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Open government and public trust: a new revaluation of the citizen perspective

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“Momentum is of great importance in scientific research. For a dissertation, which often takes years to complete, it is also a matter of luck. Do you think trust in government will continue to be relevant?”

- Carel Stolker, 2022

Former Rector Magnificus Leiden University

1. Introduction

Mila

Mila has little trust in a government that, in her view, only seems to serve itself and is full of red tape. As she anticipated, the restoration of city hall has exceeded budget, and taxes have yet again gone up. She therefore dreads the moment the municipal assessment and tax notice arrives, which forces her to pay up. At the community centre, she discusses the mistakes the municipality has made with other active members. Together, they decide to call in legal representation to help them file their notices of objection. This way, they will make the municipality listen to what they have to say.

Jack

Jack just bought his first house last year. Since he had been looking for quite some time in an overheated housing market, he paid a little extra to obtain the house of his dreams. Now an expert on real estate, out of curiosity, he responds to the invitation of the municipality to check the registered characteristics of his home online. While browsing the webpages on his property, he notices the characteristics are up-to-date as the new extension in the garden is already registered there. Yet, to his unpleasant surprise, he finds the pre-assessed value is even higher than his purchase price. He digs a little deeper and notices differences in the appraisals of the houses on his street that raise some questions. He decides to call the telephone number that is mentioned on the pre-assessment to get an answer to his questions.

Rose

It's a rainy February afternoon, when Rose hears the sound of the letter box at her front door. She doesn't recognise the logo on one of the envelopes. After opening it, she sees that it is the municipal tax bill that was sent by an administrative agency outside of town. She has lived in her home for over thirty years and has barely renovated it since then. How can it be that its value has risen by 17% in one year, she wonders. She knows everyone has to pay taxes, and counting on local government to do its jobs correctly, she makes sure the tax bill is paid right away.

THE examples in the text box above are citizens who differ in their dispositions towards government. Each citizen has their own experience, beliefs, and doubts, and approaches government in a different way. Rose may not fully understand the decision but she trusts the government knows best. Jack, being more technology-savvy, seeks more insight into the accuracy of the data behind the decision. Mila, on the other hand, feels alienated and has little trust. She wants to be heard and feels she needs legal representation in order for the municipality to listen to her. Their trust affects the way they perceive government decisions. Their responses to a similar decision range from acceptance, asking questions, to starting a legal procedure armed with experts. These vignettes exemplify the wider issue of public trust in government.

Public trust is essential for the well-functioning of government organisations, and promotes effective implementation of public services (Christensen et al., 2020, 1268). Where high trusting citizens are more likely to cooperate and accept the financial consequences of decisions, distrusting citizens require considerable resources (Goslinga, 2019, 22), either because of costly objection and appeal procedures or because they become more reluctant to obey rules or to pay taxes (Tyler, 2006, 172; Marien & Hooghe, 2011, 267); Marien & Hooghe, 2011, 267. However, the importance and desirability of public trust surely do not just lie in the acceptance of public policies and compliance with rules and regulations. Perhaps even more important than this instrumental approach, trust can be seen as a democratic value and an indicator of the legitimacy of government. Public trust is often associated with other positive evaluations of government, such as legitimacy and public support. Some even argue that the success of the public sector can be gauged in terms of public trust (Mason et al., 2014, 324). Although in repressive governments citizens may obey out of fear instead of trust (Hardin, 2002, 154), in liberal democracies public trust is essential for optimal governance (Yang & Holzer, 2006, 123) .

The public has transferred a part of its freedom to government, and the government derives its authority from the public. This type of social contract can only exist when government has the trust of the public to act in their best interests (Fleisher, 2018). Public trust can be seen as an

indicator of quality of the relationship of government with its citizens (Porumbescu, 2017, 521). Public trust in this study is defined as a 'citizen's psychological state comprising positive expectations of the intentions and behaviour of government', based on the definition of Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer (1998, 395). The concept of 'trust' is seen as the positive expectations of the trustor about the trustee with regards to a specific domain. It is thus a three-part relation (Sztompka, 1999, 25; Hardin, 2006, 19). Trust is considered an 'evidentiary phenomenon as it is expected to change with evidence in favour of or against trust' (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2015, 55).

