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

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*“Nowhere in the General Administrative Law Act
it says that you’re not allowed to use the telephone.”*

- Michiel Scheltema
Co-Founder Dutch General Administrative Law Act

7. Public encounters and public trust

THIS dissertation examines the effect of openness on trust. One element of institutional openness is participation, i.e. the availability and accessibility of participation possibilities. Even though the level of participation-openness did not show an effect, the actual encounter did. The more satisfied citizens are with the public encounter, the higher their trust is. Through an interview study, this section examines which factors create a satisfactory or unsatisfactory experience and, subsequently, when this leads to a trust change. Interviews with participants, in this study objectors to the local tax bill, help uncover the mechanisms underlying the participation-trust relationship, in order to answer the question:

What shapes participants’ satisfaction and trust?

Moreover, formal participation modes show lower average trust levels, and experience with multiple modes of participation reveals the lowest trust. This sub-study additionally examines whether people start procedures because of their low trust or whether their trust is low because of their dissatisfaction with participation. The chapter presents the results by comparing formal to informal modes of participation regarding: participant-related factors (in section 7.1), prior trust and trust change (7.2), and the role of the outcome and the procedure in satisfaction creation (7.3). Section 7.4 illustrates when trust changes after an encounter with the government, and section 7.5 closes the chapter with concluding remarks on public encounters and public trust.

7.1 Getting to know the participants: self-efficacy and expectations

In addition to procedural and outcome-related factors, it is examined how objectors view themselves in the participation process. What is the influence of their expectations beforehand on their evaluations, and does it matter whether those expectations were actually fulfilled?

7.1.1 Ease and self-efficacy

Nearly all objectors find it easy to object. They know how to find the municipality easily and the few points of criticism that were raised are of a practical nature, such as waiting times, input fields, or login options. None of these objectors experienced a substantive threshold to point out errors to the municipality. This does not rule out that this is different among non-objectors. The vast majority of the objectors consider themselves very well able to object. This is not surprising in itself, now that they have actually taken the step to do so. What is striking, however, is that the 'knowledge and skills' that the objectors believe are necessary to lodge an objection differ per type of procedure.

The **informal** objectors often say that no specific knowledge or skills are required. If, in their opinion, something is necessary, they name 'language skills, digital skills, and fortitude' as things that are necessary to lodge an objection. For **formal** objectors, however, the emphasis is on much more substantive subjects such as: *'knowledge of the housing market, appraisal-technical knowledge, financial insight, knowledge of regulations, architectural knowledge and its effect on the property value'* as well as *'a logical line of reasoning, being able to set up a clear argumentation, and knowing what to ask for'*. They assume a certain degree of expertise is necessary. For formal objectors, the bar in terms of the required knowledge and skills thus appears to be much higher than for informal objectors.

Moreover, the formal objectors also seem to have delved into the subject matter more substantively. Although some of the informal objectors also prepared well for the conversation with the municipality, the formal objectors in the interviews, for example, more often mention all kinds of architectural features of their house. However, expertise on real estate related subjects, such as architecture, permits, or even law, does not

always work to their advantage. It makes them stick to a certain way of thinking and also expect this in municipal property decision making, although this specialised field sometimes applies slightly different rules. A high level of communicative capacity of the public professional is required to recognise and address their reasoning (Bartels, 2015). If this is not sufficiently recognised by the municipality, the 'resident expert' will feel that he is not being taken seriously and may experience injustice as a result of not adopting the arguments that he believes to be valid.

'He tried his best. And well, he realized that he didn't get through to me either. I am of course an engineer. And so I think, you really don't have to explain to me what that costs, do you.'
(CRUZ, formal objector, #5)

7.1.2 External efficacy

To find out what role expectations regarding the procedure play and if correctly addressing them provides an opportunity to foster trust, objectors are asked about their prior expectations as well as whether the procedure had gone as they had expected. The **formal** objectors' expectations mainly focus on the outcome, such as *'receiving a satisfactory explanation, receiving substantiation for the decision, and expecting arguments to lead to an adjustment of the decision'*. Yet, **informal** objectors, in addition to the *'expected value reduction'*, more often mention expectations about the process towards this, such as *'getting a quick answer, reaching an agreement, working things out, and leniency on the part of the municipality'*.

