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Political Interest and Apathy:
The Decline of a Gender Gap?

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Abstract

In this article the development of political interest and apathy in Dutch society from 1970 to 1998 is analysed in order to test the idea of the disappearance of the traditional gender gap. Political apathy is measured separately with two indicators – a lack of subjective political interest and never engaging in political discussions. A decline in political apathy characterizes the developments in the 1970s. Education remains the most important determinant of political apathy during the whole period. Besides, the first cohort raised after the Second World War shows a remarkably high level of interest. The expected disappearance of the gender gap, however, could not be discerned. After an evident decline of this gap in the 1980s, recently, a widening of the differences between men and women can be observed, even when their level of education and date of birth are taken into account. This gender gap appears to be consistently wider for a lack of subjective political interest than for the avoidance of political discussions.

1 Introduction

The rapidly changing position of women is generally considered to be one of the most remarkable features of recent developments in the Netherlands. Until the 1960s, Dutch female labour participation was among the lowest in Europe and the average level of education of women was far below that of their male counterparts. Besides, the impact of orthodox Calvinist and Roman Catholic ideas that the traditional role of women was one of mothers and housekeepers could be traced easily among large parts of the population. Following the 'depillarization' about three decades ago, the position of women showed remarkable shifts in almost every aspect of Dutch society. Now, at the turn of the century, women appear to have made up to a great extent for their inferior position on the labour market and in the educational system. Female employment figures and average salaries are still below comparable levels for males (CBS 2000: 202, 209), but among the younger generations women have already surpassed men in terms of their level of education (SCP 1998: 217-8 and 1999: 58). Married women and single mothers have captured the largest parts

of recent increases in employment (SCP 1999: 73), and a decline in economic dependence of married women is taking its course (Van Berkel 1997: 39). The idea of equal opportunities for both men and women has superseded traditional role definitions (Niphuis-Nell 1997: 351-3). No wonder that several observers refer to a "small revolution" or a process that "gained momentum" (SCP 1998: 213 and 231) when the changed position of Dutch women is considered.

Women's rapidly changing societal position and the corresponding shifts in attitudes among the population will have political consequences. The results of well-established empirical research observe a *gender gap* in political involvement: men are more likely to be interested in politics than women.¹ This observation of a lower level of female political interest can be interpreted in several ways.² Although the widespread occurrence of this phenomenon suggests that "... women's (and men's) roles in society were dictated by nature" (Carroll and Zerilli 1993: 60), explanations along these lines are rare and have been criticized for understandable reasons.³ Most researchers prefer to use the concept 'gender' – the social construction of sex – to make clear from the start that genetic or biological factors do not play a prominent role. Instead of a 'genetic bias' a 'social bias of political involvement' is postulated which accounts for differences between men and women (cf. Harris 1998: 218-39, and the general discussion by Carver 1996).⁴

Usually, three major interpretations are presented to explain the relevance of gender for differences in political involvement (cf. Campbell et al. 1960: 484-9; Lane 1959: 210-6; Andersen 1975: 442-8; Welch 1977: 711-6; Jennings 1983: 364-5; Castenmiller & Dekker 1987: 411-3; Leijenaar 1989: 74; Bennett & Bennett 1989: 105; Niedermayer 1990: 10-1; Conway et al. 1997: 17-31, 77-93). The *socialization explanation* is based on the presumption that men and women are socialized in different gender roles during childhood and that political involvement belongs more clearly to the male than to the female role (Orum et al. 1974; Rapoport 1981, 1985). The *situational explanation* stresses the private, isolated roles of many adult females as mother, wife and housekeeper, which all limit the opportunities for political involvement (Lafferty 1980: 333-8; Lipset 1981: 206; Schlozman et al. 1994: 964, 974, 977, 986; Lundmark 1995: 250).⁵ A special variant of this explanation stresses the divergent and "limited set of experiences that women and men do not share equally" (Koopman & Leijenaar 1983: 256; 1984: 5), which results in different meanings of the term 'politics'. Because of this difference, it would be expected that males obtain higher scores on instruments based on traditional notions of politics. Finally, the *structural explanation* refers to the ways in which institutions in central domains such as politics, education, economy and law are configured. These institutions discriminate and encumber women in terms of opportunities, benefits and protection and so lead to a structural under-representation of women (Almond & Verba 1963: 339; Inglehart 1981: 306-7).

The conditions depicted in each of these three interpretations of a gender bias in political involvement all seem to be affected by rapid societal, economical and political changes, which can be broadly summarized in the term 'modernization'.⁶ Parents today raise their children with different goals to parents a few decades ago (cf. Klages 1993: 27); the labour market position of women has improved tremendously; and many institutions are explicitly interested in supporting female involvement. As a result of what might be called the 'levelling consequences of societal modernization', the gender gap in political interest seems to narrow from the 1970s on.⁷ Among the countries showing more or less continuous growth in the level of political interest, the Netherlands hold a special position. Perfectly in line with the expectation of the levelling consequences of societal modernization, previous analyses have suggested that the rise in political interest is highest among Dutch women of recent birth cohorts. Younger Dutch women were rapidly catching up with the men, also in the field of politics (Van Deth 1983).⁸ With respect to the traditionally extremely low levels of political involvement in a 'pillarized society' on the one hand, and the politicization that has taken place more recently on the other, analysing the development of political interest in the last decades in this country could provide important information about the background and determinants of changing citizens' involvement in democratic societies.

This article will explore the development of political interest and apathy as well as the traditional gender gap in the Netherlands. The rapid increase in the level of education among young Dutch women in particular makes it highly likely that this gender gap has been reduced considerably. Two measures of political interest are used here for these analyses: subjective political interest and discussion frequency. In order to avoid overestimating the level of political involvement, attention is concentrated on political apathy, simply defined as a lack of political interest. Before we turn to the specific aspects of the consequences of modernization, a brief description of the development of political apathy in the Netherlands during the last few decades is presented. The analyses are based on an integrated dataset constructed of all available major Dutch surveys covering the period from 1970 through 1998 and consisting of a total of 118,814 respondents.⁹

2 Measuring political interest and apathy

Citizen involvement in public affairs is a central aspect of any definition of democracy. At least some level of involvement is a necessary condition for the distinction between democratic and non-democratic government. Modern democracy, however, does not require that each and every citizen is well informed and active on every issue. An 'attentive public' could replace a well-

informed and participating citizenry (Dahl 1989: 339) and guard democratic decision-making processes. Democracy can only function in mass society when citizens show at least some degree of interest in politics. The debate on the nature of democratic politics focuses on the degree or distribution of involvement, not on the crucial role of involvement for democracy (Berelson et al. 1954: 307; Almond & Verba 1963: 474-9; Barber 1984: 117). Fiorina is certainly right when he states that "... contrary to the suggestions of pundits and philosophers, there is nothing wrong with those who do not participate, rather, there is something unusual about those who do" (1999: 415-6), but that remark refers to actual participation and not to the requirement of an 'attentive public' characterized by some degree of political interest. In addition to the prominent role of political interest in normative democratic theory, the specific characteristics of interested citizens have been evident ever since the rise of survey research in the late 1940s.¹⁰ Political interest, then, plays a crucial role in both normative and empirical research on the functioning of democratic decision-making processes.

