentives' reinforce the initial emotional motivation.

Victimhood from stigmatization creates and reinforces ingroup solidarity: 'We've always been pariahs, evil people of society, angry people who don't think anything is good. And that in itself creates a bond' (M40). An activist argues that being 'pulled through the mud' only 'makes us stronger' (M53). This exemplifies the transvaluation mechanism at the centre of ressentiment: something that should be negative is transformed into a sign of pride and strength. Another member noted, 'If you say you're a proud to be Flemish, you're immediately stigmatised … that strengthens my convictions' (M43).

Representatives expressed this transvaluation through mythical stories. A representative described this as a 'Robin Hood' feeling, doing the right thing despite being on the receiving end of injustice (R11). Another used the metaphor of David versus Goliath and describes the party as 'a tight-knit group of underdogs' (R13). Activists see themselves as valorous because of their commitment to the party. One member explained, 'As a militant, you give without measuring your self-worth or without taking [from the party]' (M43).

The sacrifices of joining the party create a mentality of 'the world is against us, or the media is against us, or the political parties are against us. Togetherness is strengthened by that' (R32). Activists feel they are 'in the same boat' (R27). The victim identity is central to their activism, as people who fear, hate or feel disgust against others but are also on the receiving end of such feelings. This closes the feedback loop, reigniting collective ressentiment. This renewed ressentiment resurrects the need for relief through pleasant party encounters, among the safe ingroup, cultivating hope for a better future.

Conclusion

The Spiral of Ressentiment model emphasizes the emotional process of PRRP activism and explains many of the paradoxes highlighted in the introduction. A connection through friends or family, or even a chance encounter with a party leader at a football match, can trigger a process that collectivizes ressentiment and transforms apathetic supporters into committed activists. Further stigmatization resulting from membership confirms activists' identity in a way that is a source of pride, not an obstacle to engagement. Having found 'their people' allows them to express their frustrations, to link these grievances to an exclusive conception of national identity, and to keep ressentiment alive. Connecting individual alienation with hope for the national group overrides hopelessness and explains how ressentiment and high motivation coexist.

While crises may spur potential voters to turn to PRRPs, party activists are loyal to the party in a more personal way. Their friendship groups become exclusively constituted of party members, they feel they have 'suffered together' for their identity and need the party community to withstand the constant supply of ressentiment-inducing

news. They trust fellow party members at the same time as they distrust all other political institutions. This spiral leads them to more intense and new emotions, like hatred of others and group-based righteous superiority. Populism and nativism are central to this, shaping the David versus Goliath heroic narrative and hope for revived national glory.

Our model generally complements the General Incentive Model. However, some findings contradict it. Activists may participate in the party *because of*, not *despite*, stigma and perceived victimization. Incentive does not seem to be an appropriate name for a model where costs and suffering drive activism rather than disincentivize it. Powerful emotions may create feedback loops locking activists in dogmatic defence of the party, which could endure even if outcome or purposive incentives weaken.

Our analysis complements and expands upon previous models of ressentiment (Salmela and Capelos 2021). Our main contribution is identifying evidence of how positive emotions are crucial to PRRP activism, and how the regulation of collective emotion allows for the coexistence of intense engagement and high ressentiment. While non-voters and inactive citizens might be high in ressentiment, party events and social interactions transform PRRP activists into engaged and committed militants. The party fostered hope and pride in the ingroup alongside hatred and contempt for others, which moves activists' emotions from a passive to an active force. Our model explains the coexistence of highly nationalistic and anti-establishment views.

Because this article is limited to an in-depth look at a single party, more research is required to confirm and refine our explanation. Moreover, because interviewees retell their life experiences by reconstructing memories from their current standpoint, it is difficult to validate each step of the spiral, especially at the granular level of each emotion. Further research, such as experimental studies, can help address those limits by isolating psychological mechanisms. Although challenging to conduct, a longitudinal study which gathers data from activists at different stages of their journey would be ideal. Further research is also necessary for specific policy recommendations, but our work highlights why stigmatizing PRRP activists might be counterproductive.

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Notes

1 Vlaams Blok is Vlaams Belang's previous name.

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