

Deciphering the Dutch drop: ten explanations for decreasing political trust in The Netherlands

Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille

Abstract

The Netherlands has always been the odd case out regarding trust in public institutions. In the 1980s and 1990s, contrary to international trends, trust in government remained high and even increased. Suddenly, from 2002 onwards, public trust in government declined dramatically. In this article we examine the plausibility of ten explanations, embedded in the international scholarly literature, and explore whether they are empirically supported or rebutted in case of the Dutch drop. We find that because most of the literature concentrates on the cross-national erosion of political support over a long period within Western democracies, explanations tend to focus on gradual, long-term demographic, social, and political trends. Sudden dips in trust levels, however, require different sets of explanatory factors; they are better explained by political or economic contingencies, such as sudden political or economic crises. In the case of the Dutch drop, the most plausible explanation is a combination of an economic decline, combined with high political instability and contestation during the first Balkenende cabinets. As of 2007, with a new cabinet in office, and an economic recovery in place, trust figures are on the rise again.

Points for practitioners

Sudden dips in public trust in government are better explained by political or economic contingencies, such as political or economic crises, than by a deterioration in government performance or by long-term demographic, social, and political trends. In the case of the sudden drop in trust in The Netherlands, the most

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Vol 74(2):283–305 [DOI:10.1177/0020852308091135]

plausible explanation is a combination of an economic decline, combined with high political instability and contestation during the first Balkenende cabinets. As of 2007, with a new cabinet in office, and economic recovery in place, trust figures are on the rise again.

Keywords: Netherlands, political trust, trust in government

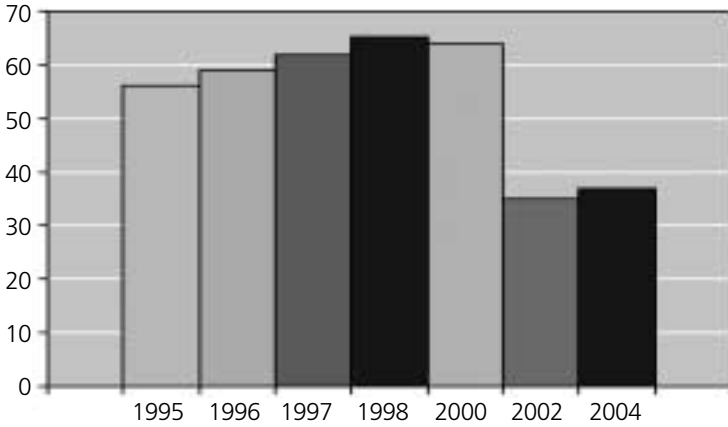
Deciphering the Dutch drop

Public confidence in the performance of public institutions has been on the decline in almost all industrial countries in the past decades (Kaase and Newton, 1995; Norris, 1999; Dalton, 2004; Dogan, 2005). An evaluation of long-term data concludes that this erosion of confidence is chronic, international and structural (Dogan, 2005). Only a few countries seemed not to share in this political *malaise*. In international surveys, the sharpest deviation from the pattern of declining trust has often been The Netherlands. An analysis of a long series of national election studies by Putnam et al. (2000) indicated for example that, whereas the decline in support for politicians and parliaments was widespread in all industrial democracies, the two longest opinion series in The Netherlands show statistically significant *improvements* between 1971 and 1994 in the confidence in politicians and in parliament. The Netherlands, together with some other Northern European countries, belonged comfortably to the 'high trust societies' (Dekker and de Hart, 2002).

This comfortable position suddenly deteriorated at the turn of the century. According to the data of the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP), the evaluation of government improved steadily in the 1990s, as is pictured in Figure 1.¹ In 1998, two-thirds of the respondents thought the Dutch government was doing a good job. This number remained stable in 2000. However, by the end of 2002 the number of respondents who indicated that government was doing a good job had fallen to less than a third of the population. This decline continued in 2004. Notable was the swiftness and steadiness with which trust in government evaporated.

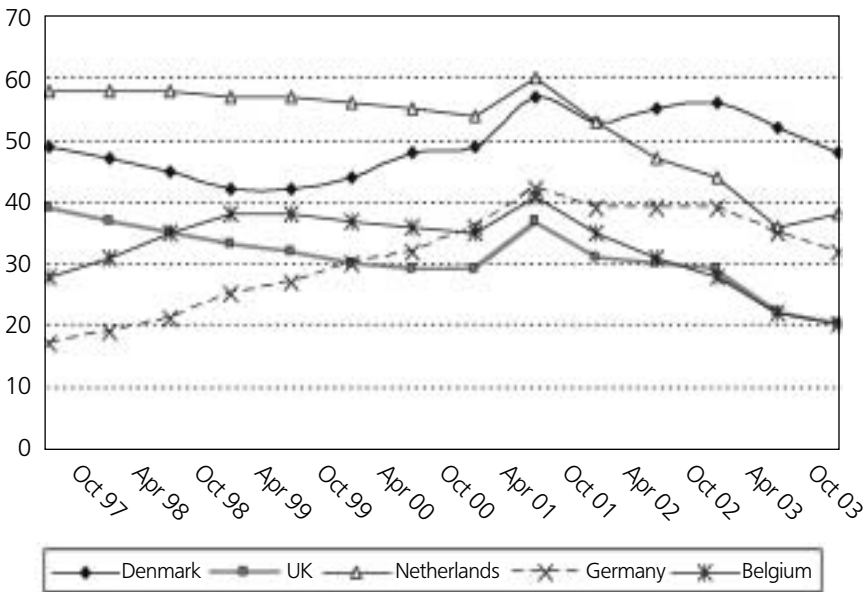
The Netherlands had also been the odd case out with regard to public satisfaction with democracy (Thomassen, 2005: 70). Until the late 1990s, the level of satisfaction with democracy remained stable and at a very high level compared to other democracies. From 2002 onwards, trust in political institutions declined sharply, whereas some other countries showed a slight increase, as can be seen from Figure 2 (Dekker and van der Meer, 2004).

It is not clear why political trust in The Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s remained so high while the political mood in other Western democracies grew more sour; and it is not clear why trust in government and in political institutions declined so suddenly and steeply in 2002 and the following years. It is clear, however, that the steep decline of trust in The Netherlands at the start of the century was perceived with alarm. Many politicians, social commentators and scientists worried about the sudden drop in trust. Trust scores are often considered a litmus test of how well government is doing in the eyes of the citizens. Low trust is usually understood as an indication that some elements of the political system — politicians, institutions, or both — are functioning poorly; or that the expectations of citizens are too high. Either way,



Source: Becker and Decker (2005).

Figure 1 'Government performs well' 1995–2004 (%)



Source: Decker and van der Meer (2004).