In spite of this central position of the concept, no generally accepted demarcation is available. Political interest has been defined and operationalized in several ways and concepts like interest in politics, political involvement, psychological involvement and political apathy are used to cover more or less the same phenomena.¹¹ Lippmann already pointed out that the word 'interest' can have at least two different meanings: "You can use it to mean that a man is involved, or that his mind is occupied" (1922: 305-6). In order to avoid any confusion with direct advantages or profits to be gained from political activities or with behavioural manifestations of political interest like distinct modes of political participation, the concept political interest will be delimited here from political motivation, involvement or participation in an unambiguous way. Political interest (or interest in politics) is conceptualized as "the degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" (Van Deth 1990: 278). Although political interest can – and most probably will – have consequences for actual behaviour, our concern here is with the willingness of individuals to take notice of politics, irrespective of the possible benefits or losses of this type of action. Consequently, political apathy is defined simply as a clear lack of political interest.¹²

Attempts to measure psychological concepts such as the degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity directly present a number of complications related to the distinction between interest and behavioural utterances or consequences of interest. The most common way to avoid these problems is to register the expression of the degree of political interest with a simple self-placement instrument. This type of measure is called 'subjective political interest'. Ever since early voting studies in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948: 24-5) variants of the following question have been applied in many studies in a large number of countries:

How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, fairly interested, somewhat interested, not much interested, or not at all interested?¹³

Other instruments developed to measure political interest all refer to utterances or consequences of this attitude. In that way, the non-committal and abstract notion of interest used in the straightforward question mentioned above is sacrificed in order to avoid any misunderstanding about the meaning of the concept political interest. The disadvantage of this strategy, however, is the possible introduction of motivations or goals of the individual other than curiosity about politics. An instrument based on these kinds of arguments should refer to a type of behaviour in an informal context where the selection of topics depends on the particular concern of the people involved. A widely used indicator for this direct utterance of political interest is:

When you get together with friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

This question on the frequency of political discussion will be used here as an indicator of the direct expression of political interest, closely related to the degree of citizens' curiosity about politics.¹⁴

Although the indicators for subjective political interest and for the direct utterance of this interest are widely used in empirical research, there are two obvious problems. First, it is unclear what the differences are between the responses 'fairly interested' and 'somewhat interested', and between talking about politics 'frequently' or 'occasionally'. The use of these response categories as quasi-interval scales for political interest does not seem to be appropriate and could imply an overestimation of the actual degree of curiosity. The only unambiguous responses are 'not at all interested' and 'never' engaging in political discussions. Respondents selecting these answers show an evident lack of political interest and these responses – and only these responses – are considered to be indicators of political apathy (Van Deth 1991: 206). Second, only a very small number of the available datasets contains both instruments, making it the construction of a combined scale for application in longitudinal analyses more or less pointless.¹⁵ Those rare datasets that do contain both indicators can be used, however, to assess the relationships between the two instruments. The two waves of the *Political Action Study* (1974 and 1979-'80) as well as the first two waves of the *World Values Study* (1981 and 1990) provide the opportunity to develop such an assessment.

Table 1 shows the results of a comparison of the two instruments for the four datasets mentioned. Identical ratings of the respondents are obtained for just more than half (51-53 per cent) of the cases in the *Political Action Study* and for about two-thirds (61-68 per cent) in the *World Values Study*. These figures

improve considerably (to 91-99 per cent) when we allow for a small difference in the level of interest. The evident tendency to show the same direction with the two instruments is indicated by the non-parametric correlation coefficients in Table 1. With respect to the relatively high coefficients (about 0.70), the conclusion has to be that the instruments measure closely-related, but not identical concepts. The right part of Table 1 reveals the results obtained with the measures for political apathy. Since these measures are dichotomized versions of the instruments used for the left side of the table, it is no surprise that all indicators in the left part are somewhat higher. Although the results for the *World Values Study* are somewhat different from the corresponding results obtained with the *Political Action Study*, all indicators suggest that the various variants of these instruments are related in the same way in each of the four datasets. Especially the gamma coefficients for political apathy show clearly that the two instruments measure very similar concepts.

Table 1 Equivalence of indicators for subjective political interest and frequency of political discussions

Study	Full Scales			Scales for Apathy		(N)
	Identical *	Similar **	Gamma ***	Identical *	Gamma ***	
Political Action						
- 1974	51%	91%	.69	81%	.80	1189
- 1979/80	53%	93%	.71	85%	.89	787
World Values Study						
- 1981	61%	99%	.63	77%	.74	1188
- 1990	68%	99%	.76	85%	.88	1012

As mentioned, most of the available datasets contain either subjective interest or discussion frequency. Using the concepts separately in a combined analysis of the development of political apathy in the Netherlands during the last decades provides the opportunity to maximize the empirical evidence available. Since the indicators apparently do not measure identical concepts, distinct analyses for each indicator will be performed.

