

Satisfied customers and distrusting citizens in the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

Satisfied customers...

Public administration in the Netherlands has been thoroughly modernized during the past decades. Much politico-administrative attention has been devoted to what is now called 'service delivery'. It was not so long ago that bureaucrats continually bombarded the citizens with application, registration and inspection forms. In those days service delivery would probably be the concept that least described the interactions between citizens and public administration. Nowadays even the Dutch Tax Department advertises with the slogan 'We can't make things more pleasant but we can make them easier'. The Tax Monitor that measures the taxpayers' opinions proves that this is not a hollow slogan. The average taxpayer seems to be very pleased with the reliability, expertise, and client knowledge of the Tax Department (Belastingdienst, 2002). Many of the world's tax authorities will envy the Dutch Tax Department's achievements. Twenty years ago they did not even dare to dream of this success.

But dissatisfied citizens...

Public service delivery departments can rightly be proud if their customers are satisfied. But what does it mean that customers are satisfied with public service delivery? Although the surveys observe satisfied customers, the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in 2001/2002 successfully highlighted a latent discomfort among Dutch citizens. The customers may be satisfied, but by continuously repeating that health care and education were substandard Pim Fortuyn attracted lots of voters. Political scientists even spoke of a crisis. Therefore, besides the reassuring customer satisfaction there also seems to be an alarming amount of discomfort. The question can be posed whether the attempts to improve the quality of public service delivery really contributed something to citizen's trust in government. Both politicians and public managers assumed that transparent and consumer oriented public services would produce satisfied customers and improve trust in public administration. Because private service delivery was supposed to be of a much higher standard than public service delivery, the citizen's expectations had risen. Therefore, we were (and are) told that public administration had (and still has) to adapt modern techniques to keep-up with the private sector.

With hindsight these assumptions seem questionable. Satisfaction and distrust seem to run parallel. Citizens seem to contradict themselves. After the Dutch Parliamentary elections in 2002 some commentators questioned the methods of the agencies that had measured a high level of satisfaction. These agencies used methods they developed in the seventies. These old-fashioned methods would not be appropriate for measuring the contemporary level of discomfort. The Parliamentary elections in 2003 have led to a recovery of the established political parties. The electoral support for the new parties diminished. Then, the agencies struck back that had been accused of using old methods. They argued that if there had been any dissatisfaction among citizens, it had to be very superficial. Apparently, the Dutch had fallen victim to a temporary collective madness.

The contribution of public service delivery

The instruments for measuring what citizens really think are probably imperfect. One instrument may be too inaccurate to measure the discomfort, the other too subtle. But even

then the question remains how satisfied customers and discomfoted citizens can occur at the same time. A possible explanation could be that citizens do not relate their overall view of government with their own everyday life. While concrete experiences may be satisfactory, people may still believe that there is a crisis within the system. Another explanation could be that people's daily experiences differ from their general views. Yet another reason could be that citizens distinguish public administration as a service provider and public administration as a politico-institutional body. In 1990, a survey carried out among thousands of citizens in Dutch cities demonstrated that they were very satisfied with their local services (Tops e.a., 1990). At the same time however, they were not very enthusiastic about local politics. This was not a pleasing result for all those politicians who had centered their political program on improving service delivery. A couple of years later Tops (1995) formulated a theory on the relationship between public service delivery and government's authority. If the quality of public service delivery increases, government will not win authority. On the other hand, if the quality of public service delivery decreases, a government will loose a certain amount of its authority or legitimacy.

Quality and trust: theories

Public administration scholars sometimes relate distrusting citizens to the performance of public administration (for an overview see Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Sims, 2001; Bok, 2001; Ringeling, 1993). The New Public Management movement aspires to restore public trust in government by improving public administration's performance. The approach is based on two pillars: macro performance and micro performance (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003: 299). Macro performance explains public trust with variables like unemployment rates and economic growth. Micro performance assumes that public trust can be explained by (improving the quality of) public service delivery.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the quality of public service delivery and citizen's trust in public administration in the Netherlands. Section two concentrates on the quality of public service delivery, while section three explores citizen's trust. The paper concludes with some questions and issues.

