Why (dis)trust politics?

An exploration of how Dutch more- and less-educated citizens evaluate politics and politicians

Joëlle Doek (669347)
Sociology: Politics and society
Supervisor: dr. Kjell Noordzij
25th of June 2023

Word count: 9.956

Abstract

In this qualitative study I explore what the constituent elements of political trust are for Dutch citizens. This study has two aims, namely, to find out how more- and less-educated people understand the political object and to find out how they attribute trust to their political object.

This study is needed because there is a gap in the literature with regard to how citizens understand the political object and to how citizens attribute trust to a political object. This is seen most concretely in surveys questions, where concepts like 'politics' and 'trust' are likely to be interpreted differently by different people. This means that results which seem univocal, may actually have different meanings. This qualitative study provides more insight in how people understand these general concepts.

This study uses in-depth interviews to gather insights in 1) the citizens understanding of the political object and 2) in the constituent elements of the attribution of political trust. First, the literature on the political object starts from David Easton. He distinguishes a specific and diffuse understanding of politics (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2011). Specific refers to incumbent politicians and parties, while diffuse refers to democratic principles. This study finds that the respondents with a university degree have a more diffuse political object than the other respondents.

Second, the literature on the trust relation between citizens and politics is approached from two perspectives: a rationalist and a socio-cultural perspective (Finifter, 1970; Kasperson et al., 1992; van Elsas, 2015). All the respondents, irrespective of education level, use aspects of both these perspectives in their evaluations of the political object. However, there are two differences between citizens of different education levels. First, the university-educated respondents take a more diffuse approach when they evaluate politics. Second, the HBO- and less-educated respondents experience a certain distance to politics. They have the idea that politicians and politics in general are unable to understand their daily life and struggles and thus that politics cannot create the right policies for them.

Keywords: Less-educated citizens, More-educated citizens, Political object, Political trust, Qualitative research

Content

1. Introduction

Political trust has been a concern for political scientists and sociologists for decades. Lack of political trust is seen as a potential problem for the representative democracy (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 61; Maryn, 2013, p. 13; T. W. G. van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017, p. 1; Muller, 1977, p. 454; Warren, 2017, pp. 34–35). That is, distrust of politics is feared to result in alienated citizens who withdraw themselves from political participation (Bélanger, 2017, p. 245; Meer & Zmerli, 2017, pp. 1–2; Muller, 1977, p. 454; Warren, 2017, p. 35). However, below these fears for alienation resides an uncertainty about the causes for political trust or distrust. Research has still been unable to present a definite answer about what the constituent elements of the evaluation of politics are and, thus, how people attribute trust to it (Seyd, 2016, p. 11).

The existing research on political trust started in the 1960s with extensive conceptual discussions and surveys that measure trust. There is a general consensus that trust is a relational concept, this means that it connects a subject, citizens, with an object, politics, through a trust relation (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 50; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 476; Meer & Zmerli, 2017, pp. 4–5; Seyd, 2016, p. 4). However, in the literature, there remains a discussion about 1) the political object that is judged and 2) what the constituent elements of political trust are. That is, what elements citizens use to evaluate politics and to attribute trust to it. These two points will be discussed consecutively.

First, the discussion about the meaning of the political object started with the book of David Easton *A Systems Analysis of Political Life.* In this book he introduces the difference between specific and diffuse political support (Easton, 1965; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 477). The former refers to incumbent politicians and parties and the latter to long term political tendencies and principles (Easton, 1975). This distinction inspired questions about the operationalization of the term 'politics' in surveys. As a result, studies demonstrated that respondents of a survey often interpret the term 'politics' differently than the researcher intended. That is, respondents mostly think of political incumbents, while the researcher is also interested in their opinions about the political system in general (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, pp. 50–51; Levi & Stoker, 2000, pp. 477, 480; Marien, 2013, p. 13, 2017, pp. 90–91; Seyd, 2016, p. 2). In order to mediate this, researchers tried to use a multiple item-scale of both specific and diffuse forms of politics. However, when an item asks about people's trust in 'government', the term government can still be interpreted in several ways. Some people may think of the politicians in government, while others think of the policies that are made by the government. This means that results which seem univocal, because they all measure trust in

government, actually have different meanings due to citizens having different interpretations of the term government (Marien, 2017, p. 91; Schaffer, 2014, pp. 326–327; Seyd, 2016, p. 4; van Elsas, 2015, p. 1159).

Second, the constituent elements of political trust have been discussed in relation to the operationalization of trust in survey questions (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 477; Marien, 2017, p. 90). Trust is operationalized in surveys either as a single item or a multi-item concept. The single item of trust is perceived to be problematic because it cannot do justice to the multidimensionality of the concept of trust and it is thus also likely to be interpreted in different non-univocal ways by different respondents (Marien, 2013, pp. 13–14; Seyd, 2016, pp. 3–4). However, the multi-item concept is also problematic because there is no consensus on what elements play a role in the attribution of trust to politics (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 497; Marien, 2013, p. 14; Seyd, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, a multi-item measurement of trust runs the risk of being incomplete. Moreover, it is also not clear whether the constituent elements and their content are the same for all citizens. Earlier qualitative research indicated that there is a difference between how less- and more-educated citizens understand concepts such as 'politics' and how they evaluate this (Dekker, 2012, p. 15; Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 86).[1] This difference between respondents of different education levels is explained by two, non-discriminating, theories. First, education is found to be a trustworthy proxy for political knowledge and cognitive abilities (Almond & Verba, 1965, pp. 317–318; Highton, 2009, pp. 1573–1574; Kam & Palmer, 2008, pp. 626–628). More-educated citizens have on average more political knowledge and cognitive abilities which results in a different understanding of 'politics' and different reasons to attribute trust to politics than citizens who have less political knowledge and cognitive abilities. Second, the more-educated citizens are longer socialized with democratic norms because they have had more years of education (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012, p. 742; Noordzij et al., 2019, p. 440). This means that they are socialized to evaluate certain values, such as the liberal-moral values tolerance and equality, as positive. This affects how they evaluate politics (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012, p. 742). This indicates that these groups have a different way of not only understanding politics, but also of how they obtain political trust.

This qualitative study investigates these two aspects: the political object and the elements of political trust for more- and less-educated citizens. During the interviews,

---

[1] In general, the Netherlands is regarded as a country with low corruption (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). Therefore, the theories developed in this paper about more- and less-educated citizens and their political trust also assume a low-corruption political context.

respondents are encouraged to define politics and asked to elaborate on why they (dis)trust it. The interviews are conducted with both more- and less-educated respondents to see whether there are different constituent elements in their attribution of trust. The main research question that this study thus aims to answer is: How do more- and less-educated citizens in the Netherlands attribute political trust to a political object? In order to answer this research question, the 'political object' needs to be defined first. Therefore, the following question precedes the main research question: What do more- and less-educated citizens in the Netherlands consider to be the political object?

The research takes place in the Netherlands, because it is an appropriate case to explore how citizens evaluate politics for two reasons. First, it is a multiparty system with high proportionality (Blais et al., 2021, p. 10). This means that all citizen's votes have an equal value, independent of the region they live in. This is important because this means that (dis)trust in the Netherlands is not influenced by disproportionality. Second, the Netherlands has a lot of parties which represent divergent opinions. This is visible through the presence of parties on the fringes of both the left and right side of the political spectrum (Asher, 2022; Castanho Silva, 2018, p. 239). According to the channeling discontent thesis, the presence of parties that represent all kinds of opinions can help discontented citizens to gain trust (Kemmers, 2017, pp. 382, 387, 394). The expectation would then be that in the political landscape of the Netherlands citizens could channel their discontent through voting on a party that represents their discontent. However, in the Netherlands political trust is still very low (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, 2022). This implies that the presence of parties with divergent positions is not per se sufficient to channel discontent and that more is needed for political trust (Bucx et al., 2023; Kemmers, 2017, p. 382). The interviews with citizens can elucidate what the constituent elements of political trust are for different citizens.

