

# Political trust in The Netherlands

## Measurements, methods, meanings – and some reflections on public opinion research in public opinion formation

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Political trust has become a core concept in recent empirical research on mass political attitudes, and a critical indicator for success and failure of politicians in the media and public debate. However, our measurements of political trust are (almost always) very basic: How much do you trust ... politicians, parliament, government? With response options ranging from tend to trust/tend not to trust, to some value from low to high trust, what do these answers mean? In the Dutch Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB) we have asked ourselves this question continuously since its launch in 2008. We have discussed the meaning of political trust in focus groups and with various questions we have asked the respondents in our surveys to explain their scores and to give reasons for trust and distrust. After a brief review of the literature on measuring trust and confidence, I compare various political trust indicators for the Netherlands in the last decades (Eurobarometer, European Values Studies), I concentrate on the qualitative and quantitative data from the COB surveys (and some additional information from the focus groups): data of about 18,000 respondents (from 2008 until the first half of 2012). I further analyse the different arguments people give for (lack of) trust, and differences in correlates and backgrounds of trust measurements between groups and over time. The basic question then is: do we measure real differences in real trust or do we measure different types of trust (or different attitudes of loyalty, satisfaction ...) between people, groups and over time? Can we, and can the public, journalist and politicians trust our trust measurements?

Last but not least we reflect on possible implications of making trust findings public, and whether and how we as political scientists should take these implications into account. I present cynics and sceptics on the public use of public opinion surveys and sketch a more positive critical perspective of public opinion research as a 'communicative institution' alongside the mass media and the publicity-oriented associations of civil society.

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*“The wealth of data and the statistical significance of the correlations are too tempting to resist, and thus trust has become a focus of scholarly attention and a presumptive cause of various desirable political outcomes.” – Clearly & Stokes (2009: 309)*

In this paper I want to reflect upon simple measurements of institutional political trust as they are available in many surveys. The findings are important nowadays in public and political discussions. The numbers are used as given facts about the political atmosphere, editorials use them to comment on the performance of governments, and politicians worry or are happy depending on the trends and their role as governing party members or members of the opposition.

After saying a few words on the thinking about trust and the measurement of social and political trust, I will present some graphics about political trust in the Netherlands in a European perspective, and trends compared to trust in other institutions. I do so to give an idea about where we are in the Netherlands and about the reliability of the measurements: do the various indicators result in the same patterns and trends? Then I talk a bit more about the Dutch Citizens’ Outlooks Barometer (COB) as a source of data for our further investigations, starting with information about how people talk about trust and the scores they give to political and other institutions. This gives us an idea about the subjective meanings of the measurements, leading to conclusions about their validity. The next and last empirical part of this paper is the quantitative investigation of the political trust scores. How are they interrelated and how do they relate to indicators for political discontent, distrust, etc.? This is meant as another test of the meaning/validity of the measurement and an exploration of trust patterns: is it one-dimensional or are their different types?

In the last section I come to conclusions about what we measure and about the sense and nonsense of the publication of findings.

## **Trust in theory and in surveys**

‘Trust’ has various meanings in everyday speech: calculability and predictability (you can trust that the postman will come, that your bicycle will be stolen if you do not lock it), supposed trustworthiness and honesty (you trust that an acquaintance will return a book, that the shopkeeper will not cheat you) and the belief in the capacities and in particular the good intentions of another person, group or institution (you trust your doctor, a friend who gives you advice). Thus, ‘trust’ ranges from beliefs about predictable bad behaviour to faith in the good intentions that lie behind unpredictable behaviour.

A diversity of meanings can also be found in the social science literature (see e.g. Luhmann (2000 [1968]), Seligman 1997, Braithwaite & Levi 1998, and Hardin 2002, to name just a few well-known earlier works). However, most scholars might agree that trust is about social relationships, incalculability and the willingness to take risks. But it

is more than just risk-taking: It implies the expectation that others will respect certain obligations or traditions, or your interests. Seligman (1997: 16-30) prefers to describe the trust that another person will do what he or she should do in accordance with tradition or reason as 'reliance' or 'confidence'.<sup>2</sup> In his terminology, 'trust' is always related to situations in which expectations of roles and functions no longer hold water. Earlier experiences cannot be used as a basis and there is an essential lack of knowledge about the motives and capabilities of the other person. There must be a 'leap of faith'. In the uncertain/unclear situation to which Seligman refers, trust is basically the belief in the goodwill of the other. This view probably comes closest to matching public opinion. According to responses to an open question in a population survey in the US, the most important cause of falling trust in politics is the idea that politicians think too much about their own interests (Ruscio 1999: 645). This conviction about the morals of others could stem from an optimistic view of humankind and from generally good experiences, or from a psychological need to trust others (distrust is unpleasant, tiring and depressing).

Trust implies a willingness to place the fate of one's interests under the control of others. Hardin (2002) talks about trust as an expression of an 'encapsulated interest': A trusts B to do X if A believes that B has a reason to act in A's interest or at least to take strong account of A's interests (because B feels very closely associated with A, B wishes to sustain the relationship with A, A could one day take revenge, etc.). A's interest is thus encapsulated in B's interest. This idea of trust assumes a factor 'X' and some knowledge of B's own interests and scope for action. There is little point in this perspective in talking in general terms about 'trust in other people' or about 'trust in the government': there is no clear X, and there are usually also no reasonably well-founded expectations of interests and behaviours within the government. Now, this might be a bit over the top, because people might have expectations of organizations similar to their expectations of other people, and it might not be a specific 'X', but there is probably some idea of the issues at hand. "Hardin's formulation makes it seem that the list of issues over which A trusts B is known in advance, but in practice this is rarely the case." (Hoffman 2002: 378).

Before continuing about trust in government and political trust, let me say first a few words about social trust. That was after all the core concept of trust in the 'Civic culture' perspective of Almond and Verba. Trusting other citizens was seen as an important condition for feeling free to express political opinions as well as an incentive for collective political behaviour. To measure social trust, the authors (Almond & Verba 1963: 212-213) used a small scale from Morris Rosenberg (1957), of which one item has spread all over the world: 'Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?' This question has been copied inter alia in the European Values Studies and later the World Values Studies. For reasons of time series and comparisons with other surveys the question is still popular, although it is a somewhat strange question. Miller and Mitamura (2003) provide arguments and empirical evidence to show that the two possible answers are not trust

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<sup>2</sup> There is much more to say about the difference between trust and confidence, but not here: In this paper I focus on meanings of trust in the Dutch population, and in Dutch, there is only one word for it ('vertrouwen') anyway.

and distrust, but trust and caution, or a perception of other people's trustworthiness and a 'self-evaluation regarding the respondent's degree of comfort in taking risks. Thus the two halves of this question are conceptually distinct. Obviously it is possible for a risk-averse person to feel that people in general are trustworthy, but still to be inclined to be careful in dealing with others.' (Miller & Mitamura 2001: 63-64). The 'lower trust' among women and the elderly might simply indicate their higher levels of risk aversion and feelings of personal vulnerability; the decline of trust in the USA might actually be an increase in caution. Using the question in the Netherlands, we have asked people in open questions and in focus groups to give reasons for their choice between 'most people can be trusted' and 'can't be too careful', it can be shown that whereas 'distrust' responses often refer to (negative) experiences, 'trust' responses seldom refer to experiences but often to some basic (moral or philosophy of life) decision. Responses to open survey questions are not easily to classify, but trusters almost never refer to positive participation and networking experiences (as would be expected from social capital theory). Quantitative analyses of 'generalised social trust' confirm that this trust is less a result of social networks than part of some 'personal strength' complex related to individual resources and feelings of efficacy and self-esteem (Scheufele & Shah 2000, Miller & Mitamura 2001, Dekker 2004). There are serious doubts as to whether measurements of (generalised) social trust – not only the old 'most people can be trusted/can't be too careful' choice, but also the question in other formats and series of similar questions – really measure a specific attitude of trust towards others or a basic self-confident optimism.

