


From personal affront to a breach of trust Narratives of citizens with a lack of institutional trust

English summary

Timo Peeters, Eliane Smits van Waesberghe, Amella Mesic, Ron van Wonderen



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Timo Peeters

Eliane Smits van

Waesberghe Amella Mesic

Ron van Wonderen



Met voorwoord van Hans

Boutellier

met medewerking van

Meike Jansen

Tommie Lambregts

Aron Leijenhorst

Maya Pauels



Josien Pieterse , Netwerk Democratie

Anne de Zeeuw, Netwerk Democratie

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Introduction

It is so easy to say: 'People are losing their trust in institutions.' We can hear or read this somewhere every day. Just as the opposite can be heard and read about: 'The Dutch still fully trust their government.' In these opposites resonate the sounds produced by social media on the one hand and statistics on the other. Maybe this means they are both true, depending on how and where we look, with all the bias that goes with it. Similar to how survey research flattens complex consciousness, the social media amplify existing resentments. 'Trust' is psychologically complex and sociologically variable. People's views are ambiguous and may vary according to the subject and mood of the day. This applies all the more to 'the trust in the democratic constitutional state', as everybody has his or her own substantive imagery associated with it.

Nevertheless, it is important to gain insight into what the concerns and views among Dutch citizens regarding the constitutional state are. That is, after all, the backbone of our society. We are pleased the WODC has given us the opportunity to carry out a study into it. The present report tries to make the citizens 'distrust' of the democratic constitutional state speak, against the background of the figures and the theory. In this speaking, we have not aimed for representativeness. We have tried to get a grip on what people mean when they turn against the government or mistrust institutions. It determined both our selection of respondents and the nature of the interviews. You can read all about it in this special study on factors and stories. All kinds of things are going on in the minds of the Dutch people and it is good to know about them.

The study had already been started when the corona pandemic hit in March 2020. The figures and literature had been studied and most of the respondents had been

talked with. It has been said more often: the corona crisis seems to be a social experiment, the effects of which are becoming increasingly clear, while the end is not yet in sight. Because of its duration, the crisis is evolving from an occasional disaster to a disruptive process. This also has an impact on the public's trust in the government, and thus on their trust in the democratic constitutional state. To what extent are people willing to comply with government guidelines – national, regional or local? And is the government able to manage this crisis effectively? We do not dare give an answer, and that is not just because we conducted the majority of the interviews before the onset of corona in the Netherlands. Perhaps more important is that you should always look at the response to a crisis like this over a longer period of time. This is because, at first, a certain national pride often emerges about the way the problems are dealt with, – an effect called 'rally-round-the-flag'. Therefore, it is not unexpected that, in the Netherlands, the corona crisis initially led to an increase in trust in the government, the cabinet, the prime minister, the security region and the mayor. Yet, it is also typical that it seems the atmosphere has started to change as the crisis continues.

*Although we have been unable to take it into account in this study, we can still say something about the breeding ground for the growing unrest. Because of its longer duration, the corona crisis seems to further stir up the already existing mistrust. This happens in part with other actors and also with some other arguments – insofar as conspiracy theories play a role. Yet, what never changes is the need to point the finger at 'the culprits'. The existing mistrust, enhanced by the social media, can serve as a breeding ground for all the understandable discontent about the measures. In that emotional mood, anyone can be guilty of the virus: George Soros, Bill Gates, 5G, prime minister Rutte, at any rate the elite. Who were already increasingly mistrusted anyway. **his** brings us back to the report, in which we have found several answers to the reasons for this mistrust. People do not feel seen, the government is invisible, there is inequality and injustice or people see, above all, a failing government. Reading this report will reveal the depth of this*

discontent. And it will also become clear that it is impossible to offer immediate action perspectives for this problem. What actually is clear, however, is that the discontent produces a signal intended not just for the authorities. During the reconstruction after the corona crisis, it will be of vital importance to win back trust across the full width of the public domain. Too many people feel that the government, the authorities but also the organizations and institutions, are not working for but against them.

In this context, we should expect an intensification of the social conflicts – a stage of politicisation following the pragmatic politics of recent decades. Who is going to pay for this crisis? And do we want to have the same society back as the one we had before the crisis? Legitimate political questions that ask for an answer people will be able to identify with. It is not a simple task, but it ultimately is everybody's concern. The trick will be to get society reorganised closer to its citizens and their concerns. Years ago, the British intellectual Maurice Glasman already stated that the big question of this time is 'how to get more love into the system'. That is the challenge brought into sharp focus by the corona crisis.