This qualitative study contributes to the gaps in the discussed scientific literature because it explores the citizen's perspective on the concepts 'politics' and 'political trust'. This adds to the literature in two ways. First, this research will be an addition to conceptual discussions. This qualitative study can refine the conceptual discussions, since these are mostly based on quantitative studies (Marien, 2017, p. 89). The answers of citizens give a new perspective on both the political object, the diffuse and specific aspects of it, and the elements which are part of the citizen's political trust. Second, this study can be used for future research. The analysis of how citizens themselves understand the political object and what the elements are of their attribution of trust to politics, will result in a more nuanced

understanding of how these concepts are interpreted by citizens. This insight can be used to improve the operationalization of the terms 'politics' and 'trust' in surveys.

This research also has societal relevance as it can contribute to the organization of the representative democracy. The answers of citizens will result in a better understanding of the reasons why people trust or distrust politics. When there are concrete aspects which are important to attribute trust, then politicians can use this information to adjust their behavior and to adjust the system in ways that contribute to closing the gap between citizens and politics. However, when there are no such aspects, then trust may not depend on politicians or the structure of the political system. Therefore, this study will contribute to society by either clarifying what aspects should be taken into account by politicians to improve the political structure and thereby political trust, or it will contribute by showing that trust is not dependent on politicians or political structure but depends on other factors (van Elsas, 2015, pp. 1159–1160). It will be especially interesting to see whether there is a difference between citizens of different education levels.

This study will continue with section 2, in which the theoretical framework will be set forth. There the concept of political trust will be discussed in two parts: *the political object that receives trust* and *the trust relation between citizens and the political object*. I will approach the latter part from both a rationalist and a socio-cultural perspective. In section 3, I will elaborate on the methods used in this study. That is, how the semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted and how the participants are selected. This will be followed by section 4: the results of the analysis. Just as the theoretical framework, this sections consists of two parts. The first discusses the political object of citizens and the second discusses how political trust is given. Finally this study will end with a concluding discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

Political trust refers to a relation between citizens and politics, in which the citizens are responsible for giving or withholding trust. Whether they trust or distrust the political object depends on how the political object is evaluated (Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 170; Levi & Stoker, 2000, pp. 476–477; Norris, 2011, p. 19). Before theories about the elements of these evaluations can be discussed, the political object needs to be defined. Therefore, in section 2.1. I will discuss the political object and in section 2.2. I will explain two theories about which elements citizens evaluate in order to attribute trust.

2.1. Political object

The first question, before the research question can be answered, is what citizens consider politics to be. This understanding of the political object is needed, to know what object citizens attribute trust to. Based on the work of David Easton, a continuum is construed from a specific to a diffuse way to understand politics (Easton, 1975, p. 437; Norris, 2017, pp. 23–24). The first refers to the support of incumbents, the current political parties and their members, while the latter refers to overarching political institutions (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 50; Easton, 1975, p. 437; Norris, 2017, p. 21).

In the research on political trust the distinction between specific and diffuse support is used to define the political object. However, it remains unclear whether citizens, when they think about politics, have a diffuse or specific political object in mind. The qualitative approach of this study enables to investigate whether this is the case, because it asks citizens how they understand politics without defining it for them. In the literature it is generally expected that more-educated citizens more clearly distinguish between diffuse and specific instances of politics than less-educated citizens. The reason is that more-educated citizens have in general more political knowledge and this is supposed to allow them to distinguish more clearly between a specific and diffuse political object (Achterberg & Houtman, 2009, pp. 1652–1653, 1661; Highton, 2009, p. 1565).

2.2. Relation between citizens and politics

The trust relation between citizens and politics depends on the tasks that the political object fulfills for citizens. In the literature there are two approaches which theorize about this relationship: the rationalist and the socio-cultural approach. They both identify different elements that are supposed to play a role in the generation of (dis)trust.

The rationalist approach starts from the theory of Roger Kasperson. This theory states that citizens rationally evaluate the performance of the political object. When the political object is judged to perform well, trust will follow (Easton, 1975, pp. 438–439, 445; Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 168; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 489; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 176; Meer, 2010, pp. 519, 522; Norris, 2011, pp. 7, 19, 23–24; Warren, 2017, p. 38). According to Kasperson et al. (1992, p.170), each relation of trust has four dimensions: commitment, competence, care and predictability. Commitment refers to the perception of citizens that the political object aims to reach the same goals as they do. The second dimension, competence, concerns the judgment of citizens that the political object is competent to perform their functions. The third dimension, caring, refers to the citizen's belief that the political object cares about citizens and that they try to act in the best way possible. Finally, the fourth aspect, predictability, means that the object of trust should act in the expected way. It should act in accordance to their promises and proclaimed intentions. If the political object acts in a different way, then it does not perform tasks as it is trusted to do.

This theory has a rationalist, evaluative approach where citizens are expected to use the four criteria – commitment, competence, care and predictability – to 'decide' whether they trust politics. On the one hand, the expectation could be that more-educated people more often distinguish these dimensions because they have more political knowledge and cognitive abilities to be able to discern these dimensions when they evaluate politics (Meer, 2010, p. 522). On the other hand, it is also possible that both more- and less-educated people use these dimensions, but that they use them differently. For example, one citizen may judge the competence of politicians on the basis of filed motions, while another may judge competence by whether the politician uses comprehensible language which sparks decisiveness. Both citizens use the dimension of competence to evaluate the political object, but they interpret the dimension in a different manner. This means that depending on the political knowledge and their cognitive abilities, the interpretation of the dimensions may differ even though they can all use the same dimensions.

The second approach of political trust is a socio-cultural approach. This emphasizes that trust is affected by socializations during childhood and adulthood. These socializations, together with the citizen's perception of and relation to society, affect whether citizens have political trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001, pp. 31–32; van Elsas, 2015, pp. 1160–1161). This is a broader way of understanding political trust, because it acknowledges the importance of the cultural context of citizens. I will highlight three aspects which are examples of socio-cultural aspects that can influence political trust: socialization, evaluation of social norms and political

efficacy. Socialization is the most important aspect of the socio-cultural theory, because it explains why social and cultural surroundings influence political trust. The other two aspects, evaluation of social norms and political efficacy, follow from socialization.

Socialization means that social and cultural surroundings influence people, because people internalize values and norms that are present in their surroundings. This socialization in a certain cultural context and with certain social norms takes place during childhood and subsequently adulthood (Almond & Verba, 1965, pp. 266–267; Mishler & Rose, 2001, pp. 31–32, 37–38). This process is expected to affect the political trust of people (Easton, 1975, p. 448; Mishler & Rose, 2001, pp. 31, 33). In general it is expected that more-educated citizens are more socialized with civic norms that support the democracy because they have had more years of education where democratic values, such as political participation and freedom of speech, are promoted (Almond & Verba, 1965, p. 316; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012, p. 742; van Elsas, 2015, pp. 1161–1162). However, it is also acknowledged that much depends on the family one grows up in. If politics is often discussed in the family sphere, this will influence political ideas and opinions of the children (Almond & Verba, 1965, p. 272; Dinas, 2014, pp. 827–829). The second aspect is whether politicians are perceived to act in accordance to common social norms (Finifter, 1970, p. 390). These social norms refer to the expectations about behavior that are present in the cultural surroundings of citizens and with which they are socialized during their youth. Politicians are, just as other citizens, expected to conform to these norms with regard to their behavior. However, different citizens may be socialized with different norms depending on their (cultural) surroundings. Therefore, if citizens have different norms, then they are likely to evaluate political objects differently. The third aspect is political efficacy. Citizens who feel politically efficacious, believe that their acts can influence politics or political decisions (Finifter, 1970, p. 390; Hadjar & Beck, 2010, p. 526; Rasmussen & Nørgaard, 2018, p. 40). The feeling of political efficacy is largely influenced by the social context that someone grows up in. Contextual aspects which influence this feeling of efficacy are for example: how political active parents are; how often someone talks about politics and how much attention school pays to politics. The social surroundings of more-educated respondents are often more involved with politics, which results in a higher political efficacy by the more-educated (Beaumont, 2011, pp. 216–217, 228–229). This is interesting because the feeling of efficacy is correlated with political trust (Catterberg, 2006, p. 43). This thus means that since more-educated citizens feel on average more efficacious they are likely to have more political trust than less-educated people

The qualitative approach of this study offers the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and to construct a nuanced picture of each respondent's perspective. This can then be analyzed to compare whether the more- and less-educated respondents rely on a rationalist approach and/or a socio-cultural approach when they evaluate politics. In addition, it will be interesting to see whether other aspects also play a role in the attribution of trust. For example, the research of Kjell Noordzij et al. (2021, p. 571) showed that less-educated people often have the feeling that there is a fundamental distance between them and politicians. If the political trust of less-educated people depends on incumbents, it is likely that this will also affect their (dis)trust.