2. Public service delivery in the Netherlands

Quality is an ambiguous and vague concept. Moreover, it is an essentially contested concept. In his cult novel, *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* Robert Pirsig describes the main character's quest for the essence of quality. His fruitless search ends in despair and madness. It appears to be impossible to grasp the meaning of quality with objective standards and concepts. Everybody experiences quality in a different way. Ultimately, quality is embedded in values. For example, if efficiency is defined as the primary value, the quality of the naturalization process for foreigners can be defined by the speed ('not having to wait too long'), convenience ('not having to put too much effort in the process'), customer-friendliness ('being treated decently') and price ('not having to pay too much'). If citizenship is defined as the primary value, quality refers to the naturalization process as a *rite de passage* ('you have to prove something to become Dutch'), the symbols ('what does the passport mean as actual proof of citizenship?'), and the weight of the procedure ('it should not be too easy'). From the first point of view, quality means being able to apply online for Dutch citizenship and receiving the passport within two days notice. As for citizenship the mayor should perhaps personally handover the certificate to the applicant. And as part of a symbolic ceremony the applicant then puts his hand on the national flag while they both listen to the national anthem.

2.1 Approaches to quality

An objective approach

If we acknowledge that the meaning of quality is embedded in values then there are at least two approaches which define the quality of public services. The first approach departs from the *goals of the organization*. These goals are used to derive quality standards and criteria. The second approach is based on *customer satisfaction*. The first approach became popular in the Netherlands during the eighties. While Western economies stagnated, Asian tigers flourished. As a consequence the Dutch showed an increasing interest in Eastern management methods which included sophisticated methods for quality control and continuous quality improvement. Since then the concept of quality can no longer be ignored both in the Dutch private sector or in the public sector and the country has been flooded with quality circles, total quality management, and quality certification methods. Almost every public organization in the Netherlands has now employed a system of continuous quality improvement to obtain ISO-certification. Most of these systems use the mission and the goals of the organization to determine quality standards.

Public service delivery cannot derive its standards from private service providers like banks and insurance companies. The public sector context differs from private service delivery in numerous ways. The Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office summarizes the public sector context as follows (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2002). First, the *price* is not necessarily an indicator of the quality of public services. The price of a public service does not express the user's preferences and scarcity does not necessarily increase the price of a service. Second, the use of a number of public services *cannot be avoided*. Citizens have to resort to a public monopolist or they depend on one provider. Third, public services are *standardized*. Although they may differ in practice, formally all hospitals and doctors, schools and teachers provide the same public service. Fourth, we do not only look at quality of the public service as

such but we also consider the *production process*. This means that we should also take into account the quality of the system that produces public services. Finally, *we cannot use efficiency* as a mechanism for quality assessment and control. Moreover, customers do not always know the quality of a service delivered. Only a few patients are able to assess the quality of medical treatment. They do know whether a doctor has supplied sufficient and comprehensible information about the treatment.

Hoogwout (2003) defines public service delivery as having the following characteristics:

- The legal nature of public services: public services create rights and obligations for government or citizens. The legal nature also refers to the legal requirements public services have to meet.
- Public services are one-sided: agreement between supplier and consumer is not necessary. Usually, government decides the contents of the service.
- Public services do not necessarily express the consumer's preferences.
- In practice public services come down to government decisions, documents or certificates and money transactions.

Because of the different context and nature, public services must meet specific quality standards and ideals. These are only partly derived from the private sector. In the Netherlands, Hoogwout (2003) defines the public service quality ideal by means of four trends:

- **From a supply orientation to a demand orientation.** Traditionally, public administration focuses on the supply side. Because of legal provisions, information has to be published. Government enacts legal regulations that create rights and obligations for citizens. Instead of the preferences and needs of citizens, service delivery concentrates on these legal frameworks. However, attention has increasingly shifted to the questions, desires, needs and preferences of citizens.
- **From a fragmented to an integrated delivery of public services.** Bureaucratic organizations almost inherently provide fragmented services because the efficiency of the production process determines the structure (and culture) of the organization. Initially, integration of public services meant that these were integrated from a government perspective ('housing and urban planning'). Currently, the life event approach aims at integrating public services from a citizen's perspective ('from birth to funeral').
- **From a reactive to a proactive service delivery.** Usually, citizen's actions trigger public service delivery. We all know the traditional application form that we have to complete to apply for some service or another, but a telephone call, a letter or even an e-mail could also be used as a means to obtain a specific service. A mix of motives has stimulated proactive service delivery. Besides insufficient use of government services (some of the social security benefits are unclaimed) an important motive for proactive service delivery has been to combat fraud.
- **From one contact point to multi-channeling.** This development refers to the distribution of public services. The letter, the application form and the telephone have replaced the old-fashioned counter. The Internet may increasingly become an important channel for public services.

Quality as customer satisfaction

The objective approach to quality is determined by the quality standards set out in the organization's goals and mission. Quality can also be treated as an equivalent to customer satisfaction. This approach is based upon the assumption that if citizens are satisfied with public service delivery its quality must be high. Sometimes it is not possible to define

objective quality standards. Besides, citizens may be (dis)satisfied with public service delivery for many different reasons. Some citizens prefer speed and convenience, while others prefer the warmth of personal treatment. The approach that equates quality with customer satisfaction does not take into consideration why customers are (dis)satisfied. It asks citizens directly whether they are satisfied or not. Sometimes customer satisfaction can be specified more accurately. It may refer to the comprehensiveness of the correspondence, the transparency of the decision-making process, the friendliness of the civil servants, and so on. An example of such a detailed research is the Dutch Tax Monitor. This research measures customer satisfaction with the Tax Department. Taxpayers are asked about their general opinions with regard to the functioning of this department. They also provide their opinions concerning the comprehensiveness of the forms, the approachability of the department and the department's website. Usually, municipalities ask their citizens to assess their local governments by using a grading system. Approximately two out of three Dutch municipalities have conducted a customer-satisfaction survey during the past five years (Hoogwout, 2003).

Operational quality, interaction quality and constitutional quality

Toonen & Hendriks (1998: 224-227) have distinguished three quality levels to assess the functioning of public administration:

- Operational quality refers to the concrete products and services public administration provides. Public service delivery concerns information, grants and benefits, taxes, permits, passports and driving licenses, complaints, fines and penalties, and so on. Individual citizens interact with public administration as a service provider.
- Interaction quality concerns the quality of the interaction in the public domain and policy development. Quality standards are used to assess the interaction process. How does public administration interact with citizens and their associations, NGOs and interest groups? What is the quality of the public dialogue? Does the process design take into account all the interests concerned?
- Constitutional quality encompasses the government system and the checks and balances within the system. Does the system contain countervailing powers? What are the guarantees for careful decision-making processes? And what about the mechanisms for citizen influence on governmental decisions? How are the institutions of government democratically legitimated? How does the system guarantee legal security and legal equality?

These levels have not yet been systematically and empirically verified. The distinctions are analytical and conceptual. While the operational quality has been investigated rather thoroughly in the Netherlands, citizens have not yet been asked for their opinions with regard to the interaction quality and the constitutional quality. We do not even know how citizens assess the relevance and the importance of these levels.

2.2 Quality and customer satisfaction

Satisfied customers

Although the quality surveys that measure customer satisfaction are somewhat ambiguous, Dutch citizens appear to be rather satisfied with public service delivery. The Tax Monitor in 2001 demonstrated that the majority of taxpayers were satisfied with the Tax Department. Most of the taxpayers considered their last contact with this department as good or very good. They also state that the Tax Department keeps its promises and that they can rely on the department. Although the approachability via telephone is considered not to be so good, the

forms and the decisions of the Tax Department are clear. In general, this department is experienced as credible, responsible and incorruptible. According to research carried out by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Agency, Dutch citizens are also generally satisfied with most of the municipal services.