3 Changing political apathy

In line with straightforward interpretations of societal developments in terms of modernization – especially rising levels of education – an increase in political interest has been observed in several countries¹⁶ and the development

in the Netherlands is described and evaluated by several authors in more or less the same way. In one of the first empirical reports on political interest, Daalder (1974: 70-1) concludes that about ten per cent of the Dutch population was 'very interested' in politics (using a measure of subjective political interest) in the period 1954 to 1972. From the early 1970s, however, the number of respondents showing this level of interest seems to have increased only slowly (Van der Eijk 1977: 23; Aan de Kerk 1987: 3; Van Deth 1983: 471, 1990: 282; Thomassen & Van Deth 1989: 69; Van den Broek & Heunks 1993: 78; SCP 1994: 576 and 1996: 532; Van den Broek 1996: 106; Arends et al. 1997). From these analyses two conclusions can be drawn. First, all researchers report small changes in the levels of subjective political interest when the relative number of people who indicate that they are very interested in politics is considered. About 10-15 per cent of the Dutch population belongs to this category, and possible increases are restricted to a few percentage points only. Furthermore, changes cannot be described by some simple linear function. Second, the number of respondents that is *not* interested in politics has declined sharply: from somewhat less than fifty per cent in the years between 1954 and 1972, to about a quarter of the population in the 1980s (Van Deth 1990: 282). Obviously, this development implies a rise of the average level of political interest in the Netherlands during the last decades (Van den Broek 1996: 106; Arends et al. 1997).

In Figures 1 and 2 the results obtained with the two indicators of political apathy mentioned in the previous section are presented for the period 1970 to 1998. Several straightforward conclusions can be based on these simple depictions. Looking at the findings for a lack of subjective interest in Figure 1 we see, first of all, that the conclusion of several authors concerning a decrease in the number of people who are not interested in politics is confirmed. Despite rather troubling short-term fluctuations and differences between distinct studies, relatively high levels of political apathy are found for the 1970s and for the *National Election Study* 1998. The rise in subjective political interest does not cover the whole period; from the early 1980s political apathy remains more or less at the same level. Looking at Figure 2, at the indicator of a lack of direct utterances of political interest – discussion frequency – a fairly similar picture arises. Up to the late 1970s there is a considerable decrease in the number of people saying they never discuss politics. The average levels of political discussion show a similar trend as the average levels of subjective interest: for the whole period under consideration we find an increase in the average levels of discussion frequency, as was the case with the average levels of subjective political interest (data not shown). And just as with this last development mentioned, the increase in discussion frequency occurred in the 1970s, while the average levels of discussing political matters seems to stabilize – or even decrease slightly – from then on.

Figure 1 Political apathy as a lack of subjective interest
(percentage of people not interested in politics at all)

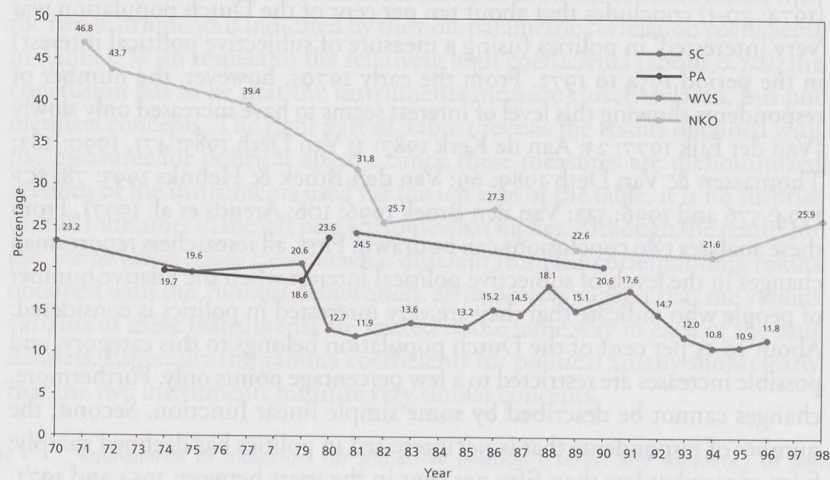
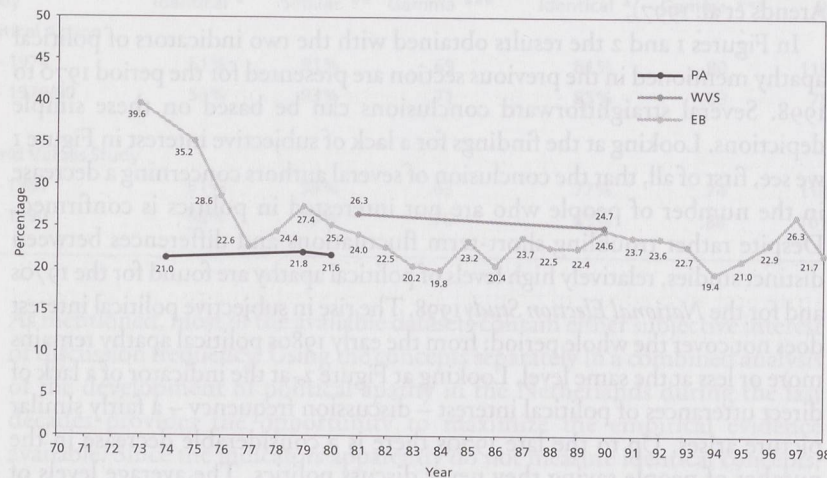


Figure 2 Political apathy as a lack of political discussion
(percentage of people having no political discussions at all)



The results obtained with the distinct measures show that there has been – broadly speaking – a decrease in political apathy in the last three decades.¹⁷ This general conclusion, however, has to be modified in a substantial way and caution is certainly required if we consider different studies and short-term fluctuations. Although the rise of subjective interest continues somewhat longer than the rise in discussion frequency, it is clear that the decrease in

political apathy in the Netherlands occurred in the mid and late 1970s. Besides, the two measures also indicate slightly different patterns in the ways political apathy has changed, showing a trend to stabilization of apathy as a lack of subjective interest and yet signs of a modest decrease for the indicator based on discussions until the early 1990s. But even identical measures with very simple answers, such as these indicators of political apathy, show disturbing short-term fluctuations and differences between specific studies. The fact that the analyses are based on pooled datasets with unusually high numbers of respondents available in each year apparently does not reduce these fluctuations.

The relatively high levels of political apathy that characterized the system of ‘pillarization’ and ‘pacification’ in the decades before the 1960s, were neutralized in the immediate aftermath of the breakdown of this system in the 1970s. Irrespective of the economic crisis and the fundamental problems with the welfare state and government finances, irrespective of the political scandals that came to the surface in the last decade, or of the end of the period of Christian-democratic/liberal cabinet coalitions, the level of political apathy remains at about the same level in the 1980s and in most of the 1990s. The most recent figures – especially the results obtained for the *Eurobarometers 1997* and the *National Election Study 1998* – point in the direction of growing political apathy.