Figure 2 Trust in political institutions

trust is seen as the essential glue in political life; democracies need trust to thrive; if citizens question every act of government or doubt every policy government is executing, this may impede democratic consensus. Governments with more public support are, therefore, expected to function more smoothly and effectively than those with less public trust (Citrin and Muste, 1999).

Given the disagreements over the roots of the problem, prospects for rebuilding trust and generating political confidence are uncertain. What we intend to do in this article is to analyse various explanations of the loss of political trust. We want to know: why did political trust in government in The Netherlands decline so suddenly and steeply in 2002 and the following years? And, more importantly, is this decline in trust a structural drop or just a temporary dip?

In search of plausible explanations

Scholars, journalists, and commentators have made a great many claims about how the decline in public trust is to be explained. We will review the English and Dutch language literature on the subject. From this literature one can easily compile a long list of explanations as to why citizens are becoming more sceptical about their governments (Nye et al., 1997; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004). We therefore made a selection in explanations (it is nearly impossible to cover the complete body of work on this topic). We list ten explanations from the literature and proceed to consider to what extent there is hard evidence for them and whether they are empirically supported or rebutted in the case of the Dutch drop.

Given the great difficulties of establishing clear cause and effect relations, and the lack of hard evidence, we will test the claims, theories, and assertions on their *initial plausibility*. This 'method', also followed by Nye (1997) and Newton (2006: 214), can be read as a provisional meta-analysis of the literature and other evidence on the origins of declining trust in The Netherlands.

In order to evaluate the ten explanations on their plausibility, we will use a number of criteria.² First of all *timing*; in a plausible explanation, cause and effect should be related in time. Secularization, for example, which is sometimes mentioned as an explanation for decline in public trust (Elchardus and Smits, 2002) is not very plausible in the Dutch case, given the fact that secularization augmented in The Netherlands throughout the 1980s and 1990s, just as trust increased – and also because there has not been a sudden increase in secularization after 2000 that would fit the sudden decrease in trust. Second, an explanation is better to the extent that more observations and facts can be explained. This is the *generalizing capacity* of the explanation. Explanations are more plausible, for example, when they are also applicable to the decline of public trust in other countries. Finally, we will evaluate explanations, which are *empirically tested* and not falsified, as more plausible than explanations that have not been tested empirically.

Searching for the causes of the decline in public trust we distinguish two different types of explanations (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 31): explanations that assume the origins of declining trust in public institutions to be endogenous; and explanations that perceive the causes of trust in public institutions as exogenous. In endogenous explanations, trust is related to the performance of public institutions or the expectations of citizens in this regard. In exogenous explanations, declining trust in public institutions is hypothesized to originate outside the political sphere or the performance of public institutions. Economic and social developments may influence the way in which citizens evaluate government and politics.

In this article, we evaluate ten explanations for the sudden drop in trust in Dutch

Table 1 Two types of explanations for the loss of trust in public institutions

Endogenous cause: political variables	Exogenous cause: economic and socio-cultural variables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government performance deteriorated • Dissatisfaction with Balkenende cabinets and policies • Rise of drama democracy and Fortuyn • Increase of political scandals • Changing political culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deteriorating economy • Changing role of media • Change in expectations and values • Generational change • Loss of social capital

government. Five explanations see the roots of the problem in endogenous causes; five explanations look at exogenous causes (see Table 1).

Ten explanations for declining trust

Government performance deteriorated

The most obvious explanation for the sudden decline of trust in government is a sudden deterioration of the performance of government. This explanation assumes that the level of trust in government is a summation of the satisfaction of citizens with the performance of a variety of public institutions, such as police, schools, local government, etc. (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003: 884). This has been the dominant explanation among public officials and politicians in The Netherlands. They have urged public agencies and local councils to invest in better service delivery through ICT, new public management and the like, to enhance public trust in government.

However, there is little empirical evidence that would support this explanation. There are hardly any indications that the performance of local councils and agencies – or the perception of this performance by citizens (Zouridis, 2004) – has suddenly deteriorated after 2000. On the contrary, research by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office into the public perception of the quality of the public sector consistently shows a positive evaluation of specific public services. In 2002, for example, the year of the spectacular decline in general trust, most citizens evaluated the public service delivery by local councils very positively. Over 90 percent of respondents were positive or very positive about garbage collection, renewal of passports and driving licences, and a large majority was also positive or very positive about the maintenance of public parks, the processing of permits, and the service delivery by the police. Trust in the police has even increased substantially since 2000 (Prast et al., 2005: 44).

This is a pattern that can be observed in other countries too. Citizens can be quite satisfied with specific public services and at the same time dissatisfied with government in general (Goodsell, 1994; Nye et al., 1997: 265). Often, there is no direct correlation between the satisfaction of citizens and the general level of trust in government. The reason for this is that the causal link between public service performance and trust is highly questionable (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003).

'Levels of trust in government may be entirely unrelated to what government is or does' (Bouckaert and van de Walle, 2003: 333). The opinion of citizens on the government as a whole tends to be determined by more general social or political sentiments (Van de Walle, 2004: 219–20). The question then becomes: what are these sentiments?

Dissatisfaction with the Balkenende cabinet and its policies

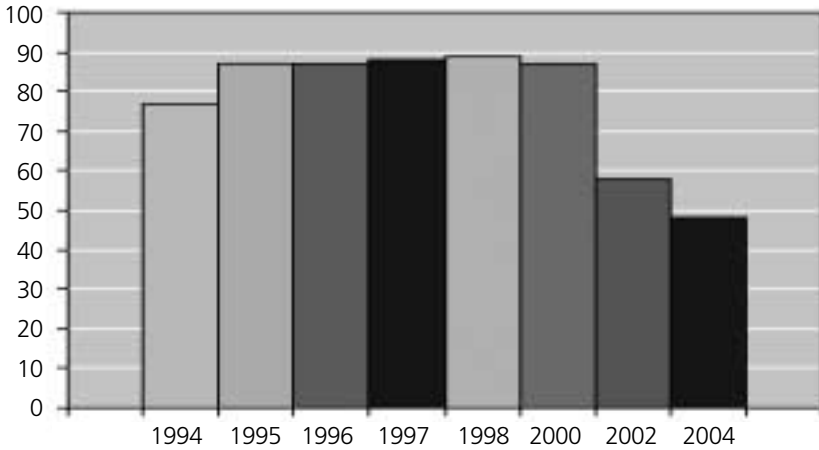
Is it dissatisfaction with the incumbent political leaders, or with their policies, that made people in The Netherlands less trustful of their government? It was Easton (1965) who argued that the legitimacy of democratic political systems depends in large part on the extent to which the electorate trusts the government to do what is right at least most of the time. Analysis of changes in trust in US government between the 1960s and 1980, for example, showed that alienation from the policy alternatives of the contending political parties and candidates led to declining trust in government (Erber and Lau, 1990).