Table 1. Citizen's opinions on municipal service delivery

	Bad	Moderate	Good	Very Good/Excellent
Passport and driving license	1%	10%	64%	25%
Garbage collection	2%	8%	56%	34%
Maintenance of public spaces	11%	34%	42%	13%
Application for a permit	9%	39%	46%	6%
Police	5%	36%	52%	7%
General opinion	2%	25%	64%	9%

Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2002: 212

Those who provide services to the whole population can rightly be proud of these figures. In contrast with the private sector, citizens cannot choose their public service provider. If the majority of citizens then experiences municipal service delivery as good or even excellent, then we can justifiably conclude that the quality of public service delivery in the Netherlands is high (from a customer satisfaction point of view). Other research leads to the same conclusions. Based on a meta-analysis of 133 surveys, Hoogwout (2003) concludes that if citizens are asked to rate their municipality on a scale of ten the municipal service delivery scores 7.2 on average. Approximately 81% of the citizens are satisfied or very satisfied with their municipal's service delivery. Generally, these citizens are less satisfied with local politics.

Although citizens are, to a certain extent, ambiguous about the quality of other public sector services, there is no major dissatisfaction. To illustrate this, some of the figures collected by the Social and Cultural Planning Agency showed that:

- Approximately 75% of the citizens assess the quality of medical care in the Netherlands as good or excellent, while 22% think the quality is moderate and 2% consider them to be bad.
- 67% of the citizens assess primary education as good or very good, 63% say that secondary education is good or very good, 70% say vocational education is good or very good and 66% consider that higher education is good or very good.
- The majority of the users are satisfied of housing organizations. 79% of the users are satisfied with the service they receive and 88% of the users are satisfied with the way complaints and repairs are dealt with.

The only exception is crime. Only 20% of the citizens consider that government is taking enough care of their safety whereas 35% of the citizens say that the police is doing a good job.

Although citizens' experiences suggest a high quality of public service delivery, many citizens believe that the quality of health care and education has declined during the past five

years. Therefore, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Agency concludes that it is not very difficult to provoke dissatisfaction with public service delivery. While asking for concrete experiences and actual quality demonstrates satisfaction, if questions are formulated more generally or abstract they then provoke dissatisfaction.

2.3 Conclusions

A summary of recent research into the quality of the Dutch public sector gives rise to a number of conclusions.

- Generally, citizens are (very) satisfied with the operational quality of the public sector. Both general opinions and concrete experiences are rated as positive.
- The only exceptions are in the area of crime and safety. Although concrete experiences with the police were evaluated positively, most of the citizens consider the police does not perform well.
- Despite a flood of quality improvement projects within public administration during the last twenty years, citizens still believe that the quality of public service delivery has declined.
- Citizens have not yet systematically been asked to assess the interaction quality and the constitutional quality of public administration. Other than some research concerning specific processes of policy development (concerning the interactive development of a specific policy paper) there has been no systematic research carried out on the interaction quality of public administration. We do not even know whether Dutch citizens consider interaction quality as relevant or important. Some scholars assume that citizens want policies to be developed interactively. Hendriks (2003) concludes that citizen satisfaction on both the constitutional and operational level will logically lead to an interaction deficit.

3. Trust in government

Trust is an even more mystical concept than quality. When and why do people trust each other? When and why to citizens trust government? Why does public trust or distrust emerge? The concept of trust infers to an expectation concerning the other's behavior. The other is being trusted because we know that he or she will (re)act in a certain manner. It is a matter of conviction whether the other is being trusted. The conviction element makes trust a mysterious phenomenon. When do people become convinced that they can rightly trust the other? Do people trust each other because of previous experiences ('it went well then')? Trust may also emerge from perceived resemblance ('he looks like me, so he can probably be trusted') or the use of third parties (e.g. lawyers, banks). Some people trust objective numbers while others only rely on real people.

The emergence of generalized public (dis)trust is even harder to grasp than trust between two people who know each other personally. Although Robert Putnam (2000) has claimed that generalized public trust (social capital) increases economic growth, prosperity, democracy and health, it seems hardly possible to consciously create social capital. Or is it too quick to draw this conclusion. Can public administration contribute to generalized public trust? And what role does public service delivery play in this respect?