3. Methods

The data for this qualitative research stems from semi-structured in-depth interviews which I conducted in the months April, May and June. The interviews are semi-structured because of two reasons, firstly, this allows an interaction and in-depth conversation between researcher and participant. It allows the researcher to ask more questions to clarify the meaning of the participant and it allows the participant to elaborate on topics that they consider to be important (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1360; Kallio et al., 2016, pp. 2955, 2959). Secondly, it guarantees that the different interviews address similar topics and thus that the answers can be compared (Guest et al., 2013, p. 31). This is important because this research aims to explore how different people understand the concept of political trust, the answers can only be compared if all the respondents have discussed political trust.

The participants of this study were selected using purposeful sampling, which means I used criteria to select a relevant sample of respondents to answer the research question (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1361; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In general, all people who reside in the Netherlands and who are eligible to vote were possible respondents for this study. However, the aim was to interview a similar amount of more- and less-educated people and to have some variation in age, gender and whether they live in a rural or urban area. Therefore, I took these characteristics – age, gender, rural/urban area and education level – more prominently into account when selecting participants, after the first interviews were conducted. I did not select respondents on other characteristics such as migration background, because migration is a salient issue in the media and in politics. Therefore, the theme of migration is likely to be important in their perception of politics and in how they attribute political trust. Since I could only interview relatively few people, this would disproportionally affect the results.

The intention was to interview around ten people, five people who are less-educated and five people who are more-educated. These groups are big enough to be able to compare the answers of the participants within a group and to compare them with the other group. More-educated refers to citizens that have a higher professional training (HBO) or university degree, while less-educated refers to citizens that have no diploma, an elementary or secondary school diploma or who have a secondary vocational training degree (MBO).[2]

---

[2] In the contemporary literature, there is a (rightful) controversy about the terms 'high-' and 'low-educated'. Therefore, I will use in the interviews, which are held in Dutch, the terms 'theoretical-educated' and 'practical-educated'. These do not fully capture the difference between secondary vocational training (MBO) and higher professional training (HBO) and university, because a lot of HBO-tracks and some university tracks are also more practical oriented (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2021). However, the aim is to reduce stigmatization

During the analysis of the results, I noticed that the answers of respondents with a university degree had a lot of similarities with each other but not with the answers of respondents with an HBO degree. Therefore, I decided to split the group of more-educated respondents up into two groups – HBO and university – and I did more interviews in order to increase the validity of the results. In the end, I have interviewed four respondents with a university degree, four respondents with an HBO degree and five respondents with a MBO degree.

In order to meet possible participants, I visited community centers in the region of Rotterdam, where I talked to visitors and asked them to participate in this research project. I decided to visit community centers because I expected that those visitors would have time to listen to my invitation to participate and that they might do the effort to ask other people to participate as well. In general it can be expected that people who visit community centers are more engaged with politics, because people who are actively engaged in society also participate more in political activities (van Ingen & van der Meer, 2016, p. 100). Therefore, in addition to participants from the community center, I used snowball-sampling to reach participants who do not attend community centers. Furthermore, I left flyers in those community centers with information about this research project and with my contact information to reach even more people. With this strategy I ended up with a total of eleven respondents, five of which are less-educated and six who are more-educated. From the eleven respondents, I met three in the community center. Other people who I met in the community center, but who did not participate, reached out to their acquaintances to help with the snowball sampling.

The interviews all started from the same interview guide with which I aimed to explore the main components of the research question and theoretical framework, namely how more- and less-educated citizens understand the political object and how they define their trust relation to that object. The interviews started with the question of what thoughts the respondents have when they think about the concept 'politics'. The aim of this question was to let participants define what they understand by politics and thus to find out how they understand the political object. Subsequently, questions were asked about their trust in this political object. Hence, both the political object and the trust relation to it, are defined by people themselves. The interview continued with questions about how their trust would increase or decrease, to see what aspects are important for their attribution of trust. In order to

---

and in general is the education on HBO and university level more theoretical in nature than that of MBO. In this thesis, however, I will use the terms 'more-' and 'less-educated' because these are the commonly used terms in English. To define what is more- and less-educated I used the ISCED dataset and an article where 'less-educated' is defined (Malgorzata Stadnik, 2022; Yunus et al., 2016, p. 119).

get a more in-depth picture of how respondents understand their relation to the political object, I also asked some concluding questions about whether they feel represented by politics and whether they have a sense of efficacy. When I finished asking all my questions about politics, I ended the interview with some general questions about age, gender, place of residence, education level and current employment. After these general questions I gave full disclosure of what I would do with these interviews, namely that I would compare conceptions of politics and political trust of people with different education levels. I only mentioned education level at the end of the interview, since I did not want to enforce the feeling by less-educated respondents that they are not entitled enough to voice their opinions. That is, in contemporary society, education level has become a legitimate way to assign status to people. People know whether they are more- or less-educated. This affects their own perception of their social status and their feeling of entitlement to share their political opinions. Concretely it means that less-educated citizens, due to their social status, feel less entitled to discuss politics than more-educated citizens (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1362; Spruyt et al., 2020, pp. 462–463; Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015, pp. 302–303; van Noord et al., 2021, pp. 13–16).

I analyzed the transcribed interviews with the help of the program ATLAS.ti. This program presents the researcher with a clear overview of the different interviews and the codes given to certain pieces of text (Hwang, 2008, pp. 524–525). The first step in the analysis was to select the relevant pieces of the interviews, I did this by selecting the relevant pieces of text, using the two core concepts that I developed in the theoretical framework: *political object* and *political trust* (Boeije, 2010, p. 101). Subsequently, I gave these pieces of text more specific codes. These specific codes were later combined into categories and themes, which were used to answer the research question (Boeije, 2010, pp. 118–120).

4. Results

This result section provides an analytic overview of the interviews with the participants.[3] In line with the structure of the interviews and the theoretical framework, both the object of politics (paragraph 4.1) and the trust relation between the respondents and politics (paragraph 4.2) will be discussed. The answers of participants of different education levels will be compared using concepts that were developed in the theoretical framework.

4.1. Political object

In their answers on the questions of the interview, respondents specified what their political object is. Using Easton's theory of diffuse and specific political objects, the answers of the respondents can be categorized (Easton, 1975, pp. 437, 444–445; Norris, 2017, p. 21). The university-educated respondents have a more diffuse object than other participants. Moreover, these two groups also focus on different political levels. The university-educated respondents focus on the country-level and international political levels such as the EU, while the other respondents focus more on country-level and municipal-level politics. The differences between the university-educated respondents and those who did not attend university will be discussed consecutively.