Measures of social trust have been related to various indicators of institutional and political trust. Positive relationships are almost always found between different measures of trust in survey analyses – between institutions, between institutions and social as well as political self-trust. Someone who trusts others is more inclined to trust institutions, and someone who trusts one institution is also more inclined to trust others (Newton & Zmerli 2011).

Much research has been done on the backgrounds or determinants of the trends and group differences in trust, mainly at the micro-level of differences between individuals, but more and more on the macro-level of differences between places and countries, as well as combinations of both (too much to refer to here, see for and from the Netherlands, respectively, Bovens & Wille 2008 & Hendriks 2009, and Van der Meer 2010). Analyses can sometimes become quite complex and the revealed relationships are becoming more and more specific; sometimes they just become funny. To give one example:

*'We find that trust (mistrust) in the European Central Bank, the EU, national government, the law and the UN all impact positively (negatively) on well-being' (Hudson 2006: 62).*

Well-being as a result of an attitude towards the ECB (the what?)? How far removed can a political scientist become from reality? There is less research about possible consequences of (lack of) trust, but that literature is growing as well (Hetherington 1998; Marien & Hooghe 2011).

This is however not the place to discuss these determinants and effects of political trust. I want to focus on the measurement of political trust as such. I think Nannestad (2008: 415) is right when he signals

*“... a wide gap between much of the theoretical and conceptual work on trust and the bulk of empirical studies. Much of the recent empirical work on trust – be it based on surveys or experiments – does not seem to proceed from any clear account of what is meant by trust in the first place. Rather, trust is taken to be what is measured by one or more survey questions.”*

For institutional political trust there are some scales and some questions that specify aspects of trust (trust to speak the truth, trust to do the right thing for the country) and there are political trust scales (or distrust and cynicism scales) based on opinions about politicians (looking out for their own interests, serving vested interests, nepotism, etc.), but in most cases trust is the answer to the question ‘how much do you trust ...’.

## The Netherlands in a European perspective

I will present four graphs, each showing two measures of political trust (trust in parliament and trust in government, or in politicians) in the Netherlands compared to as many European countries as possible in the period 2008-2009. The first two are from round 4 of the European Values Study and round 4 of the European Social Survey. Both are often dated as ‘2008’, but the data were actually gathered in 2008-2009 (and for the EVS as recently as 2010 for a few countries). This is a not unimportant detail, because political trust data are not stable and the financial crisis that hit European countries in the second half of 2008 probably had a substantial impact, as we will see in the next section.

Figure 1 includes probably the largest number of European countries available in one survey (45) and offers the possibility of unusual comparisons. As regards both trust in parliament and trust in government, the Netherlands is not only passed by the usual suspects Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, but also by Azerbaijan (AZ), Belarus (BY) and Kosovo (XH). In figure 2 we have to replace trust in government, which is not available in the ESS, with trust in politicians. These people are evidently less popular than the more neutral institution of government.<sup>3</sup> All countries are now below the diagonal, implying that parliament is trusted more than politicians everywhere. Denmark and the Netherlands have the mildest views towards politicians; Dutch trust in parliament is only surpassed by the Danes and the Finns.

Figures 3 and 4 are based on data from Eurobarometer surveys 71.3 and 74.2, both from the middle of 2009. The questions have a different format (in 71.3 the usual EB-format of ‘tend to trust’ or ‘tend not to trust’, and in 71.4 a 10-point scale) and a different place in the questionnaire (in 71.3 after a few questions about life satisfaction, how

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<sup>3</sup> Which is probably not unexpected, but nevertheless interesting. In other fields real people are probably more trusted than systems (teachers more than the educational system, doctors and nurses more than the health system).

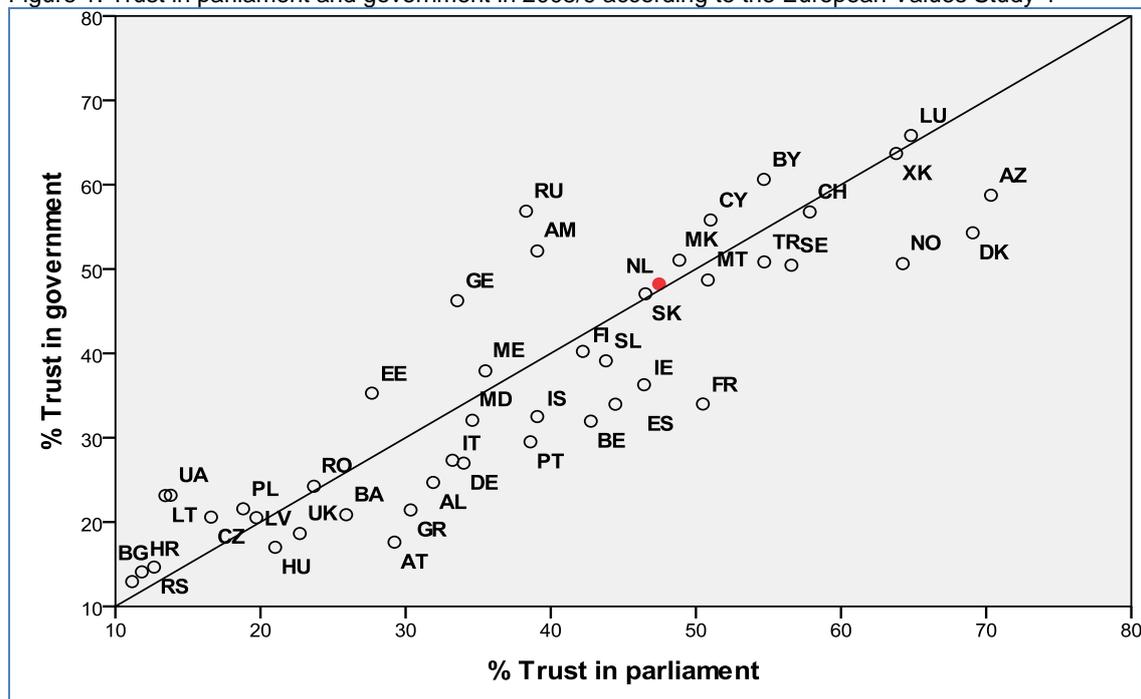
the country is faring and the EU, and in 74.1 in between questions about poverty and social exclusion).

In both figures the Netherlands is among the high trusting countries, together with the Nordic countries, Luxemburg and Austria.

Comparing all four graphs, we find modest to high correlations between the measurements of trust in the same institution between surveys. For parliament it is .84 for the 28 EVS/ESS countries, .81 for the 30 EVS/EB71.3 countries, .71 for the 287 EVS/EB72.1 countries, .92 for the 24 ESS/EB71.3 and the 22 ESS/EB72.1 countries, and .92 for the 27 EB71.3/EB72.1 countries. It is somewhat lower for government (.74 and .69 for EVS/EB and .92 for EB/EB (and social trust is .94 for the 28 EVS/ESS countries). Although there are a few unstable countries, the position of the Netherlands is quite similar in three of the four graphs. Figure 1 is somewhat exceptional, not only because the Netherlands is overtaken by some unexpected countries (higher trust in Belarus?!) but also because of the distance from the Nordic states and Luxemburg. In the three figures in which parliament and government are compared, the Netherlands is on or very close to the diagonal of trusting both institutions equally.