3.1 Approaches to trust

Rational and emotional elements of trust

After analyzing theories on trust Bouckaert et al (2002) conclude that trust is strongly related to risk and expectations. Trust seems to be a substitute for risk and uncertainty, but it also creates uncertainty for the person who trusts. Trust is both a rational and an emotional matter. According to Lewis and Weigert (1985; quoted in Bouckaert c.s., 2002), there are three dimensions of trust: a cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimension. They have developed a typology of trust based on the rational and emotional elements.

Table 2. Typology of trust

		Emotionality		
		High	Low	Almost absent
Rationality	High	Ideological trust	Cognitive trust	Rational prediction
	Low	Emotional trust	Routine trust	Probable anticipation
	Almost absent	Faith	Faith	Uncertainty, panic

Lewis and Weigert, 1985; quoted in Bouckaert et al, 2002: 7

Individual and generalized public trust

Trust refers to concrete relationships between people and their organizations. It may also refer to a *Zeitgeist* or a culture. Robert Putnam has done important pioneering work in this area. After studying Italian regions he concluded that a tradition of active citizenship and a high

level of social capital mainly account for the economic prosperity of Northern Italy and the deprivation of Southern Italy. It appeared that the existence of a civic community determines the institutional performance of a region (Putnam, 1993). His study *Bowling alone* analyzes the rise and decline of generalized public trust (social capital) in the United States (Putnam, 2000). He argues that joint action ('doing things together') creates generalized public trust. Since the sixties, people have been doing things less together and as a result social capital has declined. Television, work, and urban sprawl have caused this decline. Most important though has been the gradual disappearance of the generation that lived during World War II. This war caused the enormous growth of social capital during the fifties. It formed the consciousness of this generation and it created a community of faith that would last for years.

According to Putnam, the decline of the civic tradition in the United States should not be welcomed. A high level of generalized reciprocity (generalized public trust or social capital) seems to contribute to a nation's economic prosperity. It also goes along with more educated people, less crime and vital democratic institutions. Higher levels of social capital make a nation richer, healthier, and happier. Putnam's research does not provide a conclusive answer to the issue of causality. Therefore, the question remains open as to whether these circumstances are a result of a high level of social capital or the conditions that breed high levels of social capital. We only know that high levels of social capital go along with economic and social prosperity. And, even at this point, Putnam's analysis cannot be conclusive (yet). During the past decade the economy of the United States grew substantially without a parallel growth of social capital.

Public administration and trust

This analysis of trust demonstrates that public administration is conceptually related to trust in at least two ways:

1. Trust may be important for the concrete delivery of public services and public administration's interactions with individual citizens. We do not know whether the transactional face of public administration requires and produces specific reciprocity.
2. The politico-institutional face of public administration may be related to a culture of generalized public trust. Although this assumption seems plausible, it has not yet been empirically tested. Moreover, we do not yet know what (government) institutions breed generalized public trust. Is it a big and powerful public administration, an efficient public administration, a service-oriented public administration, a public administration that does not lie or something else?

Recently, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy emphasized that a well-functioning *Rechtsstaat* produces generalized public trust (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2002). This council assumes that there is a relationship between trust and the *Rechtsstaat*. Up to now, this assumption lacks an empirical basis. Moreover, one of the preliminary studies underlying this council's report proves that trust primarily relates to citizens' general attitude towards society, politics and public administration. Based on a survey among citizens, Van den Brink (2002) has constructed two theoretical attitudes.

Table 3. Attitudes concerning politics, society and public administration

<i>Offensive attitude</i>	<i>Defensive attitude</i>
Satisfied with the Parliamentary system	Dissatisfied with the Parliamentary System
Interested in politics	Not interested in politics and social issues
Supports social movements	Does not support social movements
Takes political action	Disregards politics
Satisfied with politics	Dissatisfied with politics
Has clear moral standards	Morally confused
Does not want authoritarian politics	Inclined to authoritarianism
Highly educated	Hardly educated
High income	Low income

Van den Brink, 2002: 69

Taking these attitudes as a conceptual point of departure, Van den Brink divided citizens into three categories: active citizens, acquiescent citizens and threatened citizens. Active citizens display the most generalized trust. Only 6% of these citizens believe that other people are generally unreliable. Approximately 28% of the acquiescent citizens and 59% of the threatened citizens shared this opinion.