The respondents who have a university degree, and one respondent with an HBO-degree, discuss specific political institutions and political problems from the diffuse perspective of how things '*ought to be*' (Hannah, Karl, Jürgen, Simone, Mary). They have two ways in which they apply this diffuse perspective. First, they refer to political principles. These principles are a guideline of how they believe democracy should look like and how it *ought to be* organized. Jürgen brings up the following principle: "politics means that politics protects people and cares for people" and he uses it to evaluate the Dutch society namely that "it has become more and more the case that society is there for politics, rather than politics for society." Using political principles the university-educated respondents bring up social and political problems and they explain why these are problematic for the democracy. Jürgen, in that respect, brings up that "Groningen is a painful example. They [politics] have written a lot of reports, all at the cost of tax money.. So they do not handle tax money well.. […] That is what I mean with they are there for themselves rather than for the community." Second, the university-educated respondents compare the democracy of the Netherlands to other democratic countries (Karl, Sam). They discuss the state and healthiness of the Dutch

---

[3] In appendix 2 an overview is presented with the names of the respondents and the kind of education they have followed.

democracy by comparing it to less healthy democracies. Such as Karl who compares the situation in the Netherlands with "what happens in Hungary with the democracy, what happens in Poland with the democracy, what is the case in the United States with the democracy and that they can switch prime ministers in Great-Britain without elections." Karl concludes "that are things that do not happen in the Netherlands."

The respondents without a university degree mostly mention specific instances of politics (Bram, René, Judith, Chantal, Martha, Elizabeth, Iris). They refer to two kinds of specific instances of politics, which are all also mentioned by the respondents with a university degree, but they do not connect these specific instances to diffuse, political principles. The two kinds of specific political instances are 1) political and social problems they see in society. Judith sums up some of the problems she sees by referring to "child care, the benefits affaire […] energy crisis, reception of people from Ukraine, reception of refugees"; and 2) politicians and parties, for instance René who says "I have faith in Mark Rutte". In addition to these specific references to politics, they also have a more diffuse way to refer to politics. Rather than using a diffuse political object as reference to how things 'ought to be', they use a diffuse object to express a general feeling they have with politics. They do this, for example, by referring to "the Hague" (Elizabeth) or by defining politics as "how society is organized" (Macrina).

In addition to the different ways of referring to diffuse and specific instances of politics, there is also a difference between university-educated respondents and the other respondents in what level of politics they refer to. For all respondents the country-level is most important. Additionally, the respondents with HBO-degree and the less-educated respondents, on the one hand, often refer to the municipal-level. They have the perception that the municipal-level is more involved with their lives. Elizabeth explains that "I think I have more faith in local politics because those people know what it means if we talk about a roundabout in the neighborhood". The university-educated respondents, on the other hand, barely refer to the municipal-level but they refer to international levels of politics. That is, the comparison with other countries, but also references to the EU. For example Hannah who says that she trusts "the EU, because it concerns the representation of [country-level] interests."

The foregoing confirms the diffuse/specific continuum formulated by Pippa Norris, however, this appears to be too narrow to capture the different perceptions of the political object that came to the fore in the analysis (Norris, 2017, pp. 24–24). In addition to the axis of the diffuse/specific continuum, there should be another axis with the political levels, because

the diffuse/specific continuum is not equivalent to the different political levels (municipality, country, EU, et cetera). That is, both on municipal-level and country-level politics, one can discuss specific parties and politicians. Similarly, on both levels the diffuse political principles can be discussed. This means that the diffuse/specific continuum can be applied to all different political levels. This is also said by Norris herself in her discussion of the levels of diffuse and specific support (Norris, 2011, pp. 23–24). Therefore, I would propose the addition of an axis with political levels. This allows a more nuanced picture of how different people refer to the political object. That is, there is not only a difference in who refers to diffuse or specific political objects, the different respondents also refer to different political levels. In appendix 1, a graph can be found with an example of how such an extra axis would look like.

4.2. Trust relation between citizens and politics

The second part of the research aims to explore how people attribute trust to politics. In the interviews a lot of different aspects came to the fore. These aspects can be divided into three groups: evaluation of policies, evaluation of politicians and social evaluations. These groups will discussed consecutively in separate paragraphs.

4.2.1. Evaluations of policies

The evaluation of policies is important for the attribution of trust to politics for participants of all education levels (Bram, René, Judith, Chantal, Hannah, Martha, Karl, Jürgen, Elizabeth, Iris, Simone, Mary). All the respondents refer to specific policies, and in all their evaluations the dimensions care and competence from the rationalist approach emerge (Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 170). However, in the evaluation of the competence of policies, the university-educated respondents take a more diffuse context into account, while the respondents with an HBO-degree or who are less-educated only evaluate the direct effects of the policies.

The dimension of care is used in a similar way by all respondents. In the theoretical framework, care was explained as the belief that the political object acts in the interests of citizens (Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 170; van Elsas, 2015, p. 1163). In case of policies, the participants indeed indicate that their political trust depends in part on whether the policies are for the good of the citizens (Bram, René, Judith, Chantal, Martha, Elizabeth, Jürgen, Karl, Simone, Mary). Judith explicates that which, according to her, is not acknowledged enough in politics: "it concerns people." Moreover, Martha says about the "laws that they make" that even a "stupid housewife can understand that those are not going to work". And Jürgen says

about the childcare benefits affaire that he thinks it is "striking that so little people have been helped". Thus, for respondents of all education levels the evaluation of policies in terms of care is an important element for the attribution of trust to politics.

In addition to care, respondents of all education levels use the dimension of competence to evaluate policies. However, the way in which this dimension is used, differs for the different education levels. The respondents with a university-degree and one respondent with an HBO-degree with a lot of political knowledge, link the specific policies to long term tendencies they see in politics (Chantal, Karl, Jürgen, Simone). For example Karl, who sees that in "the past few years you have the impression in the Netherlands that we spend a lot of money on all kinds of things, while we have economized the ten years before. I think that is strange." The same is mentioned by Simone who says "look at the refugee crisis, once again we make ad hoc policy, if things seem to go well for a while … we scale down. When we know there will be another refugee flow, then we have to scale up again but then we do not have the people anymore because they found new jobs." Thus, these respondents discuss the specific policies in relation to a continuing tendency they see in politics when it comes to creating policies. They evaluate the competence of specific policy while taking its durability into account.

The participants who are less-educated and some of the HBO-respondents, however, only evaluate the competence of specific policies (Bram, René, Judith, Martha, Elizabeth, Iris). That is, they evaluate whether the policies have the desired effects. Martha discusses the policies made to help poor people in the energy crisis of 2023. She says: "who would think to give poor people first 800 euros and then 500,- euros, thus 1300 euro in total. […] they have enjoyed themselves and at the end of the year they will receive the bill [for gas] and won't be able to pay. And then? They will be even more in debt, and they need more help. Who would think of that?" Contrary to the respondents with a university degree, these respondents do not take the broader context of society into account. They only evaluate the competence of specific policies based on its direct effects.

4.2.2. Evaluations of politicians

In the interviews, the evaluation of politicians also played an important role in the attribution of trust (Bram, René, Judith, Chantal, Hannah, Martha, Karl, Jürgen, Iris, Simone, Mary). The three important themes for both the more- and less-educated respondents in this evaluation are 1) acting in the interest of citizens, 2) behavior, 3) keeping promises and acting according to their ideology. These themes will be discussed consecutively. In general, the four dimensions

of the rationalist approach come to the fore: commitment, competence, care and predictability (Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 170). In addition to these four dimensions, the evaluation also has a socio-cultural component, namely the behavior of politicians in accordance to social norms (Finifter, 1970, p. 390).