4 Levelling consequences of modernization

The modest increase in the level of political interest at the aggregate level in the mid and late 1970s as described in the previous section, can be due to several developments at the individual (or group) level. A first candidate for explaining these developments at the macro level is a change in socio-structural antecedents of political apathy, especially the rise in the level of education among the female population. Education can be seen as an indicator of the level of (political) knowledge and (political) skills that people possess and therefore as an indicator of the capacity to comprehend political phenomena and their relevance and impact for everyday life. The fact that people with higher levels of education tend to have more interest in politics – and participate more in politics – than those with less education, is confirmed in a large number of studies. A rise in the level of political interest, then, might be well due to a rise in the level of education of the population (cf. Glenn & Grimes 1968; De Graaf 1996: 209; SCP 1994: 576; Nie et al. 1996: 131-44). Since this increase in the level of education is very evident among young women, a gradual disappearance of the traditional gender gap in political apathy is expected to be the most visible consequence of this societal development.¹⁸

Mentioning specific aspects of younger people implies the introduction of age as a third socio-structural antecedent of political apathy in addition to education and gender. This line of reasoning leads to a number of additional complications. In analyses of the development of political attitudes and orientations, age is usually seen as a surrogate variable for social and psychological aging (lifecycle or age effects), and – when date of birth is used – for experiences with specific historical events (birth cohort effects). A special variant of birth cohort interpretations of developments in political apathy is concerned with compositional differences between various cohorts. This ‘cohort composition interpretation’ predicts that the oldest birth cohorts have lower levels of political interest than younger cohorts, since they are less well equipped with political skills and resources. In this context, their much lower educational level is often mentioned as the main cause for lower levels of political interest. Finally, we have to consider period effects. Profound economic, technological, and socio-political changes have taken place during the last few decades in each and every western society (for instance, the emergence of the welfare state, the enormous increase in the levels of income, the spread of mass media, the introduction of computers and computer networks, and the end of the Cold War). It is likely that these changes have had an effect on the level of political apathy among the whole population, that is, among all birth cohorts or age groups. Especially the 1960s-70s are characterized as a politically turbulent period with strong political upheavals, which led to the process of ‘depillarization’ in the Netherlands. Several authors suggest that the political turbulence of the 1970s had an important effect on the overall levels of political interest. The cohort raised after the war, which includes the newcomers to the electorate in the 1960s and 70s, is likely to be characterized by relatively low levels of political apathy.

A theoretically based demarcation of birth cohorts to explain the development of Dutch society has been presented by Becker (see Van den Broek 1996: 30; but also Dekker & Ester 1995). Becker suggests distinguishing between (1) the ‘pre-war generation’ (people born before 1930), (2) the ‘silent generation’ (people born between 1930 and 1940), (3) the ‘protest generation’ (people born between 1941 and 1955), (4) the ‘lost generation’ (people born between 1956 and 1970), and (5) the ‘pragmatic generation’ (people born after 1970). This demarcation has the clear advantage of not relying on the arbitrary distinctions between cohorts that are usually applied. Besides, the distinct cohorts seem to be very appropriate for a test of different expectations about changes in the level of political interest and the development of a gender gap.¹⁹ If the idea of levelling consequences of modernization is valid, then we expect to find relatively high levels of political interest among the more recent cohorts, but the ‘protest generation’ in particular should be characterized by relatively high levels of political interest on the basis of the effects mentioned. In addition, it

can be expected that the revival of feminism and the interest in women’s emancipation in the late 1960s is part of the agenda of this generation. For that reason, the level of political interest among the ‘protest generation’ will be relatively high and accompanied by a decline of the gender gap. Furthermore, the very success of this movement should be visible in a gradual disappearance of the gender gap if younger generations slowly replace the older cohorts with their traditional experiences, ideas, and positions.

The three socio-structural factors education, gender, and age/cohort are certainly not independent from each other. Access to higher levels of education was much more difficult for people in the 1920s than for students today, and until recently this was also true for women in comparison with men. Furthermore, older women are more likely to be socialized into passive political roles than younger women. An empirical exploration of the levelling consequences of modernization, then, has to take these multivariate aspects into account. Various (logistic) multiple regression models have been estimated with the two indicators of political apathy as dependent variables. Since the main objective of the analyses presented here is the study of the expected disappearance of the traditional gender gap, gender is included in the models only after the level of education and birth cohort of the respondents have been included. In that way, the effects reported for the impact of gender are not contaminated by the impact of education or date of birth.

The results of the model estimations for political apathy defined as a lack of subjective political interest are summarized in Table 2. The coefficients indicate the chances (log-odd ratio’s) of being depicted as showing political apathy compared with respondents who are expected to have high chances of showing political apathy (that is, respondents with a low level of education, born before 1930, and being a woman, respectively).²⁰ The results for the impact of education are clearly in line with the expectation that a higher level of education implies a decrease of the chances of showing political apathy. Particularly respondents with the highest level of education are extremely unlikely to be characterized by a clear lack of subjective political interest. The impact of belonging to a specific birth cohort does not confirm the expectation that the generation raised immediately after the Second World War is particularly engaged in politics. We find there are higher chances of political apathy among the most recent cohorts – a result clearly in line with detailed cohort analyses presented by Van den Broek (1996: 143. See also the overview presented by Vink 1997: 49-51 or the finding for British teenagers reported by Park 1999: 25). Particularly people born after 1970 are highly likely to show more apathy than respondents born before 1930. It should be reminded that these effects for date of birth refer to findings *after* the impact of the level of education has been taken into account. In other words: possible levelling consequences of modernization do not affect the differences between

Table 2 Predictors of political apathy as a lack of subjective interest (logistic regression; log-odd ratio's and explained variance)

	Predictors						
	Education			Birth cohort			197
	med./low	med./high	high	1930-40	1941-55	1956-70	
1970	.26	.09	.13	n.s.	1.59	-	
1972	.29	.08	.00	n.s.	n.s.	-	
1974	.48	.20	.06	n.s.	n.s.	1.77	
1976	.24	.24	.10	n.s.	n.s.	2.09	
1978	.41	.21	.11	n.s.	1.33	2.97	
1980	.36	.17	.14	n.s.	n.s.	2.40	
1982	.32	.15	.11	n.s.	n.s.	1.96	
1984	.47	.29	.16	n.s.	n.s.	2.70	
1986	.34	.18	.07	n.s.	n.s.	1.96	n.s.
1988	.41	.22	.10	n.s.	n.s.	2.38	4.97
1990	.36	.14	.07	n.s.	n.s.	1.49	3.91
1992	.40	.17	.13	n.s.	n.s.	1.78	4.75
1994	.55	.48	.10	n.s.	.62	n.s.	n.s.
1996	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1998	.34	.30	.14	n.s.	n.s.	1.46	2.06