When the process goes more smoothly than expected, it can have a dampening effect on the disappointment with the outcome. For example, **informal** objectors are relatively often positively surprised, for example, by the absence of 'red tape', even though their expectations in advance were already hopeful. Conversely, **formal** objectors are more often disappointed about expectations that have not come true. Even though they received a partial value adjustment just as often, they more often mention that things turned out differently than expected. Such feelings of a 'wild goose chase' are experienced much less among the informal objectors.

'I liked it better than I expected. I felt heard even though nothing was done with it, but I was really listened and paid attention to. And they well explained how they see it, so to speak, how it works.' (ALI, informal objector, #6)

If a **formal** procedure went more positively than expected, for example, due to the absence of bureaucracy or complicated language, satisfaction is also quite high. Yet most formal objectors describe the expectations as not being fulfilled, for example, *'no value adjustment'* or *'not getting an answer to one's questions'*. However, because the expectations of formal objectors often concern the outcome, its effect on satisfaction cannot easily be distinguished from the effect of the outcome itself.

'Now I still don't understand it: what do they look at? I feel like everyone receives this letter. You see, what bothers me the most is that I never got an answer to my question, whereas I thought they made a mistake somewhere. That is why I submitted an objection. But that has not been responded to at all, not at all.'
(FRANCESCO, formal objector, i7)

The overlap between (fulfilled) expectations and (being content with) the outcome is present among **informal** objectors as well. Although expectations about procedural aspects can be properly addressed (duration, process steps), expectations often concern the outcome, which simply cannot always be met. The expectancy-disinformation model maintains that citizens' dissatisfaction is influenced by the disconfirmation of their expectations regarding what should happen as a result of prior experiences (Peeters et al., 2020, 826). Yet, the interview data show that this is only confirmed when it comes to the outcome of the procedure, an expectation that cannot be managed. In order to create a satisfactory experience, it thus appears more useful for administrative authorities to provide the outcome with a clear explanation, as will become apparent in [section 7.3.4](#), than to try to find out what objectors' expectations are and try to meet them.

7.2 Trust: differences between formal and informal participants

DESPITE the risk of flattening the rich interview data, several sections are provided with a table that summarizes the results. These schematic overviews do not do justice to the complexity of the mechanisms that take place in the formation of citizen perceptions. They, however, intend to keep an overview of the multitude of qualitative data. Although the number of interviews is too small to make general statements, the tables describe the mechanisms that can occur when citizens participate.

7.2.1 Trust prior to participation

One of the questions the survey could not answer is whether the degree of trust influences the choice to engage in a certain type of public encounter, or that the encounter affects trust, or whether there may be an interaction between the two. Among the **formal** objectors, a little less than half say they trusted the municipality prior to the procedure. Even though none of them describe their trustworthiness perceptions as very positive, not all formal objectors have low trust either. Little over half of the formal objectors have a mixed or negative initial view of municipal trustworthiness. The **informal** objectors slightly more often have a positive impression of the trustworthiness of the municipality beforehand, also one third of them initially had little trust in the municipality. Their descriptions of the municipality hardly contain examples of real anger or expressions of extreme prior distrust, as was sometimes heard among formal objectors.

‘And then I received the tax bill, which was even higher. Then I think, no way! That’s not possible. You’re screwing things up. But well, they all do that here. So that’s not a novelty.’
(STEVE, formal objector, i6)

Even when informal objectors may lean slightly more often towards positive perceptions at the start of the procedure, there is still quite some variety within the two groups. In both groups, respondents can be found at both ends of the trust spectrum. Due to these differences, no hard conclusions can be drawn about the influence of trust on the choice of one type of procedure over the other. The reasons for objecting and the choice of a particular type of procedure are multifold. For example, the supposed

knowledge required to object. On the basis of these data, it is not possible to distil the exact role of the level of trust in this choice. Even though no clear cause and effect can be demonstrated, the existence of an interaction between trust and participation does emerge from the interviews. Participation often does not start with a black sheet.