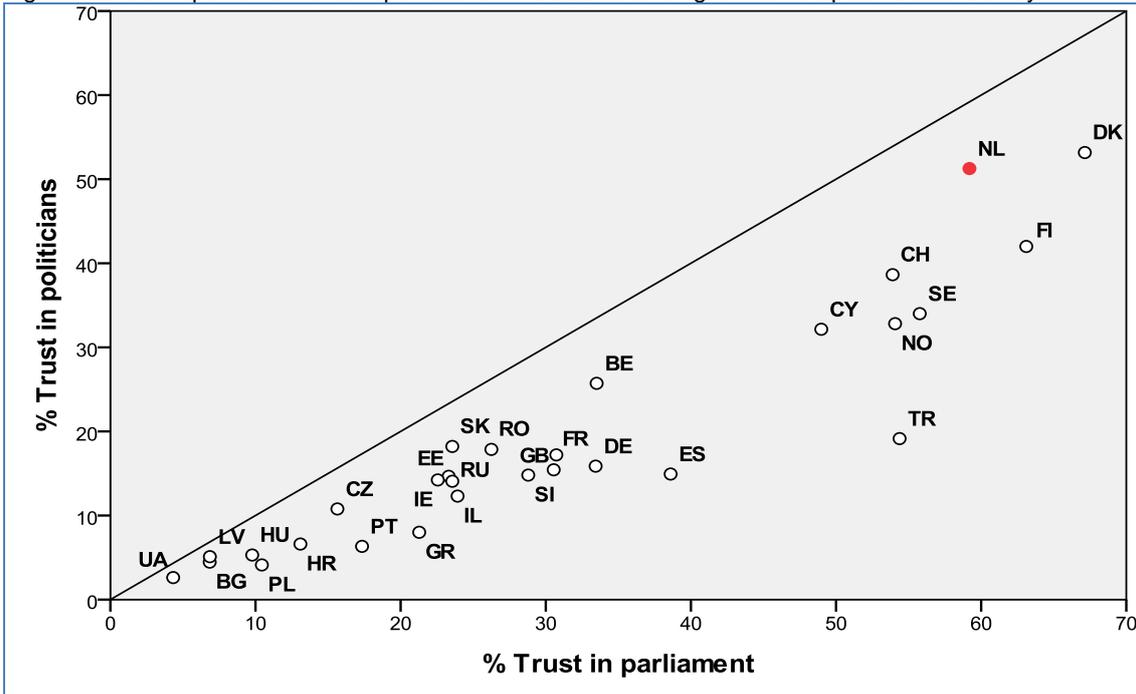
The overall impression is that, at least as regards the position of the Netherlands in Europe, the measurements are quite reliable.

Figure 1. Trust in parliament and government in 2008/9 according to the European Values Study 4<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> % 'A great deal' and 'quite a lot' (and not 'not very much', 'none at all' and 'don't know') in reply to 'Please look at this card and tell me, for each item I read out, how much confidence you have in them ...'.  
Source: EVS 4 (18+) (2008/9) (SL=SI)

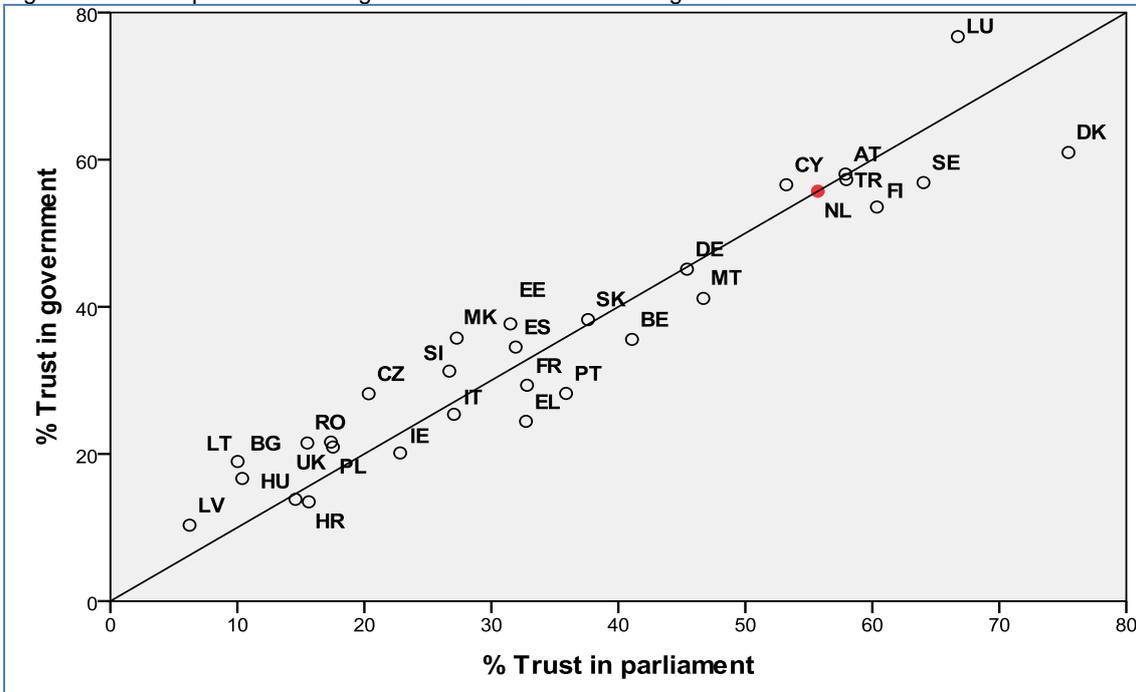
Figure 2. Trust in parliament and in politicians in 2008/9 according to the European Social Survey 4<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> % 6+ scores in reply to 'Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you *personally* trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.'

Source: ESS 4 (15+) (2008/9) (GB = UK)

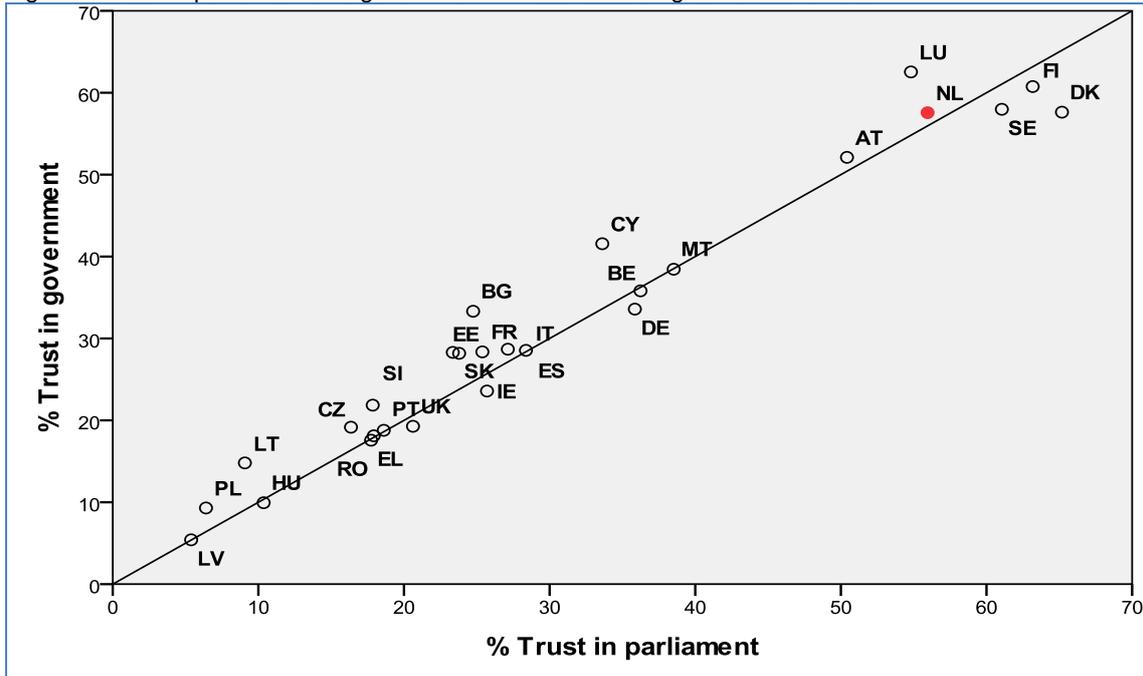
Figure 3. Trust in parliament and government in 2009 according to Eurobarometer 71.3<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> % 'Tend to trust' in reply to 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it'