- Reference categories: low education; born before 1930; female
 - n.s.: not significant (p > .05)
 * Nagelkerke's R² (in percentages)

these recent and much older cohorts. Finally, Table 2 contains the results for the effect of gender on political apathy. Each of the coefficients indicates that the chances of showing a clear lack of political interest are consistently lower among men than among women.²¹ No trace of a slowly disappearing gender gap can be noticed for political apathy defined in this way. The amounts of variance explained are rather modest and the additional variance explained by gender is surely not very impressive either – but the conclusion that women consistently show a higher level of political apathy than men is unavoidable.

The results of similar computations for logistic regression models with a lack of participation in political discussions as the dependent variable are shown in Table 3. First, the model estimations also underline the relevance of the level of education for this type of political involvement. With only a few minor deviations, it is clear that the chances of never being involved in political discussions are reduced with increasing levels of education. The results for the two remaining explaining factors are much more interesting. From the

Gender	Variance*			(N)
	Ed.	Ed. + B.	Ed. + B. + G.	
male				
.59	15	16	18	3540
.54	12	12	14	1215
.42	9	9	13	2757
.57	12	13	15	1613
.54	8	11	13	2489
.61	10	12	13	5938
.66	13	14	15	3275
.55	4	8	10	1934
.50	12	14	17	5415
.64	7	11	12	3835
.67	12	16	16	1852
.43	7	11	14	3988
.66	8	9	10	3788
-	-	-	-	-
.49	11	13	16	2088

various coefficients for birth cohorts presented in Table 3, it is clear that the post-war generation is indeed a remarkable category among the population, and Becker's label as a 'protest generation' seems to be well selected. For this generation we find consistently the lowest chances of never being involved in political discussions, while for the two consecutive cohorts the chances of showing political apathy are clearly higher in comparison with the people born before 1930. For the 1956-'70 cohort the initial high chances of showing political apathy disappear in the mid 1980s, suggesting the influence of life cycle or aging effects. The exact explanation of this phenomenon, however, is not the main object of the present analyses. If we turn to the figures for the effects of gender on political apathy defined as a lack of engaging in discussions, Table 3 broadly supports the idea of the gradual disappearance of a gender gap as has been observed by Topf (1995: 63) and Inglehart and Norris (1998: 11) for many countries. About half of the ratios computed for gender show that men are less likely to show political apathy than women, but since

Table 3 Predictors of political apathy as a lack of involvement in discussions (logistic regression; log-odd ratio's and explained variance)

	Predictors							Variance*			(N)	
	Education			Birth cohort			Gender	Ed.	Ed. + B.	Ed. + B. + G.		
	med./low	med./high	high	1930-40	1941-55	1956-70						1971-
1970	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
1972	.48	.28	.28	.65	n.s.	n.s.	-	.71	9	12	13	1046
1974	.45	.38	.34	n.s.	n.s.	2.40	-	.64	5	6	7	2527
1976	.51	.19	.37	.70	.65	1.62	-	.71	6	7	8	3225
1978	.60	.22	.24	n.s.	n.s.	1.69	-	.87	8	8	9	3352
1980	.54	.38	.30	.76	.67	1.37	-	n.s.	6	7	7	4498
1982	.59	.37	.31	n.s.	.58	n.s.	-	n.s.	6	8	8	3420
1984	.61	.36	.26	n.s.	.67	1.28	-	n.s.	6	8	8	3376
1986	.61	.35	.24	n.s.	.78	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	7	8	8	3382
1988	.67	.42	.24	n.s.	.72	n.s.	3.15	n.s.	7	8	9	5187
1990	.57	.45	.30	.75	.52	n.s.	3.43	.83	6	9	9	3666
1992	.61	.54	.26	n.s.	.63	n.s.	2.34	n.s.	5	7	7	3555
1994	.47	.31	.24	n.s.	.49	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	7	9	9	876
1996	.70	.52	.34	.70	.70	n.s.	2.20	.77	4	6	7	6453
1998	n.s.	.50	.32	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	1.89	.59	4	7	9	934

- Reference categories: low education; born before 1930; female

- n.s.: not significant ($p > .05$)

* Nagelkerke's R^2 (in percentages)

1980 most coefficients are non-significant. Although – once again – the amounts of variance explained with these models are not very impressive, the results can be interpreted in a meaningful way.

The application of two different indicators for political apathy resulted in findings that are partly in agreement. First, the level of education is clearly a strong predictor of political apathy irrespective the exact measure used. Even a rather crude categorization of education suggests that the chances of showing political apathy decrease monotonically with the respondents' level of education. Second, the impact of belonging to a specific birth cohort is different for the indicator of political apathy used. If political apathy is defined as a lack of subjective political interest, then high chances are found among respondents born after 1955 and especially among those born after 1970. If, on the other hand, political apathy is defined as a lack of engagement in political discussions, the results indicate that the post-war cohort occupies a remarkable position with unusually low chances of showing political apathy for almost the

whole period considered here. Similar conclusions can be formulated for the relevance of gender. Higher chances of showing a lack of subjective political interest are consistently found among women and this gender gap does not disappear. Defining political apathy as a lack of engagement in political discussions, however, does not show this gender gap unambiguously.²² Much of the gender gap disappeared in the 1980s, but if we look at the results for the more recent studies, it seems as if the gap is widening again. It is probably too early to determine whether the deviating findings in the most recent studies have to be seen as the harbinger of a new gender bias or as short-term fluctuations in the late 1990s. Inglehart and Norris' conclusion about the "gradual closure over time" (1998: 11) of the gender gap in political discussions, however, is premature for the Dutch case at least.