Trust in government

Although public trust should be something to be aimed for ('something positive'), the question is still whether trust in government should or should not be desired. Is not democracy just another word for organized distrust in government? We regularly vote for new politicians because we do not trust politicians who are in power too long. We have judges because we do not trust the police and the public prosecutor. We have created procedures to appeal against government decisions because we do not trust public administrators. Parry (1976) distinguishes different scholarly positions towards trust in government. The *constitutional approach* sees distrust as a necessity to maintain the equilibrium between society and public administration. Therefore, we should not speak of trust in government but of entrusting power to government. Democratically giving power to government can only be sustainable if there is a certain amount of public distrust towards government. If the majority of the citizens says that it distrusts government, we have no reason to be pessimistic. This demonstrates a healthy political attitude that does not threaten the stability of the political system. According to the *political culture approach*, we should worry if there is a high level of public distrust in government. This approach regards distrust in government as a symptom of political cynicism or political alienation. These phenomena endanger the stability of the political system. Bouckaert et al (2002: 11) have systematically characterized these approaches (see table 4). Only a combination of the two approaches can be realistic. Therefore, Parry (1976: 141-142) suggests an alliance between political theory and public administration:

'The object of policy, on this view, is to refine constitutional mechanisms in order to improve the rule of law and the procedures of accountability. Administrative tribunals and administrative law, the Ombudsman, greater publicity, improved financial and legal control over delegated legislation and over the new phenomenon of the contract state are what politics should be concerned with. It is claimed that from the standpoint of the ordinary citizen this is more dependable a policy than trusting the elite consensus of modern pluralism. At the same time it might be a more fruitful policy than attempting the slow change of a civic culture by broadening the basis of

consensus, or preserving a culture by discouraging the apathetic from disturbing the consensus.'

Table 4. Approaches to public (dis)trust in government

Political culture approach	Constitutional approach
Generalized trust produces trust in politics and public administration	Checks and balances within public administration produce trust in government
Public distrust in government and politics is a problem	Public trust in government is not necessarily a prerequisite for a stable democratic political system
Consensus is both necessary and useful	Conflict can be useful
Politicians should be good, honest, and responsible people	Politicians do not necessarily have to be good if they can be held responsible for their actions
Generating consensus and removing conflict produces trust	Strengthening checks and balances (and distrust within public administration) produces trust

Bouckaert et al, 2002: 11

Bouckaert et al (2002) attempt to combine these approaches. They argue that we should not concentrate on the opposition between trust and distrust. Instead, we should use trust-no trust and distrust-no distrust. Some circumstances create trust, like the absence of corruption, professional government, democratic participation, and an efficient government. Other circumstances create distrust. For example, illegal arrest and government attacks on the freedom of citizens and the integrity of the body. Hendriks (2003) also attempts to combine the different approaches towards trust in government. His attempt is based on the works of Almond and Verba (1963; 1980). They argue that a stable democracy can only be built upon a mix of active/trusting and passive/distrusting political orientations in a moderate civic culture. People entrust public administration with some responsibilities and power to facilitate collective action and decision-making. At the same time, citizens actively participate in democratic processes. Government's responsibilities and powers are not exclusive. Different levels of participation and trust do not necessarily mean that the stability of the system is endangered. Hendriks (2003) argues that a well-functioning democracy is always characterized by different cultures of citizenship.

Table 5. Cultures of citizenship

	<i>Participatory/action-oriented</i>	<i>Passive/acquiescent</i>
<i>Trust/attached</i>	Participatory trusting	Passive trusting
<i>Distrust/detached</i>	Action-oriented distrusting	Passive distrusting