The first important theme is acting in the interest of citizens. Respondents, irrespective of education level, bring up that politicians should act in the interest of the population and not their own (Judith, Chantal, Hannah, Martha, Elizabeth, Jürgen, Simone, Mary). This means that they negatively evaluate politicians that do not act in citizen's interests, Chantal says on this matter that politicians "only look at the interests of their party or at power and status." This is related to the components care and competence. Politicians who set their individual interests aside and who act in the interest of citizens, are judged positively because the respondents believe that they care about citizens and that they are competent. When, on the contrary, they act in their own interests, they are judged negatively. One often mentioned example of how politicians do not act in the interest of citizens is the fragmentation of the political landscape (Bram, René, Chantal, Martha, Elizabeth, Simone, Mary). The respondents have the impression that politicians constantly start new parties because it improves their position and power, rather than that it results in good government. Elizabeth summarizes "It is important that there are not too many parties […] then we never get anywhere. […] I think it is very strange that if you disagree, that you start something new. Whose interests do you represent? Your own..? or those who voted for you?"

The second theme is the behavior of politicians. Politicians are judged based on how they behave in relation to other politicians and the media (Bram, René, Judith, Chantal, Martha, Elizabeth, Karl, Jürgen, Simone, Mary). This aspect is mostly related to the rationalist dimension of competence and the socio-cultural dimension of social norms. Politicians who constantly hinder each other; who do not let each other finish talking in parliament; and who do not listen to each other, are negatively evaluated by all respondents. There are two reasons why this behavior plays a role in the attribution of trust. First, respondents have the idea that this behavior is an expression of the egocentrism of politicians (Martha, Elizabeth, Jürgen, Simone, Mary). The politicians are only focused on their own position and this behavior is an example of how they try to improve their own position. This is perceived to be at the expense of good governance and thus it affects how competent they are judged to be. Jürgen says about this behavior that it affects political trust and that he has never heard of a politician "that looks into the mirror and says that is my fault." Second, the behavior is condemned because it is seen as rude (Bram, Judith, Karl, Jürgen, Simone, Mary). Chantal says that she

finds it "embarrassing, the quarreling in politics, badmouthing each others, not listening to each other's opinions." The way politicians interact in parliament is considered to be against all kinds of social norms and for this reason respondents disapprove of this behavior. This is thus an aspect where the socio-cultural approach is important, because the respondents judge politicians on the basis of norms that they have been socialized with. In line with this, when the respondents evaluate specific politicians they praise them for their behavior, such as René does when he evaluates the current premier of the Netherlands: "I have faith in Mark Rutte and a lot of respect for him because he always stays calm and rational I think, realistic."

The third theme is keeping promises. A recurring theme in the interviews is that politicians should keep their promises and should stick to their ideology (René, Judith, Chantal, Hannah, Martha, Jürgen, Karl, Macrina, Simone, Mary). This is directly related to the rationalist dimensions commitment and predictability. The respondents say, on the one hand, that politicians should do what they promise and, on the other hand, that politicians should act when a social problem occurs. This may seem like a contradiction, because politicians cannot keep all their promises if they also have to act on suddenly emerging problems. However, the dissatisfaction with politicians who do not fulfill their promises, stems from politicians that act contrary to their ideology. Thus, respondents do not expect politicians to fulfill all their promises as long as their actions are in line with their ideology. Karl articulated this very well when he says "as long as people [politicians] have a party program and they follow that, and if everything is based on ideology and as long as you can verify that, and if people behave consistently, then I have faith in them."

4.2.3. Social evaluation

In the evaluation of politics, respondents also refer to social aspects. There are two aspects which I will discuss in succession, the first is the evaluation of politics on the basis of developments in society and the second is the personal relation to politics and politicians. In both aspects there are striking differences between the respondents with a university degree and those without.

The first social aspect is the evaluation of politics on the basis of developments in society. Respondents of all education levels mention developments and tendencies that they discern in society and that affect their political trust, albeit in a different way (Bram, René, Judith, Martha, Elizabeth, Iris, Chantal, Jürgen, Karl, Simone). The university-educated respondents and one HBO-educated respondent, on the one hand, discuss the relation between politics and society as a reciprocal relationship (Chantal, Jürgen, Karl, Simone). They

acknowledge both that the current political situation is caused by the population and that politics can influence the state of society. Chantal explains the first part, by saying that "it makes sense that there is a lot of dissension between parties because this is a consequence of the individualism and egoism of citizens." The second part, that politics has the power to change society, is expressed well by Simone when she says that "politics should […] appeal stronger to what is actually needed [of citizens] and which behavior [of citizens] should change."

In this reciprocal understanding of politics and society, the rationalist concept of competence is applied to a broader object, namely citizens and politicians. Simone does this when she negatively evaluates certain societal aspects: "Maybe we [all citizens, including politicians] have organized it [society and politics] badly." Thus, this evaluation is a fusion of the rationalist and socio-cultural approach, as it uses the dimension of competence but applies it in a socio-cultural context (Finifter, 1970; Kasperson et al., 1992).

The HBO- and MBO-educated citizens, on the other hand, emphasize mainly that the state of society is a result of political processes (Bram, René, Judith, Elizabeth, Martha, Iris). They place the responsibility to create the right policies to order society by the government. When René talks about the different incomes of people he says that politics should "give more attention to the differences between poor and rich, in order to decrease the difference between those." Moreover, if the citizens are misbehaving, they argue that the government should use their power to keep the citizens in check. Bram says in that respect about using the army to manage a demonstration "they should do that more often". They thus use the state of society to judge the competence of politicians. The state of society is in that sense a reflection of the competence of politicians to govern the citizens.

The second aspect is the personal relation to politics and politicians. This relation came in two ways to the fore: efficacy and distance. The university-educated respondents often had a feeling of efficacy (Hannah, Karl, Simone). This feeling of efficacy is related to both the socio-cultural approach, and to the aspect of care in the rationalist approach. It is, on the one hand, related to the socio-cultural approach because it is connected with having the knowledge of how to be efficacious. In the interview, Simone says for example "There are enough possibilities to do that [participating in politics], enough places to do so, where you can voice your opinions." However, education level did not seem the only reason for the feeling of efficacy as other respondents also felt efficacious (Bram, Chantal, Iris, Mary, Elizabeth). It is, on the other hand, related to care because the feeling of efficacy also means that they believe that politicians are willing to listen to their ideas and opinions.

The respondents who have an HBO degree or are less-educated, however, mention another aspect in their relation to politics, namely the feeling of distance (Bram, René, Judith, Martha, Elizabeth, Iris, Macrina).[4] This feeling goes deeper than just caring or acting in one's interest, as is the case with the rationalist concept of care. Rather it is the feeling that there always remains a distance between the respondent and the politicians. Martha, for example, constantly refers to politicians in terms that imply that they have had a good childhood (Dutch: "*geboren met een gouden paplepel in de mond*") and studied a lot (she uses the Dutch word "*sufgeleerde*") and she refers to herself as part of the ordinary people, those who are not scholars and just live normal lives (she uses the Dutch word "*klootjesvolk*"). And more importantly she says "they [politicians] don't know what it is like to do with less". It is not just that she feels distance because she thinks politicians do not care about her, she specifically feels distance because she has the impression that politicians *cannot* understand her life. And for that reason they are unable to really represent her. This is a broader carried feeling, that is also formulated by Bram, Judith, Elizabeth and Iris. A similar sentiment is present in the answers of Macrina. She chose to be uninvolved in politics because she believes that she cannot influence it. She is convinced that if she would vote that this would not make a difference and that "it all goes as they want". For that reason, she kept herself completely aloof of politics to the degree that she does not know what policies are made or which parties are in government. In her case, the feeling of distance thus prevents her from interacting with politics at all.

The feeling of distance is an important element in the attribution of political trust. Respondents have the idea that when politicians cannot understand their lives, that they are also unable to create policies that fit them and people like them. This is related to the rationalist components care and competence because they indicate that politicians cannot really represent the interests of these citizens, which is a part of care, and they cannot create the right policies for these citizens, which is a part of competence. However, the feeling of distance is more related to the socio-cultural approach, as it is related to the socialization of people. The feeling of distance is strengthened due to the feeling that politicians have been raised, and socialized, in a different way with more privileges. The respondents have the idea that these privileges result in lack of awareness of lives that are different.