5 The disappearance of the gender gap?

The results of the analyses of political interest and apathy in the Netherlands show a general but modest decrease of the level of political apathy in the period from 1970 to 1998. However, the two indicators of political apathy based on a lack of subjective interest and avoiding political discussion respectively, provide different conclusions about changes in political interest. In order to summarize the findings for political apathy, a concise measure of a political gender gap is defined in the following way. The results presented in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the distinction between four levels of education is relevant, but that the two oldest and the two youngest cohorts do not show clear differences. For that reason, we reduce the division of cohorts to three categories: the oldest cohorts born before 1940, the 'protest generation' born between 1940 and 1955, and the youngest cohorts born after 1955. For each of the twelve groups – that is, four educational categories for each of the three cohorts – the difference between the percentages of respondents showing no interest in politics at all is computed for women and men. The sum of these differences can be interpreted as a measure of a 'political gender gap' (PGG) taking education and date of birth into account. If the sum of these differences is positive, then political apathy is more common among women than among men; a negative sign indicates the opposite. In other words:

$$PGG_t = \sum [a(f) - a(m)]_{t,e,c}$$

where:

PGG_t political gender gap at time t

$a(f)$ percentage of female respondents showing no political interest at time (t) within educational category (e) and birth cohort (c)

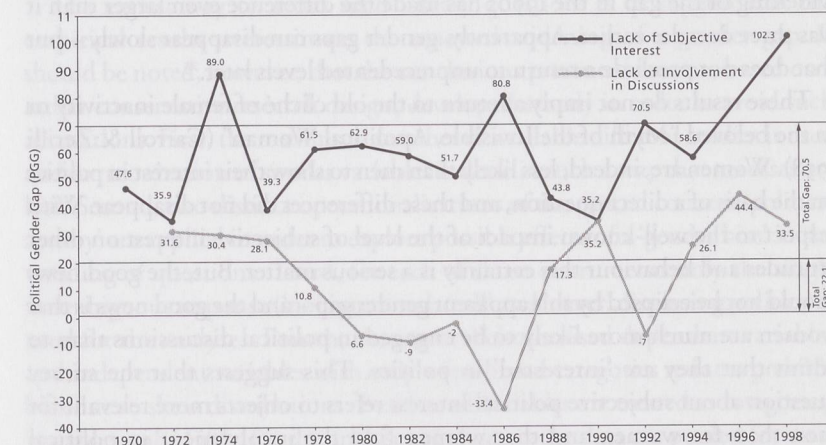
$a(m)$ percentage of male respondents showing no political interest at time (t) within educational category (e) and birth cohort (c)

The computation of this measure for political apathy defined as a lack of subjective interest results in a total PGG of 70.5 for the pooled datasets. This figure shows that political apathy is clearly much more manifest among women than among men; on average we find about six per cent more women than men showing no political interest at all in each of the twelve categories determined on the basis of their level of education and date of birth. The corresponding figures for political apathy, defined as a lack of involvement in political decisions, is a PGG of 22.1 and an average difference of about two percentage points; these also are unambiguous signs of the expected gender gap. In line with the results presented above (that is, the log-odd ratios for gender for the different two-years categories in Table 2 and in Table 3,

respectively), the observed gender gap is larger for subjective interest than for discussing politics. These computations support the conclusion that women indeed show more political apathy than men, but these differences are especially observed for a lack of subjective political interest. For engaging in political discussions the results indicate a much smaller difference between men and women.²³

The idea of possible levelling consequences of modernization can be tested efficiently on the basis of the PGGs for the period 1970 to 1998. A gradual disappearance of the differences in political apathy between men and women should be visible in a tendency for the PGGs to decline in the last few decades. In order to improve comparability, the data are pooled in two-year intervals in a similar way as was used for the estimations of the regression models presented in Tables 2 and 3. In addition, each category defined according to education and date of birth was dropped from the computations if either the number of male or female respondents in that category was less than 50. In this way, possible fluctuations based on just small numbers of cases are avoided. The resulting PGGs are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Gender gaps for political apathy



Both the general level and the development of the two measures for the differences between men and women confirm our previous conclusions. The gender gap for a lack of subjective political interest is at each and every moment larger than the corresponding gap for avoiding political discussions. Broadly speaking, the gender gap seemed to decline in the 1980s, but a clear widening becomes visible in the more recent years. Both indicators show this renewed expansion of the differences between men and women, which leads to the unequivocal rejection of the idea that ongoing modernization leads to the

disappearance of the traditional gender gap. This finding is even more remarkable, when the negative PGGs in the early 1980s for avoiding political discussions are considered. Apparently, less men than women were engaged in political discussions in that period!²⁴ As already indicated by the log-odd ratios in Table 3 it is clear that gender gaps certainly can become smaller with the passing of time, but this does not exclude a revival of the traditional gender bias in political interest.

6 Discussion

The main objective of the analyses presented here, was to test the idea that the traditional gender bias in political interest is gradually disappearing with the development of modern societies. It is expected that the access to higher education in particular can have these egalitarian consequences. In the last few years the level of education among young Dutch women has surpassed the corresponding level among men and so we expect to find a decline of the political gender gap in the Netherlands during the last few decades. This is not the case. The gender gap was reduced clearly in the early 1980s, but an evident widening of the gap in the 1990s has made the difference even larger than it was three decades earlier. Apparently, gender gaps can disappear slowly – but that does not preclude a return to unprecedented levels later.²⁵

These results do not imply a return to the old cliché of female inactivity or to the beloved “Myth of the Invisible, Apolitical Woman” (Carroll & Zerilli 1998). Women are, indeed, less likely than men to show their interest in politics on the basis of a direct question, and these differences did not disappear. With respect to the well-known impact of the level of subjective interest on other attitudes and behaviour this certainly is a serious matter. But, the good news should not be eclipsed by this apparent gender gap – and the good news is that women are much more likely to be engaged in political discussions than to admit that they are ‘interested’ in politics. This suggests that the survey question about subjective political interest refers to objects more relevant for men than for women and that women find the involvement in political discussions less problematic than might be expected on the basis of their expression of subjective political interest. If it is more important to participate in the process of actually shaping the political opinion climate than to reflect on one’s own attitudes, then these results reflect a pragmatic orientation among women. An interpretation like that is in line with the observation that women have recently tended to show a higher propensity to vote than men (Van Egmond et al. 1998: 297; Conway et al. 1997: 86).