Source: EB 71.3 (15+) (June-July 2009) (EL = GR)

Figure 4. Trust in parliament and government in 2009 according to Eurobarometer 72.1<sup>a</sup>



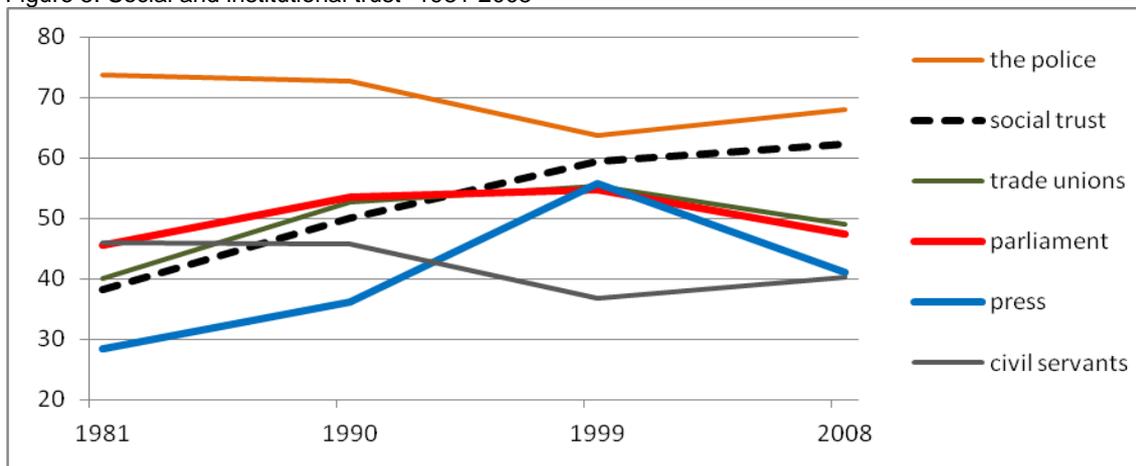
<sup>a</sup> % 6+ scores in reply to 'Please tell me how much you personally trust each of the following institutions using a scale from 1 to 10 where [1] means 'you do not trust the institution at all' and [10] means 'you trust it completely'.'

Source: EB 72.1 (15+) (August-September 2009) (EL = GR)

## The Netherlands over time

Here we have three figures: the 9-years measurements from EVS 1981-2008 in figure 5, the once or twice-yearly measurements from EB 1997-2010 and biennial measurement of social trust from an SCP survey in figure 6, and the quarterly measurements from COB 2008-2012 in figure 7 (the biennial ESS 2002-2010 could be added).

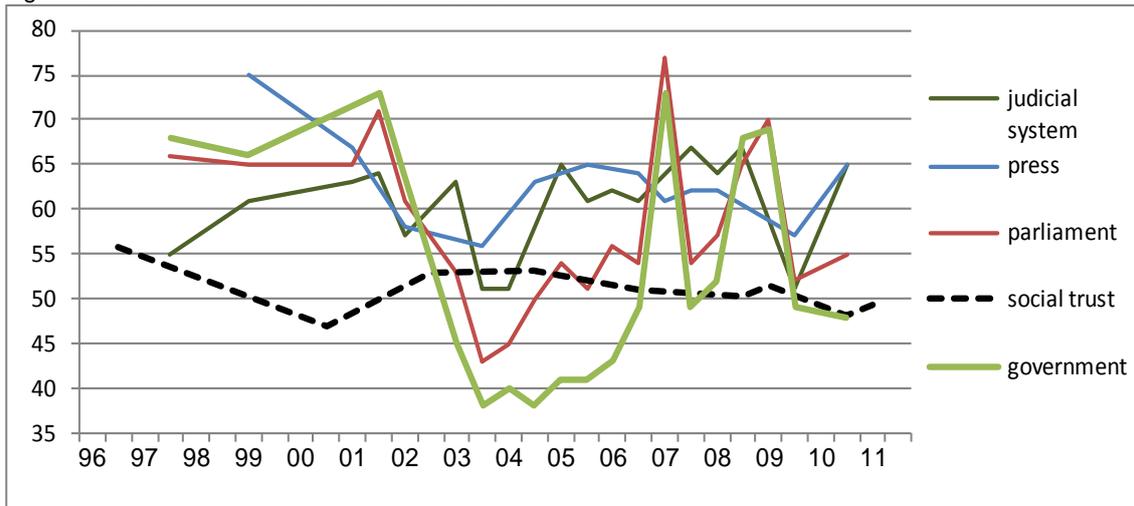
Figure 5. Social and institutional trust<sup>a</sup> 1981-2008



<sup>a</sup> Social trust = % 'Most people can be trusted'; institutional trust = % 'very much' and 'quite a lot'

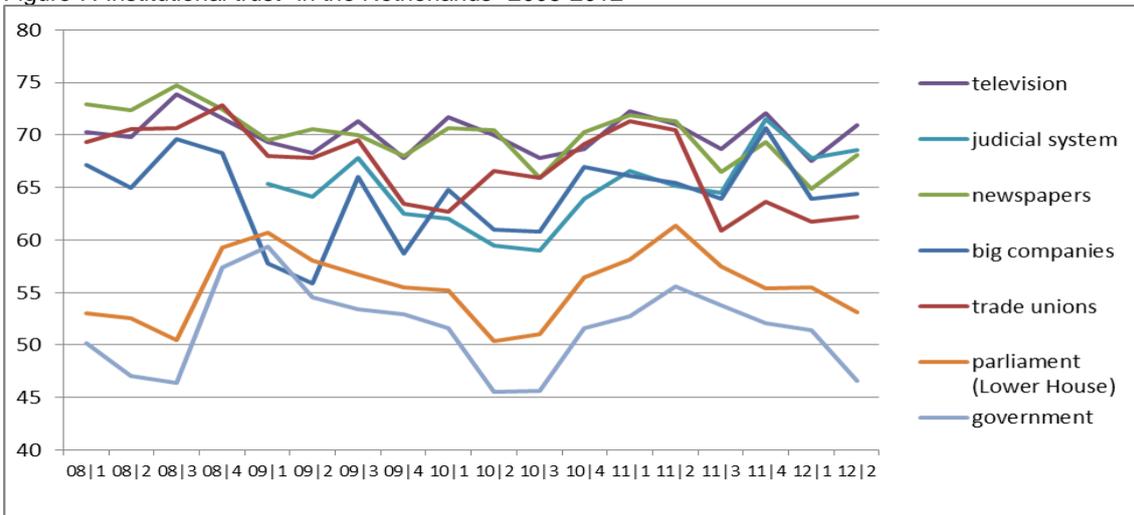
Source: European Values Study

Figure 6. Social and institutional trust<sup>a</sup> 1996-2011



<sup>a</sup> Social trust = % 'Most people can be trusted'; institutional trust = % 'tend to trust ...'  
 Source: Cultural changes in the Netherlands 1996-2011 (social trust); Eurobarometer data for the Netherlands 1997-2010 (institutional trust)