The local government context in these vignettes is just one example in which the benefits of citizens' positive perceptions of government become apparent. Many other public and semi-public institutions that interact with citizens benefit from the trust of the public. For example, the judiciary strives to increase public trust (Jonkers, 2013, 21). When the judiciary is distrusted, people may not accept its decisions or even resort to solving their disputes in ways outside of the system. As trust in politics is currently at a low point (CBS, 2023), citizens vote differently or refrain from going to the ballot box at all. In times of COVID, trust in government was found to be one of the most important factors related to greater reductions in mobility and lower infection rates (Bollyky & Hullah, 2022, 1508). When citizens trust government to act in their best interest and the government has large public support, they willingly adhere to imposed stringent measures and voluntary vaccination, limiting contagion and thereby potentially saving lives (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020, 7). Thus, when trust is deemed essential in many facets of government, this raises the question: how can it be fostered? To what cues do citizens pay attention in their perceptions of public organisations, and are certain government acts able to provide evidence in favour of or against trust?

1.1 The problem of trust

CITIZENS and government are permanently interconnected and, therefore, both thrive in a positive and trusting relationship. However, for public institutions, it can be a challenge to maintain good relations with citizens, who vary greatly in their dispositions, knowledge, and expectations of government. Because of all these individual differences, public trust is said to be ‘one of the most intangible problems of democratic governance’ (Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong, & Im, 2013, 575). To enhance public trust, a better understanding of its nature and its determinants is needed (Houston & Harding, 2014, 54). There has been extensive research on the nature and origins of trust, both in and outside of the field of public administration. Yet, even within the field of public trust in government, there is no consensus on what causes the variation in trusting attitudes. The literature mentions more than one explanation for building public trust, some of which point to largely exogenous factors, such as economic welfare, the ‘social mood’, or citizens’ general dispositions or their ‘propensity to trust’ (Mayer et al., 1995, 715; Van de Walle, 2004, 207). Other scholars argue that government acts do have a positive effect on public trust, for example, an increase in the quality of performance, procedural fairness, or the adequate delivery of public services (Goslinga et al., 2019; Hardin, 2002; Houston & Harding, 2014; Mizrahi et al., 2010; Stoyan et al., 2016).

A possible endogenous explanation for varying trust levels is the openness of government organisations. “Openness of government is the extent to which citizens can monitor and influence government processes through access to government information and access to decision-making arenas” (Meijer, Curtin, & Hillebrandt, 2012). The literature examines diverse elements of open government as possible determinants of public trust (Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot, & Cohen, 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; O’Hara, 2012; Lee & Kwak, 2012; Downe et al., 2013; Mason, Hillenbrand, & Money, 2014; Zhao & Hu, 2015; Fledderus, 2015; Stoyan, et al., 2016; Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016; Cucciniello, Porumbescu, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017; Mabillard & Pasquier, 2017; Gustavsen et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2017; Porumbescu, 2017; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Van de Walle, 2018; Seavers, 2018; Siebers et al., 2019 among others). It is important that open

government be examined as both a dependent as well as an independent variable to gain knowledge on its societal impacts (Moon, 2020, 555). Also within public administration, the general premiss is that government openness, in terms of being transparent about one's operations, being responsive to citizens' information needs, giving insight into government-held data, and enabling citizen participation, enhances public trust in government (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2019, 17). This premiss is examined further in this study. Various government initiatives have previously taken an interest in the determinants of public trust (OECD, 2013, 2017, 2018) and proclaimed the importance of open government initiatives (OECD, 2016, 2019). If certain types of openness affect trust, this would mean government organisations have tools to steer trust. Identifying which knobs to twist on the openness panel to enhance public trust can contribute to effective policy implementation. Does governmental openness have the potential to improve the relationship between government and its citizens, and which type of openness is able to promote public trust?