'Well, once before I experienced that the WOZ-value was also adjusted immediately, so that initial trust was not bad, I think.'

(ADAM, informal objector, #3)

In short, prior trust does not show an unambiguous pattern among the different groups of objectors. The interviews cannot corroborate that low trust may make citizens choose more formal encounters. Prior trust does not appear to be the most important reason for people to participate in this domain or for how they participate. This side of their possible interrelationship, in which the level of trust influences the choice of certain types of participation, was not found. The next sections focus on perceptions after the encounter and which factors affect satisfaction and trust.

7.2.2 Trust change

Trust has not increased among any of the **formal** objectors. Even though approximately half of them are (partially) happy with the outcome, they indicate that they feel heard as well. Among this group, the experience of a good or proper handling of a formal objection seems insufficient to increase trust. At best, existing trust remains the same.

'It's all neatly done. No, nothing has changed. But that is not required because I have nothing to complain about in that regard.' (SHIRIN, formal objector, i1)

For several low-trust formal objectors, the procedure has confirmed their prior dispositions. They mention the opacity of the decision making, the unsatisfactory outcome, and the aloofness of the municipality. Yet, among some of the formal objectors, trust levels dropped (further). They mainly attribute their trust decrease to the municipality not ruling in their favour and not addressing their arguments.

'I do think, I indicated that and then received an answer such as: we have looked into it, and in our opinion it is correct. And well, I don't feel heard at all. It was a rather formal, cold and standard rejection rather than a personal message.'
(MIKE, formal objector, i9)

There is considerably more variation among the **informal** objectors. In about half of them, the level of trust remains the same, often because their prior trust level was already sufficient or even high. It is difficult to further increase existing trust with a positive experience. On one occasion, public trust remained low. In the other half of the **informal** participants, trust did change after the encounter, most often resulting in more trust. These informal participants mainly attribute their trust increase to procedural factors, such as the convenience of the procedure and getting a clear explanation. Incidentally, the municipality ruled in their favour as well.

'Because that gentleman just performed the calculation. He took me seriously. He said, okay, I'll check that and he then came back like, yes madam, you are absolutely right. We recalculated it and it turns out that it was indeed too high. I will change it for you. You'll receive a notification that it will be changed.'
(YASMIN, informal objector #5)

There was one exception where trust increased even though the value did not change. This specific respondent was remarkably positive about the contact. A clear numerical substantiation was given for the value that was experienced as objective and convincing, yet also during the conversation with the appraiser, it became clear to the objector that the value actually could have been considerably higher. So he was happy with the outcome, despite the fact that the value was not reduced (ALI, informal objector #6).

In one specific case, there was such dissatisfaction with uncertainty over the outcome that trust was reduced during an informal procedure, yet this procedure was still pending at the time of the interview. This dissatisfaction was mainly due to not immediately obtaining the outcome requested, still not having received an answer, having to wait too long for a call back, and a strong conviction of unequal treatment. The respondent's anger was quite striking, partly because they indicated themselves to be a civil servant. Although you would perhaps expect a little

more understanding of the turmoil of administrative mass processes such as the informal objection procedure, the role of 'citizen' or 'is apparently dominant over that of government worker. In itself, this incident corresponds with the survey result that, in contrast to municipal officials, other civil servants do not have more trust in the municipality than citizens who do not work for the government at all. The explanation this respondent received from the appraiser did not appear unreasonable. This exception indicates that once such dissatisfaction is experienced during an encounter, as a government, you simply cannot win over everyone.

‘Look, if we weren't so articulate and if we weren't so knowledgeable, well, then you're actually a bit cheated. It sounds very blunt what I'm saying now, but just simply cheated.’
(JANE, informal objector #13)

In sum, when governments want to promote trust, the informal method offers opportunities, whereas the formal process does not seem to be able to increase public trust. In the latter, trust remains the same at best. Having established the potential of **informal** procedures and the lack of potential of **formal** procedures to increase trust, it is still unclear which aspects of the procedure are decisive in promoting, maintaining, or decreasing trust among participants. The next section delves deeper into the satisfaction and trust-creating mechanisms, comparing procedural and outcome-related factors. First, table 7.5 summarises the formal and informal objectors’ descriptions of their initial trust and their trust change.

