

Feeling ambitious but economically left behind fuels feelings of discontent with government, study finds

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Economic progress can cause people to feel dispossessed and angry if they don't feel like they are also advancing, according to a study.

"The results indicate that a booming economy may not be the incumbent government's sole insurance against loss of [public support](#)," said Cecilia Hyunjung Mo of Vanderbilt University, one of three authors of the study, "Economic Development, Mobility, and Political Discontent: An Experimental Test of Tocqueville's Thesis in Pakistan," which was published in June by the *American Political Science Review*.

"People must feel they are doing well and sharing society's success."

The study was conducted using face-to-face interviews in 2013-2014 in Pakistan, covering 2,090 households in 76 villages in the Punjab, Sidh and Kyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) provinces. Subjects were divided into four groups.

- Those primed into viewing themselves as poorer than average
- Those influenced to feel that the Pakistani economy offers incredible opportunities for socio-economic mobility
- Those who were primed into both the first two propositions
- Those who weren't influenced at all

"Among people with high aspirations, the combination of being made to

feel that one's society provides great opportunities for socio-economic mobility and being made to feel that one is relatively deprived and thus has been left behind fuels [feelings](#) of discontent with government," said Mo, assistant professor of political science at Vanderbilt. "Importantly, being primed to feel relatively poor alone did not spur dissatisfaction in nearly the same way that did the combination of feeling poor despite feeling that one lives in a mobile society.

"In the group receiving these combined messages, unmet aspirations eroded their confidence in government more than that of any other group."

Today's "hyper-connected" world, courtesy of social media, makes it easier than ever to feel left behind, Mo said.

"A barrage of visuals and messages on the 'good life' from broadcast and news media, as well as their Facebook feeds, can lead to a constant recalibration of an individual's perception of their relative prosperity, potentially leading to feelings of dissatisfaction," she said.

Governments need to ensure their high-aspiring citizens have access to growth opportunities around them, Mo said.

"This is as true in high-income countries with disillusioned populations like the United States and the United Kingdom, as it is in low- and middle-income countries struggling with political instability despite making significant governance reforms," Mo said.

More information: Economic Development, Mobility and Political Discontent: An Experimental Test of Tocqueville's Thesis in Pakistan.

www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/includes/Mo_June.pdf

Provided by Vanderbilt University

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