Figure 7. Institutional trust<sup>a</sup> in the Netherlands<sup>a</sup> 2008-2012



<sup>a</sup> % 6-10 scores in reply to 'How much trust do you currently have in the following institutions in the Netherlands?', offering scores from 1 ('no trust at all') to 10 ('complete trust').  
 Source: COB 2008/1-2012/2

The overlap is only partial. The main common finding is the peak in political trust at the end of 2008 (because of the handling of the banking crisis) in figures 6 and 7. The main lesson from the figures is that one should be very cautious in interpreting incidental measurements as representative for their time. Looking at figure 5, it is tempting to say that trust in parliaments did not change very much between 1990 and 2008, or perhaps went down a little. But looking at the other two figures, we see that measuring trust in parliament a few months earlier or later in one year can make a huge difference. There may sometimes be huge changes in shorter periods of time, but we do not measure them. So, we – and politicians and the public being served with the data – should not readily trust figures about changes and trends in political trust. OR: do the rapid changes suggest that it is not really about trust, but more about popularity?

## Trust in the Dutch Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB)

The Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB) is a longitudinal research project carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research | SCP. The main goals are to monitor current trends in public concerns, priorities and preferences in the Netherlands, to explore new topics in public opinion, and to further analyse selected major issues and dividing lines in the population. This is done for policymakers and communication specialists in the government, but also for the public at large.

Each quarter, a survey and four focus groups are carried out. The surveys contain regular series of closed questions concerning attitudes towards society and political institutions, media usage and voting behaviour. In addition there are various open-ended questions. Respondents are invited to indicate with key words their personal views on the most important problems and strengths of Dutch society and priorities in government policies. There is also a genuinely open final question asking respondents to explain in detail why they think that Dutch society is developing in the right or wrong direction, and in split-runs selections of the respondents are asked to explain their answers to another question in the survey. Asking people to explain answers to survey questions is also a small part of the focus groups. The starter in the focus groups is a discussion about the direction in which society is heading. A third to half of the time is spent on the thematic issue for the quarter in question. For further information see Dekker & Den Ridder (2011; with summary in English, available at [www.scp.nl](http://www.scp.nl), where the quarterly bulletins can also be found).

The COB survey is carried out mixed mode with representative panel, generated by random digit dialling (no self-selection or respondents from other surveys). To have at least 1,000 respondents each quarter, a random sample of about 1,750 panel members is approached by telephone to ask for participation. Potential respondents can choose between internet and a postal questionnaire (and they are free to change their preference every time they are approached (about 4 times a year (?)). In the 18 quarters (2008/1-2012/2) 19,323 people have participated (a few twice: those who stay in the panel can be approached again after at least two years): 15,188 (79%) by internet and 4,135 (21%) by postal questionnaire (varying between 15.2% and 26.6% per quarter).

Postal questionnaires are more popular among women (24%) than men (19%), 55+ (39%) than 18-34 years-olds (7%) [people with pensions 47%, students 6%], and lower educated (36%) than higher educated (12%).

Data are weighted for sex, age, education and internet use (weight efficiency at least 90%).

Several items are relevant when it comes to political trust, but here I will focus on the institutional trust question, which is asked in all quarterly surveys: 'How much trust do you currently have in the following institutions in the Netherlands?', with scores ranging from 1 ('no trust at all') to 10 ('complete trust'). The trend in average scores between the beginning of 2008 and 2012 was already presented in figure 7. Table 1 summarizes the institutional trust data for the combined 18 measurements.

Table 1. Institutional trust<sup>a</sup> of the Dutch population aged 18 years and older, 2008-2012

	all			internet		postal	
	N	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
big companies	17,935	5.76	1.54	5.83	1.51	5.49	1.61
trade unions	17,724	5.86	1.59	5.89	1.56	5.75	1.71
newspapers	18,566	5.96	1.43	5.99	1.40	5.84	1.50
television	18,617	5.96	1.45	5.97	1.43	5.89	1.52
judicial system (2009/1-2012/2)	14,320	5.92	1.85	6.04	1.81	5.44	1.95
parliament (Lower House)	18,381	5.38	1.73	5.44	1.71	5.15	1.79
government	18,448	5.21	1.89	5.26	1.87	5.02	1.94

<sup>a</sup> 'How much trust do you currently have in the following institutions in the Netherlands?' Scores ranging from 1 ('no trust at all') to 10 ('complete trust'); item non-response ('I do not know') ranging from 3.5% (television) to 7.8% (trade unions).

Source: COB 2008/1-2012/2

Internet respondents have on average more trust than respondents with postal questionnaires.<sup>4</sup> Is this because different people are surveyed or also because of a mode effect? Table 2 shows the differences between the modes adjusted for various variables.

Table 2. Deviations in institutional trust of postal respondents from internet respondents<sup>a</sup>

	unadjusted	adjusted for survey (quarter) and age	+ adjusted for sex, education, income and labour market position
big companies	-.35***	-.18***	-.12***
trade unions	-.14***	-.02	-.08*
newspapers	-.16***	-.04	-.05
television	-.08*	-.01	-.00
judicial system (2009/1-2012/2)	-.60***	-.43***	-.25***
parliament (Lower House)	-.29***	-.22***	-.10**
government	-.23***	-.16***	-.07

<sup>a</sup> Statistical significance (two-tailed): \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, and \*\*\* p < 0.001

Source: COB 2008/1-2012/2

In 3 of the 7 cases, statistical significant deviations disappear when controlling for other variables; in the other case we see a substantial reduction of the mode difference. One might expect a further reduction if we could have included better measurements of internet use related personality and life situation variables with a negative relationship with trust, but as long as we cannot do that, we cannot exclude mode effects.

## Reasons to (dis)trust

What considerations do people have when they assign trust scores to political and other

<sup>4</sup> The differences may not look modest. However, in the Netherlands 1-10 are the usual report marks in school, with 1-5 meaning insufficient / failed and 6-10 meaning sufficient /passed. So we often report no average scores but percentages sufficient scores. That makes the differences much more dramatic: 67% of the internet respondents versus 55% of the postal respondents have 'sufficient trust' in big companies, 68% versus 63% in trade unions, 71% versus 66% in newspapers, 71% versus 67% in television, 68% versus 53% in the judicial system, 57% versus 49% in the parliament, and 53% versus 46% in government.

institutions? We have discussed trust in the COB focus groups several times, and we have asked survey respondents to explain their scores. But let us start with the pilot study of COB from the end of 2007. Here, we conducted individual interviews. These included questions on why people did or did not trust the government. Two extracts are given below (taken from Tiemeijer 2009). In the first, the interviewer (I) is in conversation with a loquacious lower-educated man aged 60 (A); in the second, the respondent is a less verbose lower-educated woman aged 25 years. Both clearly have difficulty in applying the notion of trust to political institutions.