Another obvious explanation for the declining levels of trust in the fall of 2002³ would therefore be dissatisfaction with the political performance of the right-wing Balkenende cabinet (CDA, VVD, LPF) that came to office in the summer of 2002 after the landslide victory of the LPF in the May 2002 elections. This first Balkenende cabinet was short-lived. After a few turbulent months in office, the LPF ministers resigned over a series of internal conflicts in October 2002, and new elections were held in January 2003. A second, right of centre, Balkenende cabinet (CDA, VVD, D66) was installed without the LPF, which embarked upon a programme of social reforms and fiscal austerity.

The earlier 'purple', liberal coalition (PvdA, VVD, D66), governing from 1994 to May 2002, had been particularly successful in terms of citizen trust. Confidence in prime minister Wim Kok, a social democrat, rose to a hitherto unknown level in April 1998, when as many as 80 percent of the voters claimed to have much or very much confidence in him as prime minister (Van Praag, 2003: 6). In the SCP surveys, respondents are also asked about their satisfaction with the present cabinet. The trend in the level of satisfaction with the cabinet runs exactly parallel with the levels of trust in government (see Figure 3). During the 1990s, satisfaction with the cabinet gradually increased to a high of 80 percent in 1998. However, from the fall of 2002 onwards, satisfaction declined rapidly to 49 percent in 2004.

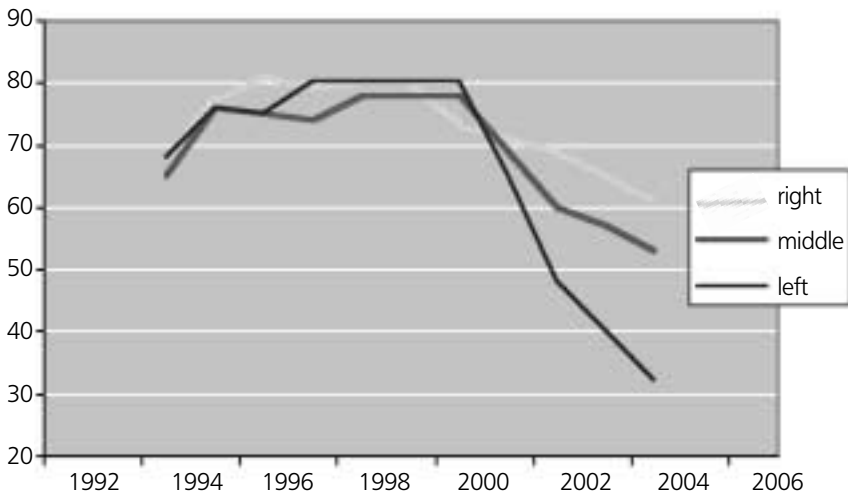
Respondents' perception of the performance of government is probably heavily influenced by their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with the incumbent cabinet. It should be noted that the SCP 2002 surveys were held in late October and early November 2002, only weeks after the first Balkenende cabinet had resigned after months of political turmoil. It is very likely that respondents had this major political fiasco in mind when they answered the subsequent questions on the cabinet and government. It is also very likely that many respondents do not make a clear distinction between government ('overheid') and cabinet ('regering').

This explanation is supported by other data from the SCP surveys. The decline in satisfaction with the Balkenende cabinets was much greater among left-wing respondents than among right-wing respondents, both in 2002 and 2004, as can be seen from Figure 4 (Becker and Dekker, 2005: 345). It is not very likely that only left-



Source: Becker and Decker (2005).

Figure 3 Satisfaction with the cabinet 1994–2004 (%)

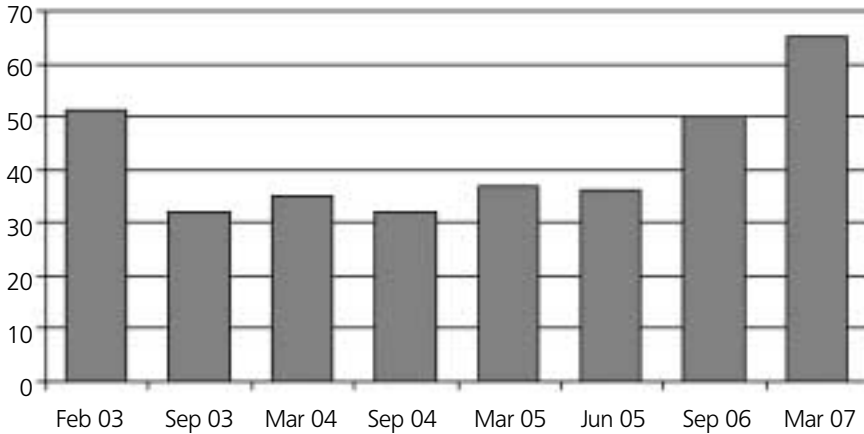


Source: Becker and Decker (2005).

Figure 4 Satisfaction with the cabinet and political orientation, 1994–2004 (%)

of-centre respondents suddenly are dissatisfied with the general quality of government performance. It strongly suggests that the drop in trust in government and the cabinet was politically motivated and boils down to a disapproval of the austere social and economic policies of the right-wing Balkenende cabinets.

However, it may be unfair to put all the blame for the sudden drop in trust in government on the new Balkenende cabinet. The decline in confidence seems to



Source: Belevingsmonitor.

Figure 5 Trust in cabinet 2003–2007 (%)

have started already under the purple coalition. Van Praag (2003: 7) has shown that the purple coalition was less successful in the last part of its incumbency. Though the economic policy was a great success (for the first time in years there was a surplus in the national budget in 2002), in other policy areas criticism increased. Much attention was paid to the long waiting lists in the health service, to rising crime rates, and the considerable problems of the national railway system. The bleak picture emerged that the public sector had been allowed to degenerate. Fortuyn, the political newcomer in the election campaign of 2002, strongly criticized the purple cabinet for its neglect of the public sector. His heavy criticism of the purple cabinet was not without success. Support for the cabinet fell between October 2001 and February 2002 (Van Praag, 2003: 14).⁴

Nevertheless, the replacement of the liberal purple coalition by the conservative Balkenende cabinets seems to have accelerated the decline in public confidence in the cabinet. This can also be seen from the 'Belevingsmonitor', a public opinion survey that is commissioned by the cabinet itself to measure, among other items, trust in and satisfaction with the cabinet. According to this government survey, trust in the cabinet decreased from 51 percent in February 2003, when the first poll was held, to 32 percent in September 2003. In the following years, it remained low, between 32 and 37 percent, as can be seen in Figure 5.