1.2 Open government and trust: knowledge gaps

THE effect on trust of specific elements of open government, such as transparency (Cucciniello, Porumbescu, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012) and participation (Mizrahi et al., 2010), is still the subject of an ongoing scientific debate, and there are still many unanswered questions. For example, why is the effect of transparency so ambiguous? The literature reveals that transparency does not always result in more trust yet shows differentiated results (Cucciniello, Porumbescu, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). It is still unclear why more transparency in some cases causes trust to rise, yet in other cases it has a negative effect on trust or has no effect at all. A possible explanation may lie in the object of the transparency: what is government transparent about? When a task is performed well, transparency about the way it is performed could cause trust to increase, whereas being open about mistakes may cause trust to decrease. At the same time, citizens may appreciate the honesty of being open about mistakes and the benevolence of the organisation that tries to find a solution to past mistakes (De Vries, Zijlstra, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017, 20). Some studies indicate that

primarily performance affects trust (Gustavsen, Pierre, & Røiseland, 2017; Khan, 2016), although context may shape the ways in which it does (Stoyan et al., 2016). And what about other elements of open government, such as giving insight into government-held data that is used in decision making? Does providing data insight enhance the trust of citizens? Transparency is often conceptualised as the availability of general information about government operations and open datasets. These involve common interests. However, the perception of citizens could also be influenced by specific information and data with regard to their individual interests vis-à-vis the government. This study includes different types of transparency to gain more insight into how different types of transparency shape citizens' perceptions, and if they do not, which underlying mechanisms influence its effect. It could be that when monitoring possibilities exist, this alone may cause trust to increase, irrespective of whether one actually uses them. Even though the literature on the relationship between data insight and public trust is still scant, the shift in the relationship between citizens and government to the digital world does have fundamental implications for the social contract between citizens and the state, changing the nature of their relationship and the ways citizens perceive government (Lips, 2010, 287). Connections still need to be made between particular aspects of e-government and trust in order to understand and explain what happens from a social science perspective (Hupe, 2022, 230).

Another element of government openness is enabling participation. This in itself is a broad concept that entails various ideas and constructs, such as exercising voice, expressing political opinions online, the existence of proportional representation systems, engaging in decision making, or co-producing public services. Public encounters are valuable elements of democracy, although they are often still found to be problematic. Enhancing the quality of such encounters merits more attention (Bartels, 2013, 472). This study examines whether accessible participation in decision making could improve citizen ownership of decisions and whether public encounters have the potential to build public trust. How do public encounters affect the perceptions of participants, and can participation promote trust beyond that group? Although the ability to give input can also be viewed as a structured and limited form of co-production, the term

participation is used throughout the study. More insight is needed into how trust is created at the interface between citizens and public services (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2020, 68). This study delves deeper into different types of encounters and the effect of their characteristics on public trust, thereby contributing to the study of the public encounter and the further exploration of the quality of the relational processes happening ‘in-between’ citizens and public professionals (Bartels, 2015, 9). In line with increasing attention to the importance of public encounters, this study explores under what conditions such encounters can influence public trust.

As has become clear, open government comes in various shapes and sizes, and one public organisation can be open in one way while at the same time being closed in another. The elements of openness are often studied separately in spite of their coherence and overlap. For example, a minimum standard of transparency is required for effective participation to be possible (Meijer et al., 2012, 14). This study aims to examine their effect on trust in conjunction with one another. Do they strengthen each other by creating an overall picture of openness and trustworthiness, or could they flatten each other out because of their diversity, resulting in a lack of effect? Examining multiple types of openness at the same time can shed light on their possibly accumulating or differentiated effects on public trust. Openness merits a comprehensive examination, based on actual openness practices and combining different elements of institutional openness. The uniqueness of this study lies in the combination of multiple institutional openness implementations, including citizens’ perceptions thereof.

1.3 Problem statement and research question

THE extensive body of literature on trust in different public institutions shows the relevance of the puzzle of public trust today. The desirability of public trust merits a more sophisticated understanding of how it can be obtained and preserved. Why is one public organisation trusted more than another, especially when they execute the same public task? Are public institutions able to influence the perceptions citizens have of them, and if so, can public trust be built by being open? These questions lead to the following problem statement:

It is still unknown whether public trust increases due to the various efforts governments place in being open, and if certain dimensions of openness – such as the active dissemination of information (proactive transparency), responsiveness to specific information needs (responsive transparency), giving insight into decision-making data (data insight), and being open and accessible to citizen input (participation), – promote public trust. As it is still unclear which forms of openness affect public trust and in what way, the central question formulated for this study is:

How does open government affect the level of public trust?

To answer this question, several sub-questions are set out, each of which is answered with its own research method. A survey study examines the first question: Does openness affect the level of public trust? In focus groups, it is examined which mechanisms influence the effect of transparency on trust, and what makes tax payers perceive local government as open and trustworthy. Lastly, an interview study explores what shapes participants' satisfaction and trust.