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- I. What is it then, really, trust? What is it that makes Parliament or the government trustworthy or not trustworthy?
- A. If they're doing things right, I suppose. Yes, trust, trust..... it's a difficult word, that; I only trust myself
- I. OK, but if you see a question like that in a questionnaire, and you give a score for trust in the government...
- A. Well, I don't give them a high score, I can tell you that.
- I. But what do you base your score on? How do you arrive at that figure?
- A. I watch the news, of course. I don't read newspapers, but I do watch the news. I reckon that's enough; I'm always full up to here with it then, I don't want any more. Some of the things they come out with, I think to myself, what's that got to do with anything, what's it about, what are they all playing at?
- I. OK, so that doesn't fit with the word 'trust'. So what does? What would they have to do to make you trust them?
- A. Having good polices and then actually carrying them out; but... if you look at that Internal Security Service or whatever they're called, all that information that's been leaked again, and then they start writing about certain people; that's all connected too. Everything gets blamed on Parliament or the government, when in fact they often can't even do anything about it
- I. But an incident like that, when something is leaked, does that affect the trust you have in the government?
- A. Yes, because it all comes from there.
- I. And yet on the other hand you say that the people in Parliament and the government can't do anything about it?
- A. There are some of them who could do something about it, of course, but [...] it's always the subordinates who do things wrong, and then they blame the ministers for it. It's just like football, if the whole football team flops, it's the trainer who gets a kick up the backside
- I. That's a nice comparison. That's what you are saying about the government too, really. The civil servants are making a mess of things and it's the ministers who get the blame.
- A. Yes, then they have to explain everything away; they have to find out all the ins and outs of it quickly, because they might not even know what's it's all about, and what if they're then asked to explain it?
- I. And that doesn't do anything to increase your trust ...
- A. No!
- I. ...in the Dutch government or in Parliament.
- A. I've got another footballing example. They once asked Willem van Hanegem, that football coach, something like, 'They've lost; how's that possible?'. 'Well', says he, laughing, 'you'd better go and ask them.'. Really interesting.
- I. But suppose the Minister were to say, when something goes wrong, that road

pricing won't be introduced, say; should the Minister then say: you'll have to ask my civil servants about that?

- A. Yes, he should, really. He can't do it all on his own, can he?
  - I. Would you have more trust if he were to say that?
  - A. Well no, not really, because he tells those civil servants what to do.
  - I. So it remains a bit of a difficult situation?
  - A. Exactly!
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- I. When you talk about trust in organisations, what exactly does that mean? What do you think of when you talk about trust?
  - A. If I trust someone, it means I trust them 100%, that I've got something I can build on, and I don't think you can build on a company or something like that, because it's too far away from you
  - I. So you find it hard to trust things like that that are too remote?
  - A. Yes, absolutely. It isn't like one person trusting another. That's something very different from trusting a company, because when one person trusts another you have some control, you might say, but with a company you just don't have any control over it or know what's really going on in that company
  - I. Suppose you say, I trust such and such a club, let's say as an organisation. What does that mean, precisely? What are you trying to say then?
  - A. That you support them, I suppose. That you support the club
  - I. So does that mean you agree with what the club does?
  - A. It means you support the club, I think, whether they're doing well or badly; that you can trust them in that way; I think they need to find a different choice of words for that. That's what I think, because I think 'trust' isn't the right word for something like that, or what you feel about a club, say.
  - I. So you think 'trust' isn't the right word for things like the television?
  - A. No.
  - I. What's wrong with it, then? Why can't you ...
  - A. You can't trust a work of art, either, can you? I watch TV, but it's not accessible; you don't have any control over it; so how can you trust it or what you see? It's the same with a work of art; what do you see of it? Can you trust something like that? I don't think so, so I don't really think... Trust in newspapers, whether they write the truth or not, what am I supposed to make of that?
  - I. Would that be part of it for you? Trust that they write the truth?
  - A. I suppose. It's the same as trusting that they show things on television as they really are, or trusting what is said in Parliament; What's said in the open, and what is said behind closed doors? You never know.
  - I. In one case you have more the idea of: are they writing the truth, are they showing reality on the TV as it really is; in Parliament it's more a case of: does everything really happen in Parliament, or are decisions also taken that I have no way of knowing about. Those are things that have to do with trust, but you think it's a difficult word to use for that...
  - A. Yes, I do, yes. I don't think it's the right word. I don't know how else you would put it, but I don't think 'trust' is right..
- 

Our conclusion from the pilot was that individual interviews about remote issues such as politics were too stressful for many respondents and too expensive to make them part of the regular research, which was then limited to surveys and focus groups.

We have discussed political trust in the focus groups after respondents had answered the questions individually. In the first round, at the beginning of 2008, we discussed all institutions (without the question about the judicial system) in four focus groups: a group with lower-educated participants and with higher-educated participants in the provincial town of Zwolle and similar groups in the smaller city of Hilversum.

The main finding was that the groups, when asked to explain their scores, almost never say anything explicit about trust, nor do they rule out other assessment criteria. People combine opinions about the goals of institutions with views about their importance to society, their credibility, their long-term effectiveness, current results, and so on, without citing 'trust' as a specific notion. Implicitly, the focus on the aspects of trust I referred to earlier is slightly stronger among the higher-educated than among the lower-educated. The six institutions presented to respondents are not comparatively assessed on the basis of corresponding criteria. Instead, different assessment criteria come to the fore. I will run through the institutions briefly.

Trust in big companies appears to depend mainly on the degree to which they do not focus (or not exclusively) on self-interest, but (also) serve the general interest. Golden handshakes and pursuit of profit are ranged against sustainable enterprise, prosperity and economic growth. People also refer to the stability of the organisation, the degree to which it offers employment, the frequency of reorganisations and the human scale ('you're just a number'). Although the better educated include more elements in their assessment – such as transparency and bureaucracy – beyond this there is no difference in the way in which trust in big companies is determined.

Trust in trade unions is associated in the focus groups with their influence and their ability to defend ordinary people. People in the town of Hilversum comment that this focus on the ordinary man in the street is sometimes lacking: 'The trade unions are no longer there for the people, but for themselves'. People also say that the trade unions are outmoded as an institution. In the town of Zwolle, lower-educated respondents also take into account whether the trade unions reach other people who are not members. Highly educated respondents in Zwolle place more emphasis on the fact that the ultimate influence of the trade unions is sometimes limited. More than once, reference is made to people's own experiences or the experiences of acquaintances. Trust is then justified with good memories of the efforts made by a trade union and the results of those efforts.

Trust in newspapers and television depends primarily on how truthful they are perceived to be. People refer to the objectivity of reporting and the selection of news items. It also emerges that each newspaper has its own 'colour', presenting news to readers from a particular perspective. When asked about trust in television, people tend to think of news and current affairs programmes, not so much about entertainment. It is striking that people with a lower education level trust the television more than the newspapers. 'You can see what is happening' on television, but in the newspapers you have no way of knowing if what they write is true. By contrast, people with a higher education level consider newspapers to be more trustworthy, because TV images are easily manipulated and television is concerned primarily with viewing figures and

speed.

Roughly half of those with a lower education level make no distinction between the Lower House of Parliament and the government. People with a higher education level are less likely to confuse these two institutions. Both institutions are however held accountable largely on the basis of the same criteria. On the one hand they are assessed on their function: 'Parliament is the most important institution we have' – and people should therefore (want to?) trust it. On the other hand, what people see happening in practice weighs very heavily. People with a lower education level are the most negative; they express little trust, a lot of disappointment and a certain powerlessness. The outcome of the election is not reflected at all in the composition of the government; politicians don't care about the real problems: 'Spending a whole day debating a ban on blasphemy? I'm still stuck in a traffic jam'. The 'political games' in The Hague also break down trust: 'The opposition opposes everything just because they are the opposition'. The lower-educated feel that trust in 'politics' (Lower House and government together) would increase if politicians were able to engage the public or young people more. They feel that politics was more relevant in the past because politicians then stood for something more than they do today and were more often passionate and idealistic than today's politicians. Those with a higher education level refer to political dealing in 'smoke-filled rooms' and lack of vision as untrustworthy characteristics of the Lower House and the government. Politicians also chase after the media too much, instead of setting the agenda themselves.