Despite the experience of distance, some of the respondents still have a feeling of efficacy (Bram, Iris). This means that these respondents still believe that politicians are

---

[4] This phenomenon of 'distance' is introduced and extensively studied by Kjell Noordzij (2023).

willing to listen to them and in that sense, that politicians care about them. Thus, although the feeling of distance is related to the rationalist component of care, it is not equivalent with it because the inability of politicians to understand is not the same as reluctance to listen to them.

5. Concluding discussion

I aimed to explore how people of different education levels attribute trust to politics. I did this by asking both more- and less-educated people how they understand politics and why they (do not) have political trust. These questions allowed me to gain insights in how people of different education levels define the political object and in what the constituent elements of political trust are for more- and less-educated people.

In the theoretical framework, the political object and the trust relation between citizens and politics was discussed. The first component, the political object, refers to the associations that people have when they think of politics. David Easton developed a theory on diffuse and specific support which relies on the idea that politics can be understood in a more specific or more diffuse manner (Easton, 1975, p. 437; Norris, 2017, pp. 24–23). With this study I aimed to find out how people of different education levels themselves define politics and whether they have a more specific or diffuse object in mind. The second component, the trust relation between citizens and politics, refers how citizens attribute trust to their political object. Two approach were discussed: First, the rationalist approach which defined four components which citizens are expected to use when they evaluate politics: commitment, competence, care and predictability (Kasperson et al., 1992, p. 170). Second, the socio-cultural approach which states that in the evaluation of politics, the socio-cultural surroundings also play a role in the attribution of trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001, pp. 31–32; van Elsas, 2015, pp. 1160–1161).

The most important finding of this study is that besides the similarities in how more- and less-educated citizens attribute trust, the respondents with a university degree had a more diffuse approach in their evaluation than the other respondents. In the following I will highlight the relevant findings of this study, starting by the political object and continuing with the trust relation between citizens and politics.

First, the political object. Respondents of all education levels understood this in a similar specific manner. The diffuse understanding, however, differed for respondents of different education levels. The university-educated respondents, on the one hand, referred more often to a diffuse political object by referring to political principles or by comparing the Dutch democracy to that of other countries. The HBO- and less-educated respondents, on the other hand, only used diffuse terms such as 'the Hague', to indicate politics in general. In addition to these findings, it also became apparent that HBO- and less-educated respondents mention the municipality more often than the university-educated respondents. The latter refer more to the EU. Therefore, I proposed to add to the axis of 'diffuse to specific political object' another axis which represents the political level. This additional axis is helpful to

distinguish more precisely the ways in which the political object can be understood, because it allows to distinguish specific/diffuse approaches on all political levels. This is relevant because, in addition to the differences in how diffuse/specific the political object of respondents is, the respondents also referred to different political levels. This extra axis should range from 'local to transnational political level' (Appendix 1).

Second, the trust relation between citizens and politics. The general finding is that for all people the attribution of trust includes both components from the rationalist and the socio-cultural approach. Respondents of all education levels use the rationalist criteria of commitment, competence, care and predictability. Commitment, care and predictability are used in a similar manner by both more- and less-educated respondents. Competence is used in predominantly the same way for all respondents, but the respondents with an university degree add an extra perspective where they use more diffuse principles as yardstick. For example, they look at the long term societal consequences of specific policies rather than their direct consequences.

In addition to the rationalist dimensions, the socio-cultural aspects of socialization, social norms and efficacy were also important for the respondents. The influence of socialization most clearly came to the fore in the discussion with HBO- and less-educated respondents about their feeling of distance. The feeling of distance is the feeling that politicians and politics are unable to understand the lives of these citizens because they have never lived that life. Therefore, these citizens deem politicians to be unable to estimate what kind of policies are really needed, because they cannot place themselves in the shoes of those citizens. The different socialization of politicians and these citizens, thus, affects how they evaluate politicians. The importance of social norms came to the fore when all respondents evaluated the behavior of politicians. They evaluated this behavior on the basis of generally held social norms of how one should behave. The feeling of efficacy is present by both more- and less-educated citizens to a similar degree. This is different than the literature, which says that more-educated citizens should feel more efficacious because they have more political knowledge due to their political socialization growing up (Beaumont, 2011, pp. 216–217, 228–229).

These results add to the existing literature because they give a more nuanced view of how more- and less-educated citizens evaluate politics. Contrary to Tom van der Meer (2010) who concluded that more-educated citizens rely more on the elements commitment and competence to evaluate parliament than less-educated citizens, this study demonstrates that both more- and less-educated respondents use the same elements of the rationalist and socio-

cultural approach to evaluate politics. The university-educated respondents, however, have a more diffuse approach to both the political object and the trust relation. Additionally, the HBO- and less-educated respondents use another element in their evaluation, namely the feeling of a distance between them and politicians. This feeling of distance is only present with those respondents because they have the idea that politicians cannot understand their life. This finding is in line with the research of Noordzij (2023).

This information is important for future research as it can help in the development of surveys. Surveys often use phrasings that can be interpreted in multiple ways. This study has demonstrated that there is a difference between how university-educated respondents and HBO- and less-educated respondents understand concepts such as 'politics'. For future surveys, it may therefore be interesting to measure politics as a construct consisting of different items. These items should contain politics defined in specific and diffuse ways, but it should also contain different political levels such as the municipality and the EU. This will give more precise results of how people think about these more specified instances of politics. Moreover, if political trust is measured, the questions should also contain these different items to measure politics because respondent's political trust is likely to differ for different political objects. Furthermore, this study adds to the conceptual discussions of political trust because it refines the current scientific knowledge about the differences between more- and less-educated people. It indicates that while the evaluation of politics and the attribution of trust has the same elements irrespective of education level, there is a fundamental difference in how these elements are applied. Namely, the evaluations of the university-educated respondents are more diffuse in character than those of the other respondents.

There are some aspects in the research design that may have affected the results. The first is the selection of respondents. As elaborated in the method section, I went to community centers to select respondents and I used snowball sampling. However, it is likely that the people who agreed to participate in this study, are already more politically engaged than people who did not participate. This may have resulted in a group of respondents that is less representative than expected. The second aspect is that I separated the group of respondents with a university degree and those with an HBO degree. I did that because the answers of the university-educated respondents were more alike than those of the HBO-educated participants. That is, some of the HBO-respondents seem to lean in their answers more toward the university-educated respondents, while others seemed to lean more toward the less-educated respondents. This may have to do with the fact that education was used as a proxy for political knowledge and cognitive abilities. It could be that there is especially a difference

with the HBO-educated respondents in how much political knowledge and cognitive abilities they have. Another possible reason would be differences in field of study. Namely that it depends on the field of study of the respondent whether they have much political knowledge. It would be interesting to enlarge this group in future research to explore differences in the group of HBO-educated respondents.

There are four more aspects that could use further scrutiny in future studies. The first aspect is people who are not politically engaged. In this study, I interviewed one respondent who does not concern herself with politics at all. Undoubtedly, there are more people like her and it would be valuable to explore why they do not engage themselves with politics. However, this group is difficult to reach because there is no organization where these people come together or reason why they would group together. Moreover, these people are probably not dying to participate in an interview about politics, since they do not have opinions or knowledge about it. Nevertheless, it may be possible by using one's network and snowball-sampling to come into contact with at least some of these people and to convince them to participate in an interview. The second aspect is the influence of cultural or societal developments on trust. Almost all respondents referred to developments in society and behavior of fellow citizens in their answers on political trust. This is an interesting theme to further investigate. A third aspect is the influence of political knowledge. One of the HBO participants clearly had a lot of political knowledge which also resulted in answers that were very similar to those of university-educated respondents. It seems therefore interesting to do a more in-depth study about the influence of political knowledge on answers, irrespective of level of education. The fourth aspect is the socio-cultural approach to efficacy. In this study, efficacy was to a similar degree present by both more- and less-educated respondents. It would be interesting for future studies to investigate the socio-cultural foundations for efficacy more in-depth.