1.4 Research design and context

THIS study uses a mixed-methods approach. In the sequential research design, a quantitative study is followed by two qualitative studies that are complementary and help to clarify unexpected quantitative findings and increase understanding. They, moreover, increase the scope of the study by helping answer new questions that arise from those findings (Hendren, Luo, & Pandey, 2018, 905). The quantitative survey study examines how institutional openness influences public trust, how perceptions are related, and whether other factors may affect trust. To this purpose, two separate large-scale original surveys are deployed. The first measures the various forms of openness by Dutch municipalities with regard to the specific task of real estate assessment, and the second measures citizens' perceptions of municipalities regarding that task. Subsequently, a focus group study examines the mechanisms behind the transparency-trust relationship as well as the formation of openness and trustworthiness perceptions. The interview study examines what happens to trust in public encounters with local government. The combination of these approaches adds value by bringing new perspectives and a more

complete picture of both open government and public trust (Hendren et al., 2018, 912). The aim is to both gain quantitative insight into the overall relationship between openness and trust and to delve deeper into citizens' perspectives using qualitative methods. The direct and indirect effects of open government arrangements, resulting from synergistic, complementary, and undermining relationships, need to be studied from different angles (Meijer et al., 2012, 19). The methods are discussed further in the corresponding methodology sections. We will also meet up with Mila, Rose, and Jack again to see how they are doing further along the process.

This study focuses on one part of government that citizens come into contact with the most: the local government, and in particular, the local tax domain. Local government is considered the government layer closest to citizens, making it a suitable domain to examine the effect of openness on trust. Moreover, the multitude of municipalities offers leverage for comparison. A biennial study on the quality of the Dutch local democracy called the 'state of the public administration' examines a variety of subjects, such as the functioning of different layers of government, voter turnout, and satisfaction with democracy. Although in the Netherlands support for the (decentralised) democracy is great and trust in the system is traditionally rather high, the last few years have seen cracks in that picture as trust in politics has decreased (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2022, 150). People trust local political institutions more than national ones (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2018, 19). Differences among citizens raise curiosity about why municipalities are perceived differently. This study aims to shed light on which endogenous factors can explain differences in trust levels when it comes to different local governments executing the same public task and explores whether these differences can be explained by their openness towards citizens. A concrete and constant trustee enables excluding differences in trust levels between types of public institutions. Levying taxes is a core task of the government. Taxation is the financial pillar under the functioning of government, and public trust is essential for the functioning of the tax system (Goslinga et al., 2019, 20). A lack of trust not only causes citizens to cooperate less, low-trusting citizens also find it

more acceptable to break the law and revert to illegal behaviour, for example, by committing tax fraud or by claiming benefits to which they are not entitled (Marien & Hooghe, 2011, 267). Distrusting citizens therefore require a more controlling approach and monitoring to achieve compliance, undermining the effectiveness of the functioning of any tax system (Goslinga et al., 2019, 22). Although at times unpopular, taxation allows for the maintenance of liberal democracy. Enhancing trust helps the public more willingly contribute to the financial well-functioning of government. Therefore, limiting negative public perceptions continues to be relevant for any tax authority today.

Within the domain of local taxation, the sub-domain of municipal real estate assessment (abbreviation in Dutch: WOZ) is chosen. In the Netherlands, all home owners yearly receive an assessment notice containing the value of their property, which in turn, determines their share in the local communitarian costs. It is a very visible tax because of the enclosed bill, which actively needs to be paid by home owners as opposed to other taxes that are automatically deducted beforehand. The annual assessment creates a recurring opportunity for citizens to reconsider their perceptions of local government. In addition to its visibility, this domain is suitable for examining the relationship between openness and trust for several other reasons. As a result of the direct financial stakes, citizens are expected to have a certain level of experience with the subject, enabling them to express their perceptions on a non-abstract level and speak from concrete experiences. One's own home evokes emotions, such as safety and privacy. At the same time, proper execution of this public task necessitates government involvement and an extensive exchange of information about citizens' private properties. This combination of privacy, government interference, and the abundant exchange of data and encounters, creates an interesting opportunity to further investigate the relationship between government and citizens. Moreover, it is an empirical field in which various forms of openness are present, creating the opportunity to combine and compare them in one study.