That’s the good news. The more alarming findings presented here concern the widening of a gender gap in the Netherlands in the 1990s. This result does

not seem to be in accordance with the generally accepted idea of a gradual closure of these kinds of gaps in modern societies. Reviewing empirical studies in the USA some time ago, Wirls concluded that “The participation gap is, or rather was, the oldest gender gap, for it seems to have disappeared” (1986: 318). Topf came to even more optimistic conclusions for the developments in the discussion of politics in Western Europe. He observes an “... increasing convergence, possibly even towards the elimination of gender differences altogether by the mid-1990s”, but explicitly mentions the Netherlands as the (only) deviant case in his comparative study showing “a modest increase” in the gender differences in discussing politics (Topf 1995: 63). Were these conclusions too optimistic, too naïve, or too premature? Or are we dealing with a specific Dutch phenomenon? These questions can be answered only with comparative studies covering the developments in the last decade. But irrespective of the exact answers that will be presented in any publications resulting from such research, it is clear that the Dutch case cannot be merely neglected. A revival of gender differences means a frontal attack on liberal democracies’ claim of political equality. It is not the existence of inequality in itself that is alarming; it is the revival of this type of inequality that is threatening.

The easiest way to avoid such uneasy questions is to suggest that the empirical results overestimate the renewed widening of a gender gap. It should be noted, however, that the conclusions presented here are based on a rather conservative research design, developed exactly in order to avoid such accusations. First, the maximum number of available different studies is used and harmonization of similar variables is done in such a way that no cases are lost. Second, two distinct operationalizations of the central concept ‘political apathy’ are applied in order to explore possible effects of a ‘gender bias’ in the wording of questions. Third, for each of those instruments only the single unambiguous response (‘not interested at all’ and ‘never’ discussing politics) is used for the analyses. Fourth, the use of dichotomised dependent variables and independent variables with only a few broad categories reduces possible bias due to skew distributions. Besides, all variables are treated as categorical variables only. Fifth, for the analyses of changes the data are pooled for two-year periods in order to avoid conclusions based on relatively few cases. Finally, a summary measure for political gender gaps is defined taking into account the differences in education and date of birth of the respondents. All these precautions were taken here on the basis of the expectation that the traditional gender gap in political interest gradually disappears. It does not.

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Notes

1. This difference between men and women has been observed in many empirical studies in a number of countries, cf. Berelson et al. (1954: 25), Almond and Verba (1963: 390 and 393), DiPalma (1970: 135), Milbrath and Goel (1977: 48), Welch (1977: 722), Verba et al. (1978: 263), Black and McGlenn (1979: 476), Randall (1982: 40), Koopman and Leijenaar (1983 and 1984: 27-8), Van Deth (1983: 484; 1990: 306 and 2000: 132), Bennett (1986: 72), Bennett and Bennett (1989: 106), Castenmiller and Dekker (1987: 419), Leijenaar (1989: 71-87), Van den Broek (1994: 186-7), Gemmeke (1998: 131-40), or Liebert (1998).

2. Notice that the gender difference is phrased in both ways – men being more interested than women and women showing less interest in politics than men – to make it clear that no ‘standard’ or ‘normal’ level is implied. Terms like ‘a lack of interest’ are used here to describe differences only.

3. See Carroll and Zerilli (1993) for an extensive overview of the literature in this field and the problems with the ‘Myth of the Invisible, Apolitical Woman’. Concise overviews are presented by, among others, Hoecker (1995), Kulke (1996), Leijenaar (1989), Gemmeke (1998) and Liebert (1998).

4. See for the use of the term ‘gender gap’ to indicate differences in voting behaviour between men and women the contributions to the symposium on ‘Gender and voting behavior in the 1996 presidential election’ as published in *Political Science and Politics* 32/1 (March 1999), and the results presented by Wirls (1986), De Vaus and McAllister (1989), Leijenaar (1989), Jelen et al. (1994), Hayes (1997), and Inglehart and Norris (1998).

5. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995: 203-4) point out that gender plays an important role in political relevant social interactions. They found a clear gender-based segregation: men mainly discuss politics with other men and do not see women as serious (competent) conversation partners when it comes to politics. Women also discuss politics more frequently with other women than with men, but this does not stem from the idea that the opposite sex is politically incompetent. In turn, this gender segregation implies a reinforcement of existing gender stereotypes, gender differentiation, and power relations.

6. See for a brief discussion of this concept and an overview of the relevant literature Riegel (1995) and the critical discussion by Berger (1996).

7. This finding, too, has been reported in many studies in a number of countries, cf. DiPalma (1970: 135), Welch (1977: 722), Black and McGlenn (1979: 476), Inglehart (1981: 307-9), Randall (1982: 40), Van Deth (1983: 484 and 1990: 306), Bennett (1986: 111), Castenmiller and Dekker (1987: 419), Bennett and Bennett (1989: 106), Niedermayer (1990: 13), Denters and Geurts (1995: 104), or Topf (1995).

8. This finding has been disputed by Koopman and Leijenaar (1984: 25-9), who did not, however, use panel data essential to challenge this conclusion and simply analysed the whole group of female respondents instead of concentrating on different cohorts or age groups.

9. The following datasets are used: *European Community Study* (1973), *Euro-barometer* 3 to 49 (1975 to 1998), *Cultural Change in The Netherlands* (1970 to 1996), *Dutch National Election Study* (1971 to 1998), *Political Action Study* (1974 and 1979/80), and *World Values Study* (1981 and 1990). For information about these surveys the following institutes can be contacted: Steinmetzarchief (website: http://www.niwi.knaw.nl/us/dd_star/datsocsc.htm) and Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung (website: <http://www.za.uni-koeln.de>). Neither these institutes, nor the principal investigators bear any responsibility for the analyses presented here.

10. The relationship between political interest and socio-economic status, occupation, education, and income has been confirmed in a virtually endless number of studies. See for an early summary of this research Milbrath and Goel (1977: 46-8, 96, 98 and 102). More recent discussions are provided by, among others, Bennett (1984) and especially Verba et al. (1995).

11. See for distinct definitions and demarcations of the concept ‘political interest’ and related concepts: Sigel and Hoskin (1981: Ch. 3-6), Bennett (1984: 31-9), Gabriel (1986: 179-82), Van Deth (1990: 276-82), and Zaller (1992: 43 and 333-6).

12. See for an extensive discussion of the concept ‘political apathy’ DeLuca (1995). The seminal article on political apathy is, of course, the exposition by Rosenberg (1954).

13. In addition to this five-point scale, several variants of this question exist with three (very, somewhat, or not interested) or four (very, somewhat, not much, or not interested) response categories offered.