Table 7.5 Initial trust and trust change

	Formal objectors	Informal objectors
Initial trust, <i>prior</i> to the procedure	Mixed	mixed
Trust change, <i>after</i> the procedure	no cases of trust increase	cases of trust increase
	cases where the level of trust stays the same	cases where the level of trust stays the same
	several cases of trust decrease	no cases of trust decrease*

* One respondent did indicate a trust decrease, yet that procedure was still pending at the time of the interview and uncertainty about the outcome dominated the perception. None of the informal objectors indicated a trust decrease after completion of the procedure.

7.3 Satisfaction: a matter of distributive or procedural justice?

THE interviews with both formal and informal objectors confirm the survey result that the level of satisfaction with participation and the level of public trust go hand in hand. For every objector interviewed, both perceptions are either (moderately) positive or (moderately) negative. A satisfactory experience has the potential to promote trust. This is in line with Park & Blenkinsopp (2011, 258), who suggest 'a recursive feedback-loop between trust and satisfaction with public services'.

The reasons **informal** participants give for being satisfied are both outcome-related: *'reaching consensus, performing a clear calculation, giving objective data, the value has dropped considerably'*, as well as procedural: *'that the time was taken; that you just get to speak to someone; less bureaucracy; the speed with which it was resolved; he took me seriously; feeling heard; feeling understood; receiving an explanation; gained more clarity; shown substantive examples'*. The reasons **formal** participants give for being satisfied contain both as well: *'it was not very difficult; no excessive bureaucracy; a human process; normal non-legal texts; the friendliness and willingness of officials'* but also *'the result is as desired, receiving an answer to my question'*.

Reasons for being dissatisfied among all participants contain both types of factors as well, yet more often lean more towards the outcome: *'not being ruled in favour of, value reduction was not sufficient, inadequate financial assessment, unsatisfactory result, disagreement with the choices and the substantiation, simply no clear answer to question'* as opposed to procedural aspects such as *'not being kept informed of progress, sloppy freelance employee'*. However, informal objectors are much less likely to be dissatisfied. The ones that are dissatisfied, did not obtain the desired result or did not have clarity about the outcome yet.

The reasons for the levels of satisfaction do not differ between formal and informal objectors. **Informal** objectors are certainly not less output-oriented than the objectors that choose the formal route. Their objective at the start of the procedure is the same. The financial motive of both formal and informal objectors to get involved in this form of participation is evident, and the result plays a dominant role in the degree of **dissatisfaction**. Obtaining a favourable result contributes to creating a satisfactory experience. Still, the results show that informal objectors are satisfied with the procedure more often, even though the municipality ruled in their favour just as often as among the formal objectors. Apparently, procedural aspects play a role in creating satisfaction as well, and more than just a favourable outcome is needed for trust to increase.

7.3.1 Procedural aspects: feeling heard, feeling included, and perceived voice

About half of the **formal** objectors indicate that they feel heard. Notably, *feeling heard* within this group of formal objectors is nearly equivalent to having obtained the *desired result*. Hence, among formal objectors, distributive and procedural factors intertwine. This is not surprising in itself, because formal procedures involve less personal contact, for example, in the form of a conversation. In the absence of any personal contact, **formal** objectors thus evaluate *feeling heard* on the basis of the written verdict. Then it is difficult for most formal objectors to assess whether the municipal employee is involved or benevolent.

'It still feels like a robot. Like I just walk through a filter somewhere and I may or may not come out. So I don't feel heard really, even though it's the first time I object.' (VICTORIA, formal objector, i12)

Compared to the experience of formal objectors, it is notable that nearly all **informal** objectors do feel heard, feel well included in the process, and evaluate the civil servants' involvement positively. All of them feel heard, even when they are not happy with the outcome and did not obtain the result they had previously desired. Almost all informal objectors are positive about the involvement of the municipal employee they spoke to.