1.5 Practical relevance

PRACTICE laid the first stone for this study. The interest in building public trust originated from the municipal supervisory agency, the Netherlands Council for Real Estate Assessment, whose mission it is to build public trust in the real estate assessment by municipalities. This mission is an invitation to study the ways trust can be built. In this particular empirical field, the importance of public trust becomes apparent in the administrative procedures that require considerable municipal resources. Greater public trust could increase acceptance and help limit extensive formal procedures. More knowledge on the way citizens perceive government and the way their trust can be gained could moreover, help municipalities decide where to invest resources. Insights that may also apply to related fields in public administration. Another development that stresses the need for trust in this specific field is the increased societal use of the WOZ-value. Compared to its introduction in 1995, the value is now used for more taxation purposes, such as inheritance tax and corporate taxes. In addition, the value is now used for a variety of societal purposes as well, such as calculating the maximally permitted rent of social housing or the compensation for home owners with earthquake damage caused by natural gas extraction in the northern province of Groningen. The widespread use of the WOZ-value increases government efficiency, yet it can only exist on the basis of public trust in that value. Citizens may not be aware of all the different purposes, yet when they are confronted with one of these purposes, it needs their sufficient support. Therefore, more insight is needed into how public trust can be obtained. More trust enables wider use, and wider use merits more trust.

Moreover, there is a societal call as well as an administrative tendency towards more openness. The general premiss within the public administration is that government openness enhances public trust, and the Dutch cabinet has repeatedly stressed the importance of being an open government (Dutch Coalition Agreement, 2017), to be understandable, accessible, and approachable, with an eye for the human dimension, in order to restore public trust (Dutch Coalition Agreement, 2021). Many initiatives have led the Dutch public administration to pursue

openness. In 2019, the Dutch government formulated its policy plans for building a national infrastructure to give citizens more insight into and control over their own data, as well as the reuse of those data for other purposes. One of the rationales for this policy is that more control and insight can promote trust (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2019, 17). The new Dutch Open Government Act (2022) is meant to bring about a culture change towards openness within government through the proactive publication of documents. Yet, the question is whether these types of openness can achieve the goal of promoting public trust. Does openness offer governments instruments to steer trust? More knowledge about the ways government affects public perceptions does not only help public institutions better understand openness and decide where to invest their limited resources, it may ultimately help improve the relationship between government and the people.

Returning to the citizens that were introduced at the beginning of this chapter: distrusting Mila, suspicious Jack, and trusting Rose. Their level of trust in government influences the way they perceive government. At the same time, subsequent experiences with government can influence their perceptions of its competence, integrity, and benevolence, and thus their trust in government. Take Rose, who, in spite of her doubts about the assessed value, accepts the decision and feels urged to pay her taxes quickly. Jack has some questions and encounters the municipality with the belief that they are able to clarify them. What happens to his perceptions of local government when, in municipality A, he receives a phone call from the public assessor the next day to ask a few minutes of his time in order to review together whether the registered characteristics are correct and to help answer any questions about the property value? And what would happen when he lives in municipality B, which marks his phone call as a formal objection and sends him a confirmation of receipt stating that he will receive a written decision in eight to ten months? And do the different responses of municipality A and municipality B have a similar effect on Mila? Every municipality has a Mila, Jack, and Rose, in addition to the multitude of other types of citizens with differing trust levels. Throughout this book, the effect of various ways of being open on their accumulated public trust is examined.

1.6 Structure of the study

THIS dissertation is organised as follows: while introducing the main concepts, the literature review in [chapter 2](#) gives an overview of the state of the art in the research on the relationship between openness and trust. [Chapter 3](#) depicts the theoretical framework of the relationship between the openness dimensions and the elements of public trust as well as the research model. [Chapter 4](#) outlines the methodological approaches and their rationale. [Chapter 5](#) describes the findings of the survey study on openness and trust and reflects on those quantitative findings in order to distil their theoretical implications and remaining puzzles. [Chapter 6](#) presents the focus group study on the transparency-trust relationship as well as the formation of public perceptions of openness and trustworthiness. The second qualitative study is presented in [chapter 7](#) and examines the effect of different types of public encounters on trust. This dissertation concludes with an overall discussion of the results, the main conclusions of the study, and their implications for theory and practice in [chapter 8](#).