14. Political discussion is not only an indicator of interest in politics, but also “a means whereby the preferences of individuals are brought into correspondence with social surroundings” (Huckfeldt & Sprague 1991a: 123). Besides, the selection of discussion partners depends on the alternatives available, the structure of personal networks of people, but also on gender related stereotypes (cf. Lane 1959: 89; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1991b and 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1995).

15. Another strategy to deal with the two measures in a single analysis is the combination of the two indicators into a scale for political involvement (Van Deth 1990: 286; Van den Broek 1996: 93; or the concept ‘attentiveness’ developed by Nie et al. 1996: 25 and 206). See also Van den Broek for the argument that ‘reading about politics’ should be considered as an indicator of “political interest rather than of conventional participation” (1994: 179).

16. Unambiguous reports of growing level of political interest include: Kaase and Marsh (1979: 36) and Dalton (1988: 22 and 1996: 26). However, the trend of increasing political interest is not to be mistaken as a universal phenomenon or a monotonous

trend. It can be shown that political interest increases in some countries, decreases in others, or shows fluctuations, without any particular trend, in the rest of the countries (Van den Broek & Heunks 1993; Gabriel & Van Deth 1995; Topf 1995; Van Deth 1996). For the United States a trend of decreasing political interest does not seem unlikely (Bennett 1984: 552; Van Deth 1990: 282; Miller & Shanks 1996: 107-11).

17. In an original attempt to explain the rising levels of political interest found in the *National Election Studies*, Visscher (1995) suggested that the decline in response rates is the main cause behind this trend. This interpretation is not followed here for several reasons. First, the main concern here is with gender differences and a response bias would affect men and women equally, leaving the differences more or less untouched. Second, a strong correlation between response rates and levels of political interest seems to be a characteristic of the *National Election Studies* and much less of the other datasets used. Finally, since it can be expected that response effects are likely to occur in each country, we would expect to find rising levels of political interest in many other countries. As has already been mentioned, this is not the case. Unfortunately, no reliable information about the response rates for each and every wave of the *Eurobarometer* data is available. See for more extensive discussions of Visscher's intriguing arguments SCP (1996 and 1999: 192-4) and Andeweg and Holsteyn (1996).

18. Several authors point out the relevance of the labour market position of men and women for their political orientations and behaviour, especially for voting behaviour. This factor is not included here since multivariate analyses unambiguously show that its impact on political interest is virtually zero when age, education and socio-economic status are taken into account, although for participation substantial coefficients are reported (Leijenaar 1989: 79-85; see also the results presented by Vollebergh et al. 1999: 312-3). Especially the level of education has a strong impact on political interest and not much can be gained by including other variables linked to more or less the same parts of the variance to be explained.

19. Since the main concern here is with gender bias and not with cohort effects the presentation of these effects is limited to this brief overview. See particularly the sophisticated cohort analyses presented by Van den Broek (1996) for an elaborated discussion of this aspect of societal change in the Netherlands, as well as the critical discussion of this approach by Dekker and Ester (1995).

20. In order to reduce the consequences of measurement errors and to keep the number of estimations to be reported reasonably low, the data are summarized for two-year periods. The increase of the number of cases, however, makes it less likely that non-significant coefficients will be found.

21. These conclusions are in line with the findings presented by Wittebrood (1995: 82) that Dutch girls are less interested in politics than boys. Gemmeke (1998: 143-4) shows that this gender gap is virtually absent among young children. Unfortunately, Park (1999) does not report gender differences for the apparently growing political apathy among British teenagers.

22. This different result obtained with different measures is in line with the interpretation of Koopman and Leijenaar (1984), that a gender gap is more likely for generally phrased questions than for more specific instruments. Yet, the results do not show consistent differences (that is, differences of more or less equal size for each study)

as should be the case if the instruments applied here would suffer from an evident and systematic 'gender bias'.

23. An objection against the use of this simple PGG could be that compositional effects are neutralized and that the size of different categories is not taken into account. However, in order to obtain an indicator for the differences between men and women – and not primarily for the developments at the aggregate level – compositional effects have been delayed explicitly. For an estimation of the societal and political consequences of the development of the PGG at the aggregate level, a weighted variant of the indicator would be more appropriate.

24. This result, too, makes clear that Koopman and Leijenaar's suggestion (see note 22) of a 'gender bias' for more generally phrased instruments of political involvement cannot be accepted for the questions used here without further specification.

25. This observation is in line with the conclusion presented by Vollebergh et al. (1999), that the gender gap in conservatism in the Netherlands has been 'reversed'; that is, women appear to be less conservative than men in 1992, although they had been more conservative than men in 1970.

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Cohen and the Basic Structure Objection

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Abstract

G.A. Cohen's discussion of the incentives argument for inequality has made an important contribution to our understanding of the normative theory of justice. The incentives argument is particularly difficult for egalitarians to rebut, yet Cohen seeks to show how egalitarians can mount a general defence against it. This paper argues that Cohen's critique has so far been construed too narrowly, and that this has resulted in the mistaken impression that his critique stands or falls with the refutation of the so-called basic structure objection. I explain Cohen's argument and the objection, and I explain why I think his critique is invulnerable to this objection if it is construed in a different way. I also point out that the critique, if construed this way, has much wider implications than is usually thought, applying not only to the incentives argument, or even to arguments about justice, but to most arguments in ideal theory.

1 Introduction

This paper examines G.A. Cohen's recent critique of the so-called 'incentives argument' for inequality (Cohen 1995a; Cohen 1995b; Cohen 1997). Its first aim is to show that Cohen's critique has been construed too narrowly, so that one particular kind of objection to it, the 'basic structure objection', has wrongly been thought to be decisive. Contrary to common opinion, the success of Cohen's critique of the incentives argument does not depend on the failure of the basic structure objection. At least one strand of his critique is immune to that objection.

Why should we be interested in these arguments? Cohen has played an important role in recent discussions on the normative theory of distributive justice, and especially in discussions about the issues raised by egalitarianism (for example, Cohen 1989; Cohen 1993; Cohen 1995c). His critique of the incentives argument is, in turn, an important part of his distinctive 'socialist-egalitarian' (as opposed to 'left-wing liberal') view of justice.¹ That gives us one reason for being interested in it. But, perhaps a better one is that it raises important and very general issues about the nature of normative political