3.2 Do (Dutch) citizens trust government?

Although there have been some rather turbulent moments in Dutch political history, the political culture of the Dutch can generally be characterized as stable and consensus-oriented. Therefore, the events that happened in 2002 surprised many commentators. What had gotten into the Dutch? Some commentators concluded that public distrust had increased substantially in the Netherlands. They argued that the rise of a new (populist) political party displayed

increased distrust and discomfort with government and politics. Some Dutch political scientists even argued that the stability of the political system was at stake. Public administration seemed to have lost its support. Dutch citizens appeared to have become alienated and cynical. Despite these analyses, Dutch citizens displayed a relatively high level of trust. In 2001, approximately 65% of the citizens trusted Parliament and approximately 53% trusted government agencies (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2002). At that moment, approximately 45% of the citizens trusted large private corporations. Substantially less people trusted political parties. In 2001, only 33% of the citizens trusted political parties. Although these figures have somewhat decreased since 1997, they do not indicate a watershed. In the Netherlands, public trust in government is relatively high compared to other European countries.

Generalized public trust is also relatively high in the Netherlands. Approximately 60 per cent of the Dutch believe that *in general most of the people can be trusted* (Halman, 2001). Only 22 per cent of the French, 30 per cent of the British, 35 per cent of the Germans, and 29 per cent of the Belgian people share their opinion. Because it is difficult to grasp the precise meaning of this statement in each country we should not simply compare these figures. And they certainly do not prove a crisis of public trust in the Netherlands.

Different levels of trust in public administration

Although the Dutch display a relatively high level of trust in government, it can be asked what part of government they trust. Three levels of public administration have been distinguished in section two with regard to quality. Hendriks (2003) uses these levels to also make a distinction between three levels of trust. On the constitutional level, he concludes that public trust in Dutch government is relatively high. He observes hardly any controversy on constitutional matters with regard to the Parliamentary system or the *Rechtsstaat* in the Netherlands. Radical constitutional change lacks public support. On the operational level, Hendriks also observes a high level of public trust. In this respect, he equates trust and customer satisfaction to public service delivery. Therefore, he concludes that distrust and discomfort logically concern the interaction level. Hendriks argues that there is a lack of interactionism in the Netherlands. Dutch public administration approaches interaction with citizens in a too technocratic and instrumental way. Citizens do not experience these interactions as sincere and meaningful.

Why do citizens (dis)trust government?

We can fall back on several theories to explain why citizens (dis)trust their governments (Bouckaert et al, 2002: 27). One set of explanations has become known as the performance theory. According to this theory, distrust is primarily associated with badly functioning government institutions. Micro-performance refers to public service delivery, while macro performance concerns indicators such as economic growth and unemployment rates. Several circumstances interfere with these theories. Whether institutions do or do not function well cannot be separated from citizens' expectations. Improving the quality of public service delivery may lead to rising expectations. The Dutch Tax Department advertises 'We can't make things more pleasant but we can make them easier', but this has to be proven. If not, the advertisement will harm the image people have of this department. But even if it is proven, rising expectations for improved quality may even stimulate increased dissatisfaction. Moreover, performance does not necessarily refer to objective quality levels. It can also refer to citizen's perceptions of the way government institutions function. In section two, we concluded that citizen's concrete experiences differ from their general view of government. Satisfaction with public service delivery can be perceived as a system crisis.

Nye et al (1997) have searched for reasons to explain increased distrust in government in the United States. After critically assessing many possible explanations, it appears that the following explanations are primarily responsible for the loss of public trust:

- World War II led to an enormous increase in trust in government. The gradual death of the war generation coincides with a decline of trust in government.
- Increased polarization among political elites leads to a decreased trust in government.
- Negative coverage on television also decreases trust in government. Generally, the media play an important role.
- The rise of the information society has led to a decay of traditional patterns of authority and individualism.

3.3 Conclusions

Generalized public trust in the Netherlands is relatively high compared with other European countries. Dutch citizens also display a relatively high level of trust in government and its institutions. The only exceptions are the political parties. A number of nuances can be added to these conclusions:

- A stable democratic and political system rests on a mix of public trust and distrust. Although political scientists may see distrust as an unhealthy phenomenon, a legitimate political system requires a certain amount of distrust.
- Individual trust concerning a specific relation or interaction has to be discerned from generalized public trust. Although these different levels are connected, individual trust does not necessarily indicate generalized public trust and vice versa.
- Trust in government is primarily related to someone's citizenship style and social position. Threatened citizens distrust government and public administration. Acquiescent and active citizens display higher levels of trust.
- In the Netherlands, scholars have argued that high levels of trust on an operational and a constitutional level logically lead to a lack of interaction. This conclusion has not been systematically and empirically verified yet.
- Some theories relate distrust in government to the actual performance of government. The empirical evidence in the Netherlands does not support these theories. The emergence of generalized public trust and trust in government seem to depend on social (mega)trends, media coverage, and styles and cultures of citizenship.