■ Prof. Hans Boutellier

■ Wetenschappelijk adviseur Verwey-Jonker Instituut

Summary

In this study, we have given the floor to citizens without trust in the democratic constitutional state and its institutions. They represent a part of Dutch society that has until now been heard and understood too rarely. Who are they and what stories do they have to tell? These are questions that are not only important from a theoretical viewpoint, but from a social viewpoint as well. After all, democracy never works equally well for everyone. It is a machine that needs constant adjusting and is never finished. It means that you may expect a democracy to be receptive to critical voices. Furthermore, a lack of trust can, in some cases and under particular circumstances, turn into behaviour harmful to democracy or the rule of law, for example when it translates into violence.

Problem definition and method

The central problem definition for this study is:

What are the characteristics and stories of the (groups of) Dutch citizens who have no or little trust in the democratic constitutional state and its institutions? And what are the consequences of the insight into these characteristics for possible action perspectives to restore this trust?

To be able to answer these questions, we have conducted fifty in-depth interviews with respondents from seven regions about the lack of trust in the democratic constitutional state and its institutions. The majority of the interviewees were 'distrusting' citizens.

Simultaneously, for each region, we have interviewed one or two citizens who, because of their function or active, participating role in society, were able to analyse the issues regarding trust and mistrust at a higher level of abstraction (experts).

The narratives in five themes

People's views are layered and often consist of a complex whole of ideas, images and experiences. While structuring the views at the foundation of the lack of trust, we have tried to stay as close as possible to the character of our respondents' narratives. We have concluded that the narratives are concentrated around the following five themes:

1. Invisibility of the government. This theme refers to the image of a government that has grown ever more distant from its citizens. This is felt most urgently at the local level, where the government is traditionally most tangibly present. The closure of physical municipal service desks and police stations, out of control digitalisation, powerless city districts, and complex rules and regulations with which the overwhelmed citizen has to deal all alone, - these are described developments that show the government's retreating movement, and not seldom a 'distrusting' citizen who feels abandoned.
2. Invisibility of the citizen. Respondents indicated they feel unseen by the government. They think the human dimension has been lost in the contact with the government, and that the government no longer knows what is going on in society. They also feel that the government does not take responsibility often enough, which makes it insensitive to particular social issues. A number of respondents pointed out the fact that the distance between government and citizen also leads to a government that distrusts its citizens.

3. Unequal treatment. This is about dissatisfaction driven by an 'us versus them' feeling, with 'us' feeling deprived or suspecting that other groups get preferential treatment, - the narratives are about disadvantaging people as well as favouritism. There is discontentment about the conviction that the government favours, above all, itself or particular groups in society: the elite, Dutch people with a migrant background, refugees, white Dutch people and those living in the Randstad.
4. The citizen does not get heard. Respondents felt they do not get heard, both in decision-making in which they are directly involved as stakeholders (or in which they feel they should be treated as stakeholders), and in decision-making at a national level, in which they are indirectly involved as stakeholders (coalition formation and the follow-up after referenda). They also express their dissatisfaction with what we have called 'pretence participation', when the citizen is rustled up solely for window dressing. 'Unpopular' honesty about the fact that there really is no participation is preferred over dancing around the issue. This was linked to the need to 'take the citizen seriously' and also to what a citizen should expect of democracy.
5. Incompetence. Respondents indicated that they think officials, politicians and administrators are incompetent. They also reproached politicians and political parties for a lack of vision. Respondents argued that politics is driven by fear for the big narrative; the focus is on winning votes and the short term. Here, too, the citizen appears who does not feel that his or her wishes, concerns and problems are taken seriously. Finally, respondents thought that the parliamentary system is an obstacle to sound and decisive political action, since it is conducive to political fragmentation.

Who is the government?

The themes show that our respondents mainly base their trust in the government on its performance, which is called an object-driven approach in the literature. Thus, the narratives tell us something, not just about the mistrust of our respondents and who they are, but also about who the authorities are or how they are experienced by our respondents. In this context, we have several observations:

- Sometimes, respondents literally do not know who the authorities they should trust actually are: 'Where should I ring the bell?' 'Who is the police officer on our beat?' 'What is an area broker?' The literature mentions four characteristics that are relevant in citizen's assessment of whether or not to trust the authorities (capability, care, accountability and reliability).¹ . We conclude that the question "Who is the government?" is underlying these assessment factors as a more fundamental question. After all, prior to citizens' assessment based on these four characteristics, they need to know who or what they are dealing with.
- When citizens have trouble identifying the institution or the official they should trust, this not only can result in more distrust but also in an upscaling of this distrust. Distrust directed at a specific official, service desk or service then leads to distrust of, for instance, the municipality or the government in general.
- Invisibility of the government almost automatically turns into invisibility of the citizen. To not see and to not be seen are two sides of the same coin.