The assessment of political institutions appears to be the most diffuse. A common perspective on trust seems most evident in the assessment of the media based on the perceived reliability of their information. Trust in trade unions relates mainly to their good intentions and their ability to defend the interests of their members, while trust in big companies relates to their benefits to society. It is clear that institutions are not assessed using identical criteria and that individuals, and probably groups as well, differ in the criteria they apply.

With all the appropriate reservations relating to chance in the composition of the focus groups, these findings serve as a warning against attaching too much weight to the interpretation of institutional trust scores in surveys: respondents probably focus on very different things when they are asked about trust, and their comparison of institutions, given the lack of an overarching idea of fruit, is less reliable than a comparison of apples and pears.

In the first quarter of 2011 we discussed the questions about institutional trust again in the focus groups. The discussions confirmed the picture from earlier research. People with a lower education level are more negative than people with a higher education level; it is easier to give reasons for low trust than for high trust; and there are very diverse arguments and important differences between types of institutions. One striking thing this time was that several participants were unable to express an opinion about trade unions because they have no idea what they do. For the judiciary, it emerged that the mistakes that have been reported in the news in recent years were interpreted very differently. For a number of people with a lower education level they were an argument

for low trust, but for a number of higher-educated respondents they showed that the system is able to correct itself and therefore deserves a lot of trust. Parliament and government are sometimes mixed up. People generally tend to be negative towards Parliament ('low standards', too many parties and too much talking); people are more specific about the new government, and are sometimes positive ('decisive', 'look as if they mean business'), and sometimes more polarised ('a move to the right', which may or may not be seen as a good thing). That difference is not reflected in higher average scores for the government; in figure 6, Parliament consistently gets slightly higher trust scores.

In the first quarter of 2011 we also asked some of the respondents to explain their trust scores for the government. The individual explanations again revealed a wide variety of considerations. Lack of action ('a lot of talk') is a recurrent argument for low scores, and reference is also made to the dependence on the islamophobic populist PVV party in the coalition, and also the spending cuts which are hurting the weaker members of society. Recurring arguments for high trust scores are the fact that there is a new government ('a new broom') and one that is showing decisiveness, as well as agreement with the economic policy and more severe punishments for crime. The 'benefit of the doubt' can be used as an argument both for a score of 6 and a score of 8 out of 10.

So these are some of the findings from qualitative research on the meaning of political trust and other institutional trust. That trust turns out to be based on very different grounds. Trust in the media and trade unions does revolve around a majority criterion: the perceived truth of the reporting and defending the interests of members. Trust in political institutions involves both a wide range of opinions about the objectives and the actual functioning of the institutions. Questions about trust in political institutions do not appear to produce much more than a general image perception. We should be wary of placing too much weight on our interpretations of these figures.

## **Exploring the political trust scores**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, my goal is not to explain differences in political trust scores but to understand what trust scores are. In this section we will see what a purely quantitative exploration can add to this undertaking. I do not have hypotheses to test and it is clear in advance that findings will be difficult to interpret. For instance, if we find a strong relationship between political trust and some other forms of institutional trust, I would say that that is a reason to be suspicious because it might indicate that there is no such thing as political trust, but just institutional trust in general. However, one could interpret the same correlations as being explanatory and say that political trust and the other measures of institutional trust are different but empirically related concepts. The numbers as such will not give us an answer in this matter.

The first step is to look at the dimensionality of institutional trust. In table 3 I simply use exploratory principal component analyses and varimax rotation to discover possi-

ble differences in structures of attitudes.

In the entire population there is a strong common component explaining 54% of variance in the six trust scores. The explained variance ranges from 49% among university-level respondents to 58% among the lower-educated, suggesting that the higher-educated have more specific opinions about the institutions. The lower-educated might differentiate less (for cognitive reasons or because of more similar positive or negative experiences with the institutions). Looking at the rotated solutions, we find the political institutions on the same dimension.<sup>5</sup> We cannot say why this is the case: is it because people have a real ‘attitude towards political institutions’ or because they simply mix up parliaments and governments anyway. Probably both.

Table 3. Principal component analyses of institutional trust: varimax rotated components for all and for the 10% highest educated and the 20% lowest educated

	All			≤ Junior vocational			University level			
	1 dim	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
big companies	.67	.29	.18	.74	.35	.23	.72	.19	.18	.91
trade unions	.65	.11	.26	.81	.13	.27	.85	.41	.59	-.19
newspapers	.77	.21	.87	.24	.22	.87	.27	.16	.86	.19
television	.74	.15	.89	.23	.17	.89	.24	.13	.84	.25
parliament (Lower House)	.80	.92	.21	.21	.92	.23	.24	.89	.27	.09
government	.77	.94	.15	.20	.94	.17	.20	.90	.13	.23
variance explained	54%	31%	29%	23%	32%	29%	24%	31%	32%	17%

Source: COB 2008/1-2011/3

Table 4 shows how the trust items fit into a broader field of attitudes towards society and politics. Political institutions (and to a lesser extent the judicial system and big companies) are part of a dimension comprising a general kind of positive attitude towards politics and society. All but the political institutions form the second dimension, to be labelled as non-political institutional trust? The third is a kind of ‘hate politics’ dimension, the fourth a kind of private happiness thing, and the fifth presents an optimistic or moralistic, warm attitude towards other people.

<sup>5</sup> It is intriguing that big companies are part of the political dimension for the lower-educated, while unions are part of it for the higher-educated (and they seem to perceive a polarity between companies and unions). It is worth exploring this further using more advanced techniques.

Correlation of trust in parliament and trust in government varies between .80 and .92. Scores for both institutions are not only highly correlated, most people evaluate them equally: 68% of the respondents give parliament and government exactly the same score, 11% gives government a higher score (only 3% more than 1 point higher) and 21% gives parliament a higher score (only 6% more than 1 point higher). Voters of parties in government tend to prefer government more than voters of opposition parties (and so do women and lower educated, but the differences are small and only significant because we have over 15,000 respondents). This is something for another paper.

Table 4. Principal component analyses of trust, satisfaction<sup>a</sup> and opinions about politics: varimax rotated components

	1	2	3	4	5
trust in big companies	.36	.52	-.07	.19	.02
trust in trade unions	.25	.64	.01	.02	.10
trust in newspapers	.18	.84	-.12	.08	.08
trust in television	.17	.86	-.03	.04	.00
trust in judicial system	.50	.37	-.28	.02	.23
trust in parliament (Lower House)	.74	.29	-.35	.05	.06
trust in government	.78	.24	-.31	.07	.00
satisfaction with health	.08	.07	-.05	.76	.03
satisfaction with main daily activities	.07	.07	-.04	.82	.02
satisfaction with personal financial situation	.22	.05	-.08	.68	.11
satisfaction with Dutch society	.62	.17	.08	.23	.36
satisfaction with Dutch economy	.68	.11	-.03	.27	.27
satisfaction with municipality	.65	.20	.06	.16	.21
satisfaction with politics in 'The Hague'	.86	.14	-.18	.11	.03
satisfaction with European politics	.78	.21	-.11	.07	.04
most people can be trusted	.22	.12	-.09	.09	.78
you cannot be too careful	-.09	-.03	.28	-.04	-.79
national politics is too complicated to understand for most people	-.03	-.01	.63	-.02	-.10
the government doesn't do enough for people like me	-.39	-.01	.54	-.17	-.15
most politicians are skilled people who know what they are doing	.55	.17	-.34	-.03	.03
people like me have no influence over what the government does	-.33	.01	.60	-.06	-.17
politicians often behave badly towards each other	-.04	-.11	.62	-.02	-.01
variance explained	22%	12%	9%	9%	7%

<sup>a</sup> Measured on a 1-10 scale, very dissatisfied → very satisfied.