It is also notable that feeling heard among **formal** objectors coincides with being ruled in favour of, yet is not congruent with whether any personal contact has taken place. Whether an appraiser visited the property during the objection procedure or a conversation took place in some other way is not decisive for the evaluation of 'feeling heard'. This is somewhat remarkable, as all **informal** objectors indicate they do feel heard after the conversation, regardless of whether they were being ruled in favour of. Apparently, the **informal** mode of participation is experienced as a personal and direct interaction with a fair hearing, in which the citizen knows and perceives that there is really someone involved in his case. During **formal** encounters, the idea of customization seems to be experienced much less, even when personal contact in the form of a conversation or visit does take place. So even within one specific public domain, formal and informal modes of participation are different kinds of street-level bureaucrat interactions that are experienced differently by participants. Still, it can be noticed that despite the fact that the **informal objectors** feel heard and well included, public trust does not increase for all of them. Procedural justice contributes to a positive experience, but in itself, is not enough to increase trust. The informal objectors whose trust increased, are happy with the achieved result as well.

7.3.2 The effect of terms

A striking difference between the two groups is the perception of terms. The formal objectors' perceptions of the handling time (may last the entire calendar year) differ strongly from the informal objectors (often clarity within a few weeks, but sometimes also within days or hours). Despite the much shorter processing time, the informal objectors are more often dissatisfied with how long it has taken. Therefore, the effect of the term on satisfaction is discussed separately.

It is surprising that **informal** objectors, at times, are more critical of the speed of the procedure. They use other criteria than formal objectors. They expect very fast handling and often even take its speed for granted. Even the time (number of minutes) that they were on hold before someone picked them up could determine whether they experience the speed of the procedure as positive or negative and can determine the evaluation of how easy it was to object. Their frame of reference is clearly

not the 'usual' objection procedure that can take almost a year, but a telephone conversation with any other 'service provider'. If the call-back term they expect –whether or not based on statements made by municipal employees– is not met, they are relatively quickly dissatisfied with it. Disappointment about the handling time therefore occurs more quickly in such a 'flash procedure' than in a longer formal objection procedure. Conversely, when other informal objectors are asked what they think of the speed of this informal procedure, respondents sometimes indicate that it was not too short: *'They really took their time during the conversation'*. It can also go too fast.

On the other hand, most **formal** objectors actually have no problem at all with the longer handling term. Instead, they are remarkably lenient about it. They know it can take up to ten months, and if they don't hear anything, they expect that it's still pending. They thus wait patiently. Yet, they do not evaluate a relatively fast written procedure, for example, a decision within a few months, as particularly positive either: *'It wasn't too bad'*.

'Well, I didn't find that very interesting. Because of course it didn't concern very large amounts, and I find accuracy more important than time.' (LAURA, formal objector, i10)

In sum, the term within which the objection is handled, i.e. quickly knowing where you stand, does not seem to determine satisfaction and trust. After all, none of the formal objectors had a problem with how long the procedure took, while they were much less satisfied than the informal objectors. The informal objectors were more often satisfied with the procedure, yet were less happy with its speed.

7.3.3 Perceived fairness

Respondents are asked how they assess the fairness of the procedure as well as what 'fair' means to them. This is done to 'explore how citizens define fairness' in distinct types of procedures (Tyler, 1990, 110). Is fairness of a procedural or more of a distributive nature? The perception of fairness varies widely among the **formal** objectors. About a third think it was fair, a third feel it was not, and a third doubt whether they can judge this. Although 'being ruled in favour of' is sometimes mentioned as a reason for the experienced fairness, among this group there is no clear

relationship with the outcome of the procedure – unlike was found for 'feeling heard'. For most formal objectors, 'fair' mainly means that they *'are taken seriously'* and that *'the municipality listens, and reconsiders the decision carefully'*. Interestingly, several **formal** objectors indicate that they find it difficult to assess the fairness of the procedure because there has been no personal contact.