6. Bibliography

Achterberg, P., & Houtman, D. (2009). Ideologically Illogical? Why Do the Lower-Educated Dutch Display so Little Value Coherence? *Social Forces*, *87*(3), 1649–1670. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0164

Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, *4*(10), 1358–1367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1965). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Little, Brown & Company. http://archive.org/details/civicculture0000unse

Asher. (2022, September 12). *Meerderheid vindt demonstraties nodig voor maatschappelijke verandering*. I&O Research. https://www.ioresearch.nl/actueel/meerderheid-vindt-demonstraties-nodig-voor-maatschappelijke-verandering/

Beaumont, E. (2011). Promoting Political Agency, Addressing Political Inequality: A Multilevel Model of Internal Political Efficacy. *The Journal of Politics*, *73*(1). https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000976

Bélanger, É. (2017). Political trust and voting behaviour. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 242–255). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Blais, A., Bol, D., Bowler, S., Farrell, D. M., Fredén, A., Foucault, M., Heisbourg, E., Lachat, R., Lago, I., Loewen, P. J., Nemčok, M., Pilet, J.-B., & Plescia, C. (2021). What Kind of Electoral Outcome do People Think is Good for Democracy? *Political Studies*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211055560

Boeije, H. (2010). *Analysis in qualitative research*. Sage.

Bucx, F., Eggink, E., Geurkink, B., van Gool, M., Huijnk, W., Josten, E., Kluizenaar, Y. de, Kromhout, M., Noije, L. van, Olsthoorn, M., Postma, D., Ridder, J. den, Roeters, A., Schellingerhout, R., Torre, A. van der, Vermeij, L., Versantvoort, M., & Vonk, F. (2023). *Sociale en culturele ontwikkelingen: Stand van Nederland 2023*. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Castanho Silva, B. (2018). Populist radical right parties and mass polarization in the Netherlands. *European Political Science Review*, *10*(2), 219–244. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773917000066

Catterberg, G. (2006). The Individual Bases of Political Trust: Trends in New and Established Democracies. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *18*(1), 31–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edh081

Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. (2021, December 14). *Invulling praktisch en theoretisch opgeleiden* [Webpagina]. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/discussion-papers/2021/invulling-praktisch-en-theoretisch-opgeleiden?onepage=true

Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. (2022). *SDG 16.2 Instituties* [Webpagina]. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/brede-welvaart/monitor-brede-welvaart-sustainable-development-goals-2022/sdg-s/sdg-s/sdg-16-2-instituties

Citrin, J., & Stoker, L. (2018). Political Trust in a Cynical Age. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*(1), 49–70. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050316-092550

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (Fifth edition). SAGE.

Dekker, P. (2012). *Political trust in the Netherlands: Measurements, methods, meanings—And some reflections on public opinion research in public opinion formation*. 1–23.

Dinas, E. (2014). Why Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree? How Early Political Socialization Prompts Parent-Child Dissimilarity. *British Journal of Political Science*, *44*(4), 827–852. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123413000033

Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. New York, Wiley. http://archive.org/details/systemsanalysiso00east

Easton, D. (1975). A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support. *British Journal of Political Science*, *5*(4), 435–457. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400008309

Finifter, A. W. (1970). Dimensions of Political Alienation. *American Political Science Review*, *64*(2), 389–410. https://doi.org/10.2307/1953840

Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. SAGE.

Hadjar, A., & Beck, M. (2010). Who does not participate in elections in Europe and why is this? A multilevel analysis of social mechanisms behind non-voting. *European Societies*, *12*(4), 521–542. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2010.483007

Hakhverdian, A., & Mayne, Q. (2012). Institutional Trust, Education, and Corruption: A Micro-Macro Interactive Approach. *The Journal of Politics*, *74*(3), 739–750. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000412

Highton, B. (2009). Revisiting the Relationship between Educational Attainment and Political Sophistication. *The Journal of Politics*, *71*(4), 1564–1576. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609990077

Hwang, S. (2008). Utilizing Qualitative Data Analysis Software: A Review of Atlas.ti. *Social Science Computer Review*, *26*(4), 519–527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439307312485

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A.-M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *72*(12), 2954–2965. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031

Kam, C. D., & Palmer, C. L. (2008). Reconsidering the Effects of Education on Political Participation. *The Journal of Politics*, *70*(3), 612–631. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080651

Kasperson, R. E., Golding, D., & Tuler, S. (1992). Social Distrust as a Factor in Siting Hazardous Facilities and Communicating Risks. *Journal of Social Issues*, *48*(4), 161–187. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb01950.x

Kemmers, R. (2017). Channelling discontent? Non-voters, populist party voters, and their meaningful political agency. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, *4*(4), 381–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1339203

Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000). Political Trust and Trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *3*(1), 475–507. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475

Malgorzata Stadnik. (2022). *NL UOE21 ISCMapping* (Final) [Data set].

Marien, S. (2013). Measuring political trust across time and space. In M. Hooghe & S. Zmerli (Eds.), *Political trust: Why context matters* (pp. 13–46).

Marien, S. (2017). The measurement equivalence of political trust. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 89–103). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Mayne, Q., & Hakhverdian, A. (2017). Education, socialization, and political trust. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 176–196). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Meer, T. W. G. van der. (2010). In what we trust? A multi-level study into trust in parliament as an evaluation of state characteristics. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *76*(3), 517–536. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852310372450

Meer, T. W. G. van der, & Hakhverdian, A. (2017). Political Trust as the Evaluation of Process and Performance: A Cross-National Study of 42 European Countries. *Political Studies*, *65*(1), 81–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321715607514

Meer, T. W. G. van der, & Zmerli, S. (2017). The deeply rooted concern with political trust. *Handbook on Political Trust*, 1–16.

Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, W. en S. (2022, September 1). *Uitdaging komende politieke jaar: Houd kritische burgers aangehaakt - Nieuwsbericht - Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* [Nieuwsbericht]. Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport. https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/09/01/uitdaging-komende-politieke-jaar-houd-kritische-burgers-aangehaakt

Mishler, W., & Rose, R. (2001). What are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-Communist Societies. *Comparative Political Studies*, *34*(1), 30–62.

Muller, E. N. (1977). Behavioral Correlates of Political Support. *American Political Science Review*, *71*(2), 454–467. https://doi.org/10.2307/1978341

Noordzij, K. (2023). *Revolt of the deplored: Perceived cultural distance and less-educated citizens' political discontent*. Ridderprint.

Noordzij, K., de Koster, W., & van der Waal, J. (2021). "They don't know what it's like to be at the bottom": Exploring the role of perceived cultural distance in less-educated citizens' discontent with politicians. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *72*(3), 566–579. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12800

Noordzij, K., Van der Waal, J., & De Koster, W. (2019). The Educational Gradient in Trust in Politicians in the Netherlands: A Status-Based Cultural Conflict. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *60*(3), 439–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2019.1580551

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

Norris, P. (2017). The conceptual framework of political support. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 19–32). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Rasmussen, S. H. R., & Nørgaard, A. S. (2018). When and why does education matter? Motivation and resource effects in political efficacy. *European Journal of Political Research*, *57*(1), 24–46. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12213

Schaffer, F. C. (2014). Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy. *Polity*, *46*(3), 303–330. https://doi.org/10.1057/pol.2014.14

Seyd, B. (2016). *How should we measure political trust?* 1–22.