The level of trust in the cabinet started to rise again when the Balkenende cabinet came to the end of its incumbency. In September 2006, it presented its final budget and produced a state of the union that was jubilant and declared an end to years of social and fiscal austerity. After the elections in November 2006, a new left-of-centre (PvdA, CU, CDA) cabinet (again presided over by Balkenende) was installed in early 2007. Interestingly, the level of trust in the cabinet increased significantly, to 65 percent in March 2007 – the highest figure in six years. This supports the explanation

that the drop in trust was related to the incumbency of the right-wing Balkenende cabinets and their policies.

'It is the economy, stupid'

However, the coincidence of the fall and rise of trust in government and the cabinet may have been related to a third variable. Low satisfaction with the first Balkenende cabinets may have been caused by the serious economic decline after 2000. Both the SCP data and the Belevingsmonitor data show that respondents are particularly dissatisfied with unemployment rates, social economic policies, and the cost of living.

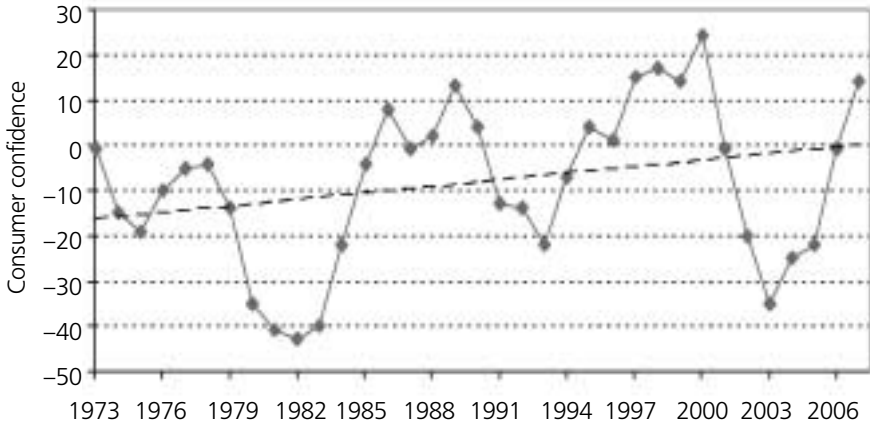
Another explanation of citizens' trust in government, therefore, points to the national economy. 'It's the economy, stupid' was the phrase Bill Clinton used in his 1992 presidential campaign against George Bush. Good times boost citizens' confidence in government while economic downturns erode it (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Stimson (2004) shows for instance for the US how trust follows economic indicators. 'Trust, in this story, loses its status as barometer of democracy . . . It goes up as well as down, and its movement require explanation but not concern' (Stimson, 2004: 153). In most European countries, too, there is a strong correlation between consumer confidence and citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Van de Walle, 2004: 212–16).

The rise and fall of trust in government and democracy in The Netherlands follows the same pattern (Prast et al., 2005: 62). When citizens are confident about their economic situation, their satisfaction with democracy increases, as can be seen from Figures 6 and 7 (Tiemeijer, 2008).

During the economic boom of the 1990s, which coincided with the 'purple' cabinets, satisfaction with democracy rose to an all-time high, but it dropped abruptly after the internet bubble burst. When the economy recovered, from 2003 onwards, trust started to rise again.

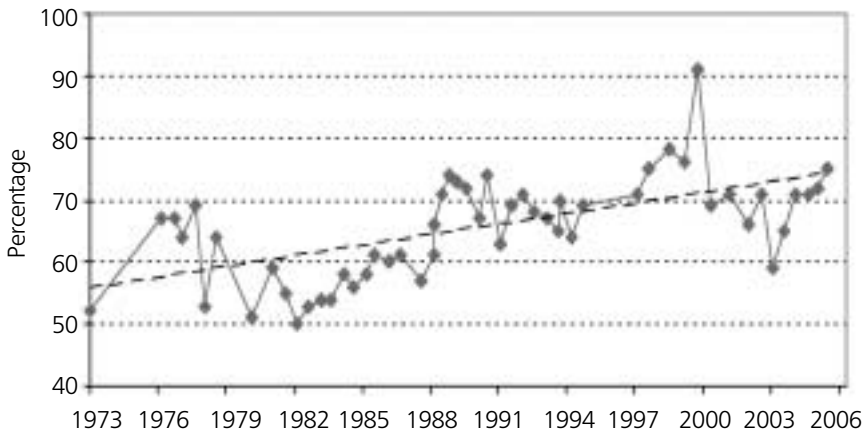
There are some problems with this explanation. First, the causality is not clear: are people more satisfied with democracy because they have more confidence in their economic situation, or do consumers have more confidence because they are more satisfied with the way in which democracy and government are operating? Did the satisfaction with the Balkenende cabinets diminish because of the economic decline, or was the economic decline caused, or deepened, by the political turmoil in 2002 and the following years? Van de Walle suggests that both indicators may be determined by more general social sentiments (Van de Walle, 2004: 219; Van de Walle and Kampen, 2004).

Second, there is a problem of generalizability. Consumer confidence or economic well-being cannot explain why in many other industrialized countries trust in public institutions has gradually declined (Dalton, 2004: 124–7). Over the past two decades, almost all Western countries have experienced substantial economic growth — so the relation rather seems to be inverse (Elchardus and Smits, 2002: 53). The economic outlook may explain fluctuations in trust in government, but not the more structural, gradual decline of trust in public institutions (Pharr and Putnam, 2000: 173–201; Dalton, 2004: 127).



Source: CBS-statline.

Figure 6 Consumer confidence in The Netherlands, 1973–2007



Source: Eurobarometer.

Figure 7 Percentage of Dutch satisfied with how democracy works in The Netherlands, 1973–2006

Drama democracy and Fortuyn

As of 2002, public trust in other political institutions, such as parliament and political parties, dropped sharply too, as can be observed from Figure 2. The decline in trust in political institutions was much stronger in The Netherlands than elsewhere in Europe. This suggests that there is more to it than a cabinet with little political appeal and economic adversity. It probably is not a coincidence that the decline in trust in political

institutions accelerated in the spring of 2002. Surely, this must have something to do with the rise and fall of Pim Fortuyn.

The assassination of Pim Fortuyn, the leader of the LPF (List Pim Fortuyn) nine days before the parliamentary elections of May 2002, followed by the landslide victory of his new party, shocked the Dutch nation. The shock was caused by the murder itself, and by the fact that a large group of voters apparently felt attracted to the messages of the charismatic and populist Fortuyn. Never before had a new party been elected into parliament with over 17 percent of the seats, and never before had a coalition government of three parties lost so many seats in an election. The Dutch Parliamentary elections of 2002 are among the most volatile elections in post-war Western Europe (Van der Brug and Pellikaan, 2003).