1 The citizen who assesses whether or not to trust, looks at the extent to which the object to be trusted is equipped with the means to act effectively (capability); the extent to which the object is inherently involved with his/her interest (care); the extent to which the object can be held accountable (accountability); and the extent to which the object's behaviour can be predicted, based on the past (reliability).

- We can also interpret the question ‘Who is the government?’ as ‘Who calls the shots within the government?’ Part of the respondents has the idea, for example, that there is an elite that more or less pulls the strings.

Who is the citizen with a lack of trust?

Based on the quantitative data of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), we have determined that citizens with less institutional trust more often are lower educated, men, older than 50, and PVV and SP voters. The interviews we have conducted with citizens with a lack of trust do not add any additional ‘hard’ characteristics to this. They do show, however, the cracks in this standard idea about the distrusting citizen, mainly regarding the assumptions that can be easily projected on this idea. The distrusting citizen in our study had many faces: from politically active to politically withdrawn and from highly educated to low educated. Even more important is that our study questions an argument, often heard during policy interventions, that a lack of trust is the result of a lack of knowledge among citizens; ignorance breeds intolerance, which requires a knowledge injection. Yet, in general, our respondents, even those who are lower educated, seemed to be well informed

A process-driven approach to trust

How informed our respondents were is hard to explain when we only look at it from the perspective of the object-driven and subject-driven approaches dominant in the literature. Instead, it requires what we have called a process-driven approach to trust. This approach assigns explanatory power to mechanisms that assert themselves once the first impetus for mistrust has been given. It turns out that distrust is fed by, among other things, the enormous availability of distrust-confirming information usually at hand at platforms such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. The steering and compartmentalising operation of these social media’s algorithms enhances this process. Furthermore, distrust can generate a pull effect once it has manifested itself in a person. This happens, for instance, as distrusting citizens seek each other out because of their political affinities, which tends to exacerbate their distrust. In addition,

distrusting people’s tendency of avoiding contact with the authorities, may play a role in keeping the distrust alive; it may block a person from gaining new, ‘positive’ experiences that could contribute to a restoration of trust. Mistrust seems to be a terrain where demand and supply find one another quite easily. We can conclude from this that it is not a lack of information that drives mistrust, but rather a lack of information that spreads around other sound-bites. It also shows, however, that mistrust is easily reinforced once it has reached a certain level. And at that point, it is difficult to diffuse it.

Restoration of trust

How can we mend this lack of trust? This question is as logical as it is treacherous. That is to say, every government that considers this assignment, should ask itself first of all to what extent it should want to restore trust. After all, a critical, monitoring attitude of citizens, – which may result in scepticism towards institutions and people in power, but also in consent and trust -, is actually beneficial to democracy. Moreover, the state is capable of doing something about this only to a limited extent. Social discontent such as displayed by a part of our respondents cannot be seen as separate from processes such as globalisation and neoliberalism, which also surmount national government. Furthermore, each attempt at the restoration of trust will have to compete with the cynicism that so easily gets the upper hand at platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Therefore, in the policy field of the restoration of trust, modesty and realism are fitting. The best chance of success, we think, is when two directions will join forces that can be summarised as nearness and participation. To be seen and also to be heard, that is what it is all about. Or, seen from the perspective of government, to be present but also to be there for the citizen. This requires a forward move by the government, in full acknowledgement of the risks involved. The past has shown that well-intentioned opportunities to participate can get hijacked by what has been called the 'participation elite', which foments political inequality. The irritation of our respondents about what is experienced as sham participation, - the citizen feels his or her presence is just for show -, shows that, in the words of our respondents, the creation of a 'realistic influencing sphere' is a necessity. This formulation is not only an expression of the wish for more real participation, but also of the wish to be better informed about the considerations involved in decision-making.

COLOFON

Opdrachtgever	Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek en Documentatiecentrum
Auteur:	Mr. T.D. Peeters Drs. E. Smits van Waesberghe A. Mesic, MSc Drs. R. van Wonderen
Voorwoord Met medewerking van	Prof. dr. J.C.J. Boutellier M. Jansen, MSc T. Lambregts, MSc A. Leijenhorst, MSc M. Pauels, MSc J. Pieterse, Netwerk Democratie A. de Zeeuw, Netwerk Democratie
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