4. Quality and trust in the Netherlands

Common assumptions and empirical findings

Public trust is not the only reason to improve public service delivery and to modernize the public sector. Professional pride and political programs can also legitimize attempts to improve the quality of public service delivery. Still, many managers and politicians believe that better quality and better performance will eventually strengthen public trust in government. In the Netherlands, Van der Zwan (2003) even explains the rise of populism with bad performance and imperfect public service delivery. Although this assumption may be persistent, research does not seem to support it (yet). There seems to be a rather weak relationship between government performance and public trust. A critical assessment of this relationship in the Netherlands gives rise to the following conclusions:

- During the past twenty years, many implementation agencies and municipalities have made a lot of investments to improve the quality of public service delivery. Demand-oriented, integrated, proactive and multi-channeled public services have been the primary goals.
- Generally, Dutch citizens rate public service delivery as good to very good. There appears to be a difference between the citizens' concrete experiences and their general views. While the experiences are positive, the general view of public administration is rather negative.
- Sometimes different levels of public administration can be distinguished. Citizens' evaluation of the constitutional quality, the interaction quality, and the operational quality can turn out differently. Moreover, we cannot assess the quality of public services by merely looking at customer satisfaction. Public administration has also developed some 'objective' quality standards and criteria to assess the system as a whole.
- Stable and well-functioning democracies are characterized by a combination of generalized public trust and distrust.
- The amount of trust and distrust is primarily related to the citizenship style and the citizen's subculture.
- In the Netherlands, systematic empirical research on the relationship between public service delivery and generalized public trust has not been carried out yet. The available research supports the hypothesis that there is a weak relationship. If there is a relationship, the contribution of public service delivery to generalized public trust seems limited. Moreover, it probably has to be related to the institutional performance of the public sector as a whole.
- Although it has not been empirically tested, Tops' theory on the relationship between public service delivery and government's authority seems plausible. If the quality of public service delivery is being improved, government cannot rely on extra authority. On the other hand, if public service delivery is qualitatively low, a government will lose a certain amount of its authority or legitimacy.

Some questions and issues

This paper started with the curious Dutch combination of satisfied customers and distrusting citizens. We now know that this combination may be ambiguous, but it is certainly not a theoretical monstrosity. Apparently Dutch citizens evaluate their government somewhat precisely. If the quality of public service delivery is high, they express their satisfaction. That

does not logically imply that they trust their government. Although this combination comes as no surprise, it does raise some interesting questions:

- How do citizens value their satisfaction with public service delivery? What does it mean to them that the quality of public services is high? What consequences do they attach to their satisfaction? What does customer satisfaction mean for public administration's legitimacy?
- If the quality of public services does not determine Dutch citizen's trust in government, what does? Is public trust merely a matter of media coverage and the image that media communicate? What role does actual performance play?
- If there is no connection between public service delivery and trust in the minds of citizens, how do they view government? Do they distinguish different faces (or sides) of government, for example public administration as a service provider and public administration as a politico-institutional entity? Or do they really differentiate a constitutional level, an interaction level, and an operational level? And if so, how do citizens define the connection between these levels?

Even if there is no connection between the quality of public service delivery and citizen's trust in public administration, the question as such raises some fundamental issues. These concern the legitimacy of public administration. What determines public administration's legitimacy from a citizen perspective? We are familiar with the theoretical foundations upon which public administration rests, such as the Rechtsstaat and democracy. But how do citizens determine whether they trust government and public administration? Questions like these make-up an interesting agenda for research and public administration theory. Or am I wrong and did I just let myself get carried away by the collective madness of the Dutch during 2002?

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