It may well be that the murder of Fortuyn and, two years later, of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, has shattered the confidence of citizens in the political institutions. Belgium has experienced a similar drop in public trust in the mid-1990s. Particularly in 1996–98, trust in democracy and in almost all public institutions dropped to an all-time low, even though consumer confidence was quite high (Van de Walle, 2004: 212, 216). The explanation for this was the impact of the Dutroux affair. The abduction and subsequent death of a number of young girls, the floundering of the authorities, and the 'White Marches', rocked the country to its foundations and resulted in a very profound social and political crisis. During such a period of social and political shock, every failure of government and politics is magnified. A crisis is easily construed in the media, and citizens are not prepared to give authorities the benefit of doubt. Elchardus (2002) has aptly called this *drama democracy*. The media massively focus on a dramatic event that touches the public emotionally, and try to construe this as a trend. Given enough fuel, this can result in a series of media hypes that may dominate public debate and influence public sentiments. Such drama-driven drops in trust tend to be temporary. Gradually the fuel runs out and the hype dies down. In Belgium, the effect of the White Marches ceased and trust in public institutions has returned to its pre-Dutroux levels (Van de Walle, 2004: 78–80).

The empirical evidence for this explanation of the Dutch drop is mixed. According to Dekker and van de Meer (2004), there was no Fortuyn-effect in The Netherlands. Fear of international terrorism after 9/11 has led to a 'rally around the flag', in a number of European countries, which caused a rise in trust in political institutions in October 2001, as can be observed in Figure 2.⁵ This rise was temporary and in the spring of 2002 trust figures returned to their normal level in all European countries, including The Netherlands. Therefore, the decline in trust in political institutions, such as the cabinet, in the fall and winter of 2001, are the result of this post-9/11 effect. However, in The Netherlands the decline in trust in political institutions went on much longer and went way beyond the pre-9/11 levels. This suggests that the dramatic events of May 2002 and the subsequent political turmoil may have played a substantial role. In April 2002, before Fortuyn was murdered, 56 percent of the respondents in the Eurobarometer tended to have trust in political institutions; by April 2004 this figure had declined to 39 percent (Dekker and van der Meer, 2004).

Scandals and fiascos

It is often believed that political scandals play a role in lowering the regard for government and political institutions. Pharr and Putnam (2000: 199) hold that in most Western countries there is a strong relationship between the confidence in government and public institutions and the numerous media reports of leaders' misconduct in office. Bowler and Karp (2004) have investigated for the US and the UK whether being aware of scandalous behaviour on the part of a politician erodes public regard and confidence in politicians and, in turn, lowers the regard for the institutions more broadly; or whether the impact of scandals is, at its best, very narrowly confined to an impact on the popularity of the individual politician and will not spill over into assessments of the institution more broadly. They observed that both in UK and in the US scandals involving specific MPs lower regard for politicians in general and parliament in particular. Hetherington (2005: 24), on the other hand, shows that scandals do not automatically lead to lower political trust levels; political trust in the US, for instance, increased throughout the 1990s despite the constant scandals experienced by Bill Clinton. Even the Monica Lewinsky scandal did not harm Clinton's popularity (Dalton, 2004: 197).

The plausibility of the scandal explanation for the Dutch case is limited. It is probably fair to say that media attention to scandals has increased in the past two decades, due to depillarization and the commercialization of news media. From the 1990s onwards public and political attention to corruption and integrity issues has increased too — even though the incidence of corruption cases did not increase — which seems to have reinforced the public perception that politicians tend to be corrupt (Bovens, 2006). Also, the number of parliamentary inquiries and questions has risen since the late 1980s (Wille, 2005), which may also have conveyed an image of government failures and policy fiascos. However, the problem with this explanation in the Dutch case is timing. As the attention to corruption and scandals grew in the 1990s, so trust in government and the cabinet gradually increased, where it should have decreased, according to this explanation. Also, public attention to scandals and fiascos cannot explain the sudden drop in 2002. There was no sudden rise in the number of scandals to match this drop.

Media are to blame

Many political observers believe that the current generation of leaders is no better or worse than previous generations, but that it is public awareness of scandalous activities that has grown. The media, especially television, are thought to create fear, alienation, distrust, and cynicism because of its 'attack journalism' — highly critical, muckraking investigative journalism — and its focus on conflict and bad news (Newton, 2006: 212). The increasing negativity in media coverage of politics is alleged to cause declining trust. Strategic news coverage in particular, focusing on winning and losing, and on polls, and on politicians' motives and style rather than their content and policies, fuels political cynicism and has contributed to a 'spiral of cynicism'. Patterson (1993) documented a growing negativity in the press coverage of politicians in the US. Cappella and Hall Jamieson (1997) show that exposure to strategic news activates political cynicism among news consumers.

Recent studies appear to offer a rejoinder to this 'persistent negativity' in research on politics and the media (de Vreese, 2005: 284; Newton, 2006) by showing that the relationship between media and citizens is less one-dimensional than some research suggests. The relationship between exposure to strategic news and political cynicism appears to be of a conditional nature; there is, for instance, a difference between television and newspaper users. Moreover, evidence shows that media-effects are weak where people already have entrenched values and opinions, but may be stronger on matters that are new, complex and unrelated to existing cleavages and values (Newton, 2006: 226). When attitudes and opinions are strongly held, the impact of the media is often secondary (Zaller, 1996); and social networks seem to determine how media messages are received and interpreted by the public (Newton, 2006: 217).

Some research suggests that the effects of news media use are not always in the direction of eroding political trust. Studies on national election campaigns in The Netherlands, for instance, indicate that the use of polls and the horse-race frame also have become common in the election news coverage (Van Praag and Brants 2000). This has, however, not contributed to a decline of trust in political institutions. Van der Brug and van der Eijk (2005) observed that trust levels in the Dutch population in the month before the parliamentary elections, at a time of intense media reports on politics, increased instead of declining.

A changing political culture: from polder politics to polarization

Maybe it is not the news coverage itself, but the growth of negative political campaigning and advertising that has contributed to the public's growing cynicism. Experimental studies have shown that subjects who are exposed to negative advertisements were significantly less likely than those exposed to positive advertisements to express confidence in the political process as a whole (King, 2000: 96–7). Past research also suggests that the public comes to support government authorities and policies when political elites are generally in agreement (Gross et al., 2004: 53). The *politics of conflict* is perceived as one of the key reasons why people tend to be negative towards politicians and political institutions. Politicians appear always to be involved in harsh disagreement and it is precisely when politicians are 'doing politics', i.e. debating and ultimately resolving controversial political issues, that public regard for them seems to decline.