Spruyt, B., & Kuppens, T. (2015). Education-based thinking and acting? Towards an identity perspective for studying education differentials in public opinion and political

participation. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, *2*(3–4), 291–312. https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2016.1150689

Spruyt, B., Kuppens, T., Spears, R., & van Noord, J. (2020). Talking Politics? Educational Category Salience Reinforces Differences in People's Willingness to Participate in Deliberative Initiatives. *Political Psychology*, *41*(3), 461–478. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12558

Ugur-Cinar, M., Cinar, K., & Kose, T. (2020). How Does Education Affect Political Trust?: An Analysis of Moderating Factors. *Social Indicators Research*, *152*(2), 779–808. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02463-z

van Elsas, E. (2015). Political Trust as a Rational Attitude: A Comparison of the Nature of Political Trust across Different Levels of Education. *Political Studies*, *63*(5), 1158–1178. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12148

van Ingen, E., & van der Meer, T. (2016). Schools or Pools of Democracy? A Longitudinal Test of the Relation Between Civic Participation and Political Socialization. *Political Behavior*, *38*(1), 83–103. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9307-7

van Noord, J., Spruyt, B., Kuppens, T., & Spears, R. (2021). In the Shadow of the Schooled Society: Feelings of Misrecognition and the Education Ladder. *Social Problems*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spab034

Warren, M. E. (2017). What kinds of trust does a democracy needs? Trust from the perspective of democratic theory. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust* (pp. 33–52). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Yunus, A., Bakar, A., Hamzah, A., & Wan Jaafar, W. M. (2016). The Practice of Hiring, Training and Promoting Less-Educated Workers in Malaysian-Based Manufacturing Companies. *Asian Social Science*, *12*, 118. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n5p118

7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1: Graph political levels
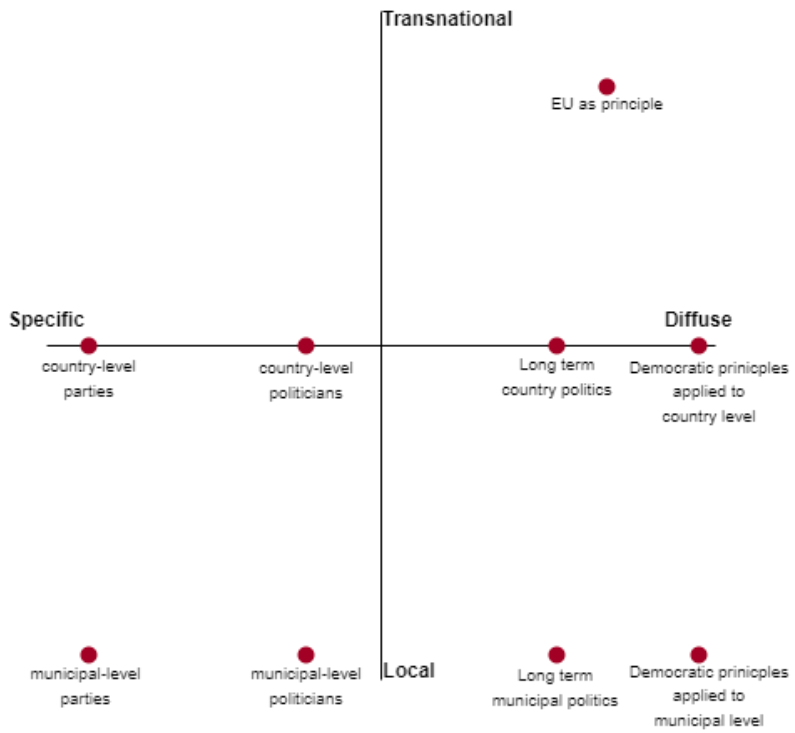
7.2. Appendix 2: Names respondents and corresponding education level

Name	Education
René	Less-educated
Martha	Less-educated
Elizabeth	Less-educated
Iris	Less-educated
Macrina	Less-educated
Bram	HBO
Judith	HBO
Chantal	HBO
Mary	HBO
Hannah	University
Karl	University
Jürgen	University
Simone	University

7.3. Appendix 3: Checklist ethical and privacy aspects of research

Instruction

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: The meaning of political trust for Dutch citizens

Name, email of student: Joëlle Doek, 669347jd@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Kjell Noordzij, k.noordzij@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 13th of February – 25th of June

Is the research study conducted within DPAS   YES

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1.   Does your research involve human participants.   YES

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research?   NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).

2.   Does your research involve field observations without manipulations
that will not involve identification of participants.   NO

3.   Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary   data
that has been anonymized by someone else).   NO

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1.   Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?   NO

2.   Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?   NO

3.   Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants?   NO

4.   Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?   NO

Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).

Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?   `   NO

Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?   JA

Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? NO

Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?   NO

Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?   NO

Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?   NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

This study investigates political trust through in-depth interviews. It is likely that political opinions/ideas of participants are part of the answers that are given on the asked questions about politics.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

The respondents are always allowed to read the material that is used and, if they wish to, they can always rectify the things they said. Moreover, the data will not be saved on the cloud, but only on a hard drive of a laptop and a USB-stick. In the final thesis, everything will be anonymized, thus, it will not be retraceable to the participants.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.
No

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

I will go to community centers in Nieuwerkerk aan den Ijssel, Capelle aan den Ijssel and Rotterdam. There I will attempt to find possible participants, also using a snowball-effect. If I need more participants, or participants of a different category (for example, younger people) I will ask people I know whether they have acquaintances whom I can interview.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

I expect to have a total of 10 participants. Ideally, five people who are less educated and five people who are high educated.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

My sample is taken from the whole population of the Netherlands above eighteen. Which were (in 2021) 14311810 people.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

I will store the audio-files and transcripts on my computer. I will also save these on an USB-stick as a back-up. Once the thesis is handed in and graded, I will delete those files of both my computer and the USB stick.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I am.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

I will back-up my research data, every time there is a change.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

I will use alternative names to ensure that everyone is kept anonymous. Moreover, if they share data that can be retraced to them, I will anonymize that as well.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Joëlle Doek   Name (EUR) supervisor: Kjell Noordzij

Date: 20-03-23   Date: 20-03-23

7.4. Appendix 4: Informed consent form

Formulier voor geïnformeerde toestemming

In dit formulier leg ik kort uit waar dit onderzoek over gaat. Ik vraag u om toestemming te geven om dit gesprek te gebruiken voor mijn onderzoek. Ik geef ook mijn contactinformatie zodat u mij kan benaderen als u nog vragen heeft.

Contact informatie

Ik ben Joëlle Doek en ik ben student sociologie aan de Erasmus universiteit in Rotterdam. Dit onderzoek is mijn afstudeeronderzoek van mijn studie.

Mijn emailadres is: 669347jd@eur.nl

Heb je vragen of klachten over de privacy en wil je deze melden aan de Erasmus universiteit? Dan kunt u een mail sturen naar: privacy@eur.nl

Onderzoek

Dit is een onderzoek naar politiek vertrouwen. Dit onderzoek bekijkt wat politiek vertrouwen betekent voor Nederlandse burgers. Dit doe ik door gesprekken/interviews aan te gaan met mensen en te vragen wat dit voor hen betekent. Voor dit onderzoek zullen de verschillende antwoorden van deelnemers worden onderzocht. Deze informatie gebruik ik vervolgens in mijn onderzoek.

Toestemming

Met dit formulier wil ik u vragen om toestemming te geven om dit gesprek te gebruiken voor mijn onderzoek. Hieronder vallen ook gevoelige gegevens, zoals politieke meningen en ideeën, die mogelijk besproken worden tijdens het gesprek. Nadat ik mijn onderzoek heb ingeleverd en dit is beoordeeld, zal ik de audiobestanden verwijderen. Ikzelf, Joëlle Doek, en mijn begeleider, Kjell Noordzij, zijn de enige mensen die toegang hebben tot deze gesprekken.

U heeft altijd het recht om:
1. De opname van dit gesprek te luisteren
2. Uw woorden te herzien, verwijderen of aan te passen
3. Uw toestemming terug te trekken
4. Een klacht in te dienen bij mijn begeleider of de Erasmus Universiteit zelf

Als u akkoord gaat met al het bovenstaande, mag u hieronder uw handtekening plaatsen:

_____