<sup>b</sup> Measured on a 5-points scale, strongly disagree → strongly agree.

Source: COB 2009/1-2011/3

What does this say about political trust? Not that much, but the suggestion that political trust is both an expression of a general attitude towards society and of a more specific attitude to politics is interesting. To explore this a little further, I have done some cluster analyses. However, so far I have not found interesting results (such as low political trust scores in a group of overall negative people as well as in a group of specifically politically negative people). Institutional trust variable differed in the same way between clusters. So, no interesting patterns for the discussion of the meaning of political trust measurements. Let us stop here.

## Conclusions and consequences

Questions about institutional political trust are much too simple. They are virtually unrelated to the theoretical distinctions (such as levels of support and legitimacy in the political system; variable nature of trust; different objects of trust). The answers therefore tell us nothing. They stem from a mass lack of interest in and information about politics. If people think about trust in politics at all, they think about different things and their answers cannot be compared. Let us end this nonsense.

But if we do that, are we also going to stop asking questions about happiness, about

love, about sympathies and all those other vague issues about where the gulf lies between deep philosophical thought and meaningless measurements and questions where people mean and feel completely different things? No, we will probably still want to know how happy people feel and what kind of attitudes they have towards other people.

Although the survey scores on political trust say little about ‘real trust’ in the normal and theoretically founded meanings of the word, the scores do inform us about the image of institutions. And whatever the criteria used to assess reliability, the trust scores will also be indicative of the credit that people grant to the institutions in question, or the tendency to accept what they do. In all its vagueness, that is relevant and that is why we continue to measure political trust in such a simple way. Of course, it would be good to ask about individual aspects (integrity, competence, good intentions, etc.; cf. Myhill et al. 2011),<sup>6</sup> but that is often not possible and the general, generic question remains useful.<sup>7</sup> Ordinary citizens use the word ‘trust’ themselves in relation to politics; it is not some strange concept that we researchers impose on them. The international figures, time series and relationships between measurements which I presented earlier, also inspire confidence that we are measuring something real, and especially noise.

What is very important is that the figures obtained from these surveys are put into perspective and that we avoid equating them in our research too quickly to what is theoretically meant by trust, and to what is readily linked in the public domain to dramatic comments about ‘breakdown of trust’, and so on. The trust measured in surveys really is something very different from the trust that people have or don’t have in each other in real relationships.

As well as putting the figures and their explanation into perspective with qualitative research, caution is also called for in the presentation of the figures. The scores are of no more than comparative value, and it is wise when measuring a trend or group difference to use more than one source. Caution is also required in treating survey findings as representative over a longer period. The EVS figures, with an interval of nine years between them, can suggest trends which would not exist at all if measurements were carried out more frequently.

It would be interesting in future research to track people’s argumentations over time. Do individual people apply the same criteria (do some always think more about integrity, others more about competence?), or are individuals reasonably stable in their views but use constantly changing criteria (for example always liking someone but for very different reasons)? ‘Criteria’ is in fact putting it a bit strongly; often, all that is in-

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<sup>6</sup> And possibly also more about individual institutions and actors, but here there is a danger that interested politicians, political scientists and public administration experts will overestimate the ability of most citizens to draw the distinctions. If they react slightly more positively to ‘government’ than ‘Cabinet’, that is not because they have a clear picture of the constitutional position of the Queen, but because ‘Cabinet’ sounds more political (and they hate anything political).

<sup>7</sup> Actually, the simple empty measurement of institutional trust is a lot better than the classical measurement of social trust with the strange opposition of trust and carefulness. It is unclear what exactly is being measured, and it is likely that different things are being measured in different subpopulations.

volved is a selection of promising items from the news. Changing criteria play an aggregated role over time: the government can achieve the same score because it does something specifically well (tackling the banking crisis) or because it exudes a sense of trustworthiness ('decisiveness'). That is not an objection to the simple measurement of trust, but a warning not to leave it there and to investigate thoroughly what people mean by it.

In this way, then, we can contribute to our role as reliable informants of public and politicians. But is it really our job to inform them? What is the point of publicity about trust figures?

There are very different ideas about the role of opinion research in a democracy. First a quote from Onora O'Neill (2002: 44-45) about exactly our topic:

*"... I think there isn't [even] very good evidence that we trust less. There is good evidence that we say that we trust less: we tell the pollsters, they tell the media, and the news that we say that we do not trust is then put into circulation. But saying repeatedly that we don't trust no more shows that we trust less, than an echo shows the truth of the echoed words; still less does it show that others are less trustworthy. ... The supposed 'crisis of trust' may be more a matter of what we tell inquisitive pollsters than of any active refusal of trust, let alone of conclusive evidence of reduces trustworthiness. The supposed 'crisis of trust' is, I think, first and foremost a culture of suspicion."*

We would not worry about trust if the pollsters did not ask about it. Really? A notably positive approach to opinion surveys is offered by Alexander (2006), who sees this kind of research, to the extent that it is made public, as part of a civil sphere, in which public and politicians strive together for collective ideals. Very differently from O'Neill, or more generally someone like Bourdieu and his followers (Champagne 2004), who regard opinion research as the enemy of Parliamentary democracy, Alexander describes this kind of research as a 'communicative institution', which deserves an honourable place alongside the mass media and the publicity-oriented voluntary associations of civil society. According to Alexander, opinion research is a means for the public to get to know itself and to reflect on collective opinion formation.

*"Publicized polls provide 'hard data' about the life world of the civil sphere, allowing it to be construed independently of other exigencies and institutions. Polls represent this life world as filled with reflection, as based on the responses of independent and thoughtful people. The very process of polling attributes to its interviewees rationality and sincerity, converting the members of civil society from a passive, voiceless, and potentially manipulable 'mass' into a collective actor with a voice and intelligence of its own." (Alexander 2006: 85)*

This is undoubtedly a somewhat idealised representation, but it is a good starting point for reflecting on the possibilities of opinion research. Where others see the circularity and mutual reinforcement of signals by mass media and opinion research as a threat, Alexander takes the following view (2006: 87):

*It is precisely this circularity that makes polls so fundamentally important to the in-dependence and self-understanding of civil society. [...] Insofar as the news media themselves rely increasingly on polls to report on public opinion, polls become an even more powerful, doubly objectifying social force. There develops a kind of sub-rosa dialogue [...] between these two communicative institutions.*

Pollsters ask questions about things that appear in the media and inform the public via the media about what it thinks. This knowledge is a source for reflection and further opinion formation in the media and provides information to which politicians have to respond in some way. Ranged against this image of opinion research as a contributor to the public debate and democracy is the criticism that this research itself lacks an essential component of democratic opinion formation, namely deliberation, and that it often erroneously assumes interest and informed opinion. Instead of allowing people to debate with each other in order to share information and weigh interests, people in surveys are simply asked what they think, without being able to talk about it with others. In some cases, people will undoubtedly have already discussed things with others before the poll, but in other cases there are indeed grounds for asking how communicative opinion polls really are. Following Alexander, you could say that an opinion poll is not the end of a discussion, but the beginning, and the reflection only begins afterwards.

In order to contribute to that discussion, it is of paramount importance not to stop at the figures, but to devote extensive attention to people's motivations, the changeability of their views, the sensitivity to contexts and frames and the superficiality and uninformed nature of those views. We can do this increasingly well by asking supplementary questions in surveys (Schuman 2008), but it is without doubt also something that demands interaction and collective reflection, for example in focus groups.

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