Mutz and Reeves (2005: 13) show that uncivil political discourse has detrimental effects on political trust. Disagreements may be inevitable and unavoidable in politics, and even desirable from the perspective of democratic theory, but experiments show that the *manner* in which such disagreements are brought into the open affects public attitudes toward politicians, politics, and institutions of government. Again, television media may play an important intervening role here: 'it is one thing to read about political pundits' or candidates' contrary views in the press, and quite another to witness them directly engaged in vituperative argument 'in person' (Mutz and Reeves, 2005: 2).

In The Netherlands political elites were, for a long time, forced into a style of political accommodation rather than political competition. The extensive pluralism of

Dutch society and politics means that politicians and citizens realize that politics is the art of compromise. Van Praag and van der Eijk (1998) suggest that this tempered political discourse in ways that might moderate negative government evaluations. The tempestuous entry of Fortuyn and the LPF into Dutch politics meant a sharp breach with the prevailing consensus political culture. The subdued, technocratic style that has dominated Dutch politics for decades suddenly gave way to a populist, emotional and expressive style in which strong personal attacks were no longer taboo (Brants and van Praag, 2005). It is not the rise and death of Fortuyn, but the polarizing political style that he and his followers introduced, that might explain the abrupt drop in public trust in 2002 and the following years. The relatively tranquil years of consensus 'polder politics' during the purple coalitions, in which trust steadily increased, were abruptly followed by a hitherto unknown period of political contestation and polarization. The politics of polarization is the politics of mistrust, which may explain both the loss of confidence in government in The Netherlands in recent years, and the steady rise of trust in the consensus years of polder politics in the 1990s.

Data from the SCP do indeed suggest that the manner in which politics is conducted and the image of politicians may have been a cause of the decline in public trust in The Netherlands (SCP, 2005: 356). It remains to be seen whether Dutch political culture has fundamentally changed. It may well be that the Fortuyn episode was only a temporary breach and not a fundamental reversion of the dominant culture of consensus. However, if the latter were the case, then the drop in public trust may turn out to be a structural decline. It is too early for definite conclusions, but polder politics seems to be quite resilient. The new Balkenende cabinet is much more consensus oriented than the previous cabinets, the LPF has vanished from the political landscape, and the trust figures, as we have seen, are indeed on the rise again.

Changing expectations

Maybe it is not political culture that has changed, but the values and expectations of the general public. Inglehart (1999) maintains that societal changes transformed the values of contemporary publics. The emergence of postmaterialist values alters citizen expectations about the democratic process and has led to a more critical and demanding public. This phenomenon is claimed to have contributed to declining trust in government. Postmaterialists have less respect for hierarchical authority, are increasingly resistant to authoritarian government, and are at the same time also more interested in political life, and are more apt to play an active role in politics. This pattern of rising expectations of governments has become evident in particular among the upper social strata and the young; their passion for the democratic creed leads to dissatisfaction with today's politicians and political institutions and to high aspirations for the democratic process (Inglehart, 1999: 236).

Dalton (2004: 195) suggests that 20–30 percent of the decline in support in advanced industrialized countries might be traced to these democratic aspirations. Does this mean that political trust in The Netherlands dropped because postmaterialists have become suddenly more cynical about government? The answer is probably no. A change in values seems to indicate a shift in the expectations of citizens

over the long term and these gradual changes can explain the long-term trend to declining political support (Dalton, 2004: 102); but changing values cannot easily explain short-term shifts. A decline in respect for authority usually takes place through a process of intergenerational change; and it is questionable whether this has affected the shift in trust in the Dutch government so rapidly.

Again, The Netherlands seems to be the odd case out, because it has been the only industrialized country in which both the number of postmaterialists and the level of trust increased during the 1980s and 1990s (Dalton, 2000: 258). Moreover, there are no indications that the post-material orientations among citizens suddenly increased from 2002 onwards.

The 'coming of age' of generation X

Generational replacement is one of the key mechanisms that can explain social and political change with respect to attitudes toward political institutions (Hooghe, 2004). In most Western societies the political orientations of younger age cohorts differ in fundamental ways from those embodied by their predecessors. Today, the relation between the new generation and institutionalized politics is claimed to be under serious stress. Young people have tended to eschew traditional politics altogether; they refrain from party politics, but also from civil engagement, membership of voluntary associations and various forms of formal and informal interaction. Other studies show that younger age groups function as the vanguard of a new generation of critical citizens, who tend to be more sceptical about the performance of political institutions (Norris, 1999). The decline in confidence is hence the result of the coming of age of a less trusting and less engaged generation.

Back in the 1950s there was a negative relation between age and trust, indicating that older people were significantly more distrustful (Dalton, 2004). In most recent studies, however, this relation has turned around, as younger age cohorts now are clearly more distrustful than older respondents. According to Dalton (2004: 94), this finding allows some grounds for speculation about future trends: 'the young are now more likely to display lower levels of political trust and greater cynicism towards politicians and political institutions'. Members of 'generation X' begin their political experience as political cynics and these sentiments might only strengthen with continued experience with everyday politics (Hooghe, 2004: 334). The normal process of demographic turnover may therefore produce continued downward pressure on political support in the years ahead.

This generational turnover may explain the gradual decline of trust in a number of industrialized countries, but it does not provide a plausible answer to our puzzle of the abrupt drop of trust in The Netherlands in 2002. First of all, there is a problem of timing. It is not very probable that generational change manifests itself so abruptly; and the steady increase in trust until 2000 does not fit this explanation at all. Second, the data do not confirm this explanation. In the SCP surveys the youngest generation of respondents (aged 16 to 30) is not significantly more negative about government or the cabinet than older generations (Becker and Dekker, 2005: 345), or is even more trustful (Tammes and Dekker, 2007).

3.10. *Loss of social capital*

The decline in political support may not be an issue of generational turnover, but may be caused by a decrease in social capital. Social and geographic mobility and other forces of modernization have supposedly weakened the ties between individuals and social communities and has contributed to a growth of socially estranged and socially isolated groups in society (Dalton, 2004: 69). There is some evidence in the literature of a relationship between modernization, a decline in social capital and a decline in political trust, but it is weak, inconsistent, and significant among some groups but not among others (Zmerli et al., 2006: 36). Structural changes in society that generate feelings of discontent affect some social groups more than others (Van der Brug, 2003: 92). Elchardus and Smits (2002), in their analysis of the Belgian drop in public trust, have suggested that in particular the least educated and the elderly have become distrustful of government. They lack the skills to adapt to the demands of the information society, they face increasing competition on the labour market, and their social environment is rapidly changing because of immigration and globalization. These so-called 'losers of modernity' are resentful, they believe that politicians are not aware of their daily predicaments and refuse to listen. Social unease and political mistrust go hand in hand. They are hardly ever involved in voluntary work and civil society; they have little trust in other people, nor in public institutions; they are cynical about politicians, in favour of strong political leaders, and inclined not to vote at elections.

The empirical data for The Netherlands do indeed show that levels of trust in government vary between social groups. The lowest levels of trust in government and politics can be found among the least educated, non-religious, lower classes (Becker and Dekker, 2005: 351; WRR, 2005; Tammes and Dekker, 2007: 79). However, there are no indications that the decrease in trust has been much stronger among the least educated. Between 2001 and 2004, all educational cohorts have become less trustful (Van Praag and van der Brug, 2006: 40).⁶

Conclusions and discussion

Explaining the Dutch drop

Why did political trust in government in The Netherlands decline so suddenly and steeply in 2002 and the following years? We have examined ten explanations that have been put forward in the public debate in The Netherlands and in the scholarly literature on public trust. We have tested these explanations on their first face plausibility, on the basis of a meta analysis of the literature and the available empirical data, using three criteria: timing, generalizing capacity, and empirical plausibility. Our findings are summarized in Table 2.

On the basis of our analyses, a number of explanations can be discounted as inconsistent with the empirical evidence. It is not very plausible that the sudden decline in public trust was caused by an abrupt deterioration in government performance, or by a rapid rise in the number of political scandals and policy fiascos. Exogenous social developments, such as an increase in the number of postmaterialists, or generational change, also are not very likely explanations in the Dutch case. For

Table 2 Deciphering the Dutch drop of trust in government

Explanation	Plausibility	Comment
1. Deterioration of government performance	- - -	Timing does not fit; no empirical evidence for (perceived) decline in specific performance; theoretical link between performance and general trust is weak.
2. Dissatisfaction with Balkenende cabinets	+ + -	Timing fits quite well. Decline coincides with incumbency of right-wing Balkenende cabinets. Decline strongest among left-wing respondents. Rise with centre-left-wing cabinet. Economy intervening variable?
3. Consumer confidence	+ - +	Timing fits very well. Causality not clear. Explains fluctuations but not structural trend in other countries.
4. Fortuyn and drama democracy	+ - +	Timing fits, but may coincide with rally around the flag effect. May explain steepness and length of decline.
5. Scandals and fiascos	- - -	Timing is problematic. May be a factor elsewhere, but weak evidence for The Netherlands.
6. Media	- - +/-	Timing is problematic. May be a factor elsewhere. Inconclusive empirical evidence.
7. Change in political culture	+ + +/-	Timing fits. Generalizable to other countries. Some evidence in data; long-term trend unclear.
8. Changing expectations	- - -	Timing does not fit. May be a factor elsewhere, but no evidence in data for The Netherlands.
9. Generational change	- - -	Timing does not fit; does not explain rise or decline; not confirmed by data.
10. Loss of social capital	- + -	Timing questionable. Some evidence in the data for The Netherlands, but not elsewhere.

some other explanations, such as changes in the way in which the media operate, or loss of social capital, the empirical evidence is inconclusive.

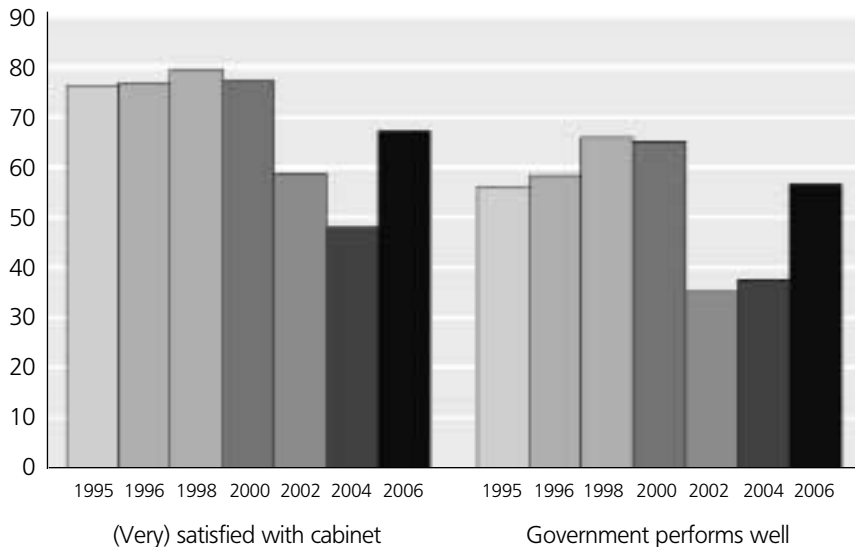
Complex problems seldom have simple explanations, and the same is true for the decline in public trust, as is evidenced by the extensive literature on the subject. In the Dutch case, the decline in trust is probably best explained by a combination of four endogenous and exogenous factors that have coincided in time and have reinforced each other. The sudden decline in trust in government, as measured by the SCP, seems first of all a product of *endogenous* political factors such as dissatisfaction, particularly among left-wing respondents, with the incumbency – and inept demise – of the first right-wing Balkenende cabinet and with the social and economic poli-

cies of the second Balkenende cabinet. However, the incumbency of the Balkenende cabinets coincided with a period of serious economic decline and a large part of the dissatisfaction with the cabinet and of the decline of trust in government can also be attributed to an *exogenous* factor: a decline in confidence in the economy. The steepness and length of the decline of trust in government, as compared to other European countries after 9/11, is probably caused by the dramatic events of the murders of Fortuyn in 2002 and Van Gogh in 2004. These, in turn, led to a long period of social and political upheaval and to a contentious and polarized political climate.

The drop was a temporal dip

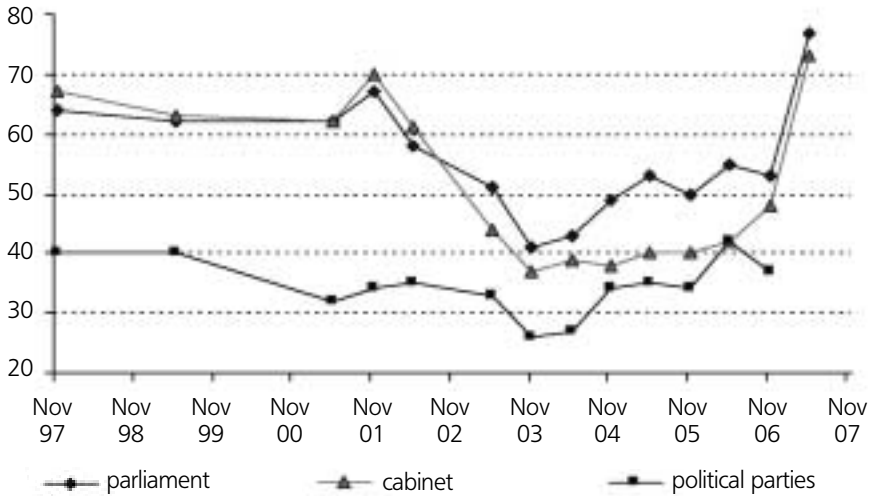
The Dutch decline in public trust has been a temporal dip and not a permanent drop.⁷ Most of the relevant factors – incumbent cabinets, economic decline, and dramatic political events – are contingent and temporary in nature. Recent rising trust figures do indeed suggest a return to higher levels of public trust. As of 2007, with a new, centre-left Balkenende government in office, and an economic recovery in place, trust figures are on the rise again as can be seen from Figure 8. According to the fall 2006 survey of the SCP, trust in government returned to its 1995 level. It is not only the SCP data that show an *upsurge* in public trust in government and cabinet, also the Eurobarometer figures also show a similar pattern of recovery for other political institutions, as can be seen from Figure 9.

According to the April 2007 Eurobarometer figures, trust in the cabinet was even higher than in the late 1990s. It remains to be seen whether the Dutch trust figures will structurally return to their extraordinarily high, pre-2002 levels. If the changes in



Source: SCP (2007: 73).

Figure 8 Satisfaction with cabinet and government performance, 1995–2006



Source: Eurobarometer.

Note: The Eurobarometer surveys are held in spring (March/April) and autumn (October/November) of each year. Not all institutions are part of each survey. For reasons of space, we have only listed the November surveys on the x-axis.

Figure 9 Trust in Parliament, political parties and cabinet in The Netherlands, 1997–2007

Dutch political culture, such as negative campaigning, horse-race news coverage, and highly polarized political debates, turn out to be permanent, high levels of trust may not be durable. It is too early to tell whether The Netherlands will again be the odd case out among the industrialized countries or will eventually join the long-term pattern of a slight, but steady decline of public trust.

Theoretical implications: sudden dips versus gradual decline

Most of the literature (Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004) concentrates on the explanation of the *cross-national gradual erosion* of political support over a relatively long term within Western democracies. Dalton (2004: 81–3), for instance, studies the declining public confidence in government as a *long-term trend within the advanced industrial societies*, a trend that has occurred over 40 years and of which the rate of change is slightly less than 1 percent a year, but of which the cumulative impact of the per annum changes is quite substantial in the long run.

We, on the other hand, have focused on a rather *abrupt* downfall in political confidence in a relatively short time span. Similar abrupt changes in the public mood have been observed in other countries, such as Belgium in the wake of the Dutroux affaire and the White Marches in the mid-1990s, Austria during the Haider government, and Eastern European countries after the fall of communism at the time of transition to democracy (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005). Likewise, the events in the US of 9/11 demonstrate that political trust orientations of citizens toward government can change quickly. Political trust in the US, after the terrorist attacks, increased greatly: in

no time Americans rallied around their government. But nine months after the attacks trust was again at the level recorded in 2000 (Hetherington, 2005). Similar spikes in support for US government had accompanied the Gulf War conflict in 1991 and the Iraqi War Resolution in 2002. These sudden dips or highs in public trust cannot be explained by long-term demographic, social, and political trends, because the timing criterion is very problematic.

Although empirical evidence is still thin, we argue that sudden dips in trust and long-term decline in trust are probably two different types of social phenomena, which require different sets of explanatory factors. Sudden fluctuations in trust levels are better explained by political or economic contingencies, such as sudden political or economic crises. Overnight movements in public opinion should be understood, in Stimson's (2004: 21) view, as predictable responses to real-world events; public opinion is 'a sensitive barometer. It moves not only in response to big and exciting events; it also tracks more subtle and normal politics.' Trust in the US, for instance, has deteriorated greatly since the 1960s, but there have been increases during this period as well (Hetherington, 2005). For instance, with Ronald Reagan in power in the 1980s trust levels returned to a height not seen since the late 1960s; and throughout the late 1990s trust increased despite the constant media focus on the many scandals experienced by Clinton. In both periods, Americans' perceptions of the nation's economic performance were favourable. From this perspective, fluctuations in public trust simply follow recent government performance: 'it drops when one would expect, as with the deepening morass in Vietnam after 1968 and the Watergate scandal in 1974, and it rises when one would expect, as with the major economic expansions of the early 1980s and the late 1990s' (Hetherington, 2005: 18). In Stimson's (2004: 153) words: 'citizens trust government when it has performed well; and withdraw trust when they are displeased with the state of things. As is usually the case, the national economy is the best indicator of performance.'

Economic outlook and political crises may not, on the other hand, explain the trend of more structural, gradual decline of trust in public institutions (Pharr and Putnam, 2000: 173–201). Dalton (2004: 193–7) calls these factors nation-specific *post hoc interpretations* that are unlikely to identify the general source or root cause of the general declining trend across most advanced industrial democracies. In Dalton's (2004: 197) view, these 'performance' explanations (of economy, government, and politicians) should be discounted as sources of eroding political support: 'strong changes in performance can have short term influence on political support — but these effects are perturbations around the long term trend'. The long-term decline of trust in public institutions is best explained by rising expectations, increasing diversity of issue demands, and a more critical voice of certain interests in contemporary policy debates.

Both approaches to the explanation of changes in political trust can be valuable in their own right. Gradual changes in trust levels can be conceptualized as the result of what Mishler and Rose (2001) call *learning processes*. Shifting socialization experiences of new generations with different political values and rising expectations — mainly exogenous factors — contribute to steady changes in (the erosion of) political trust over time. Fluctuations in political trust, then again, can be conceptualized as the result of *earning processes*. Trust declines and can be *earned* again through better

economic policies or improved government performance — and is mainly endogenously determined. Trust 'earned' can change more swiftly than the generations or decades that are needed for trust (or distrust) 'learned'. In our view, gradual changes in trust and short-term fluctuations are thus both subject to different dynamics.

Notes

- 1 The SCP survey question is: 'Do you think the government is performing well?'
- 2 These are partly based upon Nye et al. (1997: 264–8).
- 3 The data for the SCP survey were gathered in the fall of 2002.
- 4 However, as can be seen in Figure 2, a number of other countries also experienced a decline in trust in political institutions following the post-9/11 high of October 2001.
- 5 A similar increase in trust in government after 9/11 has also been observed in the US (Dalton, 2004; Hetherington, 2005).
- 6 According to Dalton (2004: 87–91), the importance of education for trust has weakened in recent decades; in some countries, such as the US, the correlation between education and political support has even reversed: 'Over time, the trust levels of the better educated decrease at a steeper rate, and by the end of the 1990s the less educated are more trustful' (Dalton, 2004: 87). This is not the case in The Netherlands (Van der Brug and van Praag, 2007).
- 7 Van der Brug and van Praag (2007) come to a similar conclusion.

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