'I really don't know, no. No, like I told you, there has been no personal contact at all. So well, fair: what is fair?' (BELLE, formal objector, i11)

'I don't know. Look, I think digital, well, we can't do without it, but there are some things I would rather do face-to-face.' (FRANCESCO, formal objector, i7)

There are differences between the formal and informal groups in the assessment of fairness. About half of the **informal** objectors regard the procedure as fair. Most of them take the decision itself (the outcome) as a yardstick for fairness, i.e. whether the value has been adjusted or is in better proportion to that of neighbouring properties (principle of equality). When someone obtains the desired outcome, he experiences the decision as fair. This confirms the consumer-oriented approach of the informal objectors. In line with distributive fairness theory, their assessment of fairness more often involves the achieved result instead of procedural aspects. Even though this group attaches importance to procedural aspects as well, such as 'feeling heard', the dominance of the outcome in perceived fairness among informal objectors may be explained by the fact that this procedure takes much less time than the formal procedure (the entire procedure usually takes place in one or two conversations). Factors such as 'feeling included in the process' or even 'being listened to', could be considered self-evident and carry less weight in the assessment of fairness. The self-evidence of procedural factors may make the outcome more decisive for their evaluation of fairness. The informal objectors who doubt fairness, indicate that this is not easy for them to assess because of their uneven information position, which for example, could only be balanced by the expertise of a house broker or appraiser. But also in this line of reasoning, the assessment of the correctness of the outcome

determines perceived fairness among informal objectors, not its procedural factors. Moreover, perceived fairness is a complicated indicator because some of the objectors do not separate the 'fairness of this procedure' from the 'fairness of the original decision' or of the perception of 'fairness of the system as a whole' (their general view on property taxation). If the original decision was unfair in the eyes of the objector, this can affect his assessment of the fairness of the procedure as well.

When it comes to fairness, the distinction between procedural and distributive justice appears not to be as strict as the theories may imply. Among the formal objectors, *feeling heard* (a core element of procedural justice theory) is closely related to the favorability of the outcome. This finding is in line with early work on perceptions of fairness that finds that outcome and procedural judgements are correlated (Tyler, 1984, 67). In the absence of any personal contact, it makes sense that citizens evaluate their feelings of being heard on the basis of the written verdict. Then the outcome is all they have to base their opinion on. Nevertheless, when personal contact did take place, the outcome was still more important. For **informal** objectors, fairness does not evoke an association with *procedural fairness*.

The way in which a procedure is set up thus seems to affect the way in which fairness is assessed. It is striking that formal objectors consider personal contact important in order to assess fairness, while in informal 'flash procedures' procedural aspects are not mentioned as a cause of fairness. It is not that informal objectors do not notice the procedural aspects. They actually rate most other procedural factors positively, regardless of the favorability of the outcome. The explanation may lie in the duration of the procedure: the longer it takes, the greater role procedural aspects may play in fairness perceptions. Another explanation could be that, when it comes to *fairness*, people may mainly mention the factors they associate with *unfairness*. Table 7.6 provides a summary of the differences in the procedural perceptions of formal and informal objectors. It becomes clear that one cannot actually lump all procedural factors together.

Table 7.6 Differences between formal and informal objectors

	Formal objectors	Informal objectors
Feeling heard	Feeling heard often depends on the outcome.	All feel heard, regardless of the outcome.
Processing time (handling term)	They do not mind the longer processing time, nor particularly appreciate faster processing.	They are easily disappointed if previously communicated or assumed deadlines are not met.
Perceived fairness	One-third experienced the procedure as fair.	Little over half experienced the procedure as fair.
What does fair mean to you?	Being taken seriously, a careful reconsideration. Assessing fairness is difficult in the absence of personal contact.	Fairness is often related to the outcome.

7.3.4 Distributive aspects: getting results vs. getting an explanation

The interview results confirm the general expectation that objectors are satisfied if they are (partially) ruled in favour of, and also know why. And vice versa, objectors are dissatisfied when decisions are not in their favour and a clear explanation is absent as well. However, not *all* objectors are dissatisfied when they do not achieve the desired result, or vice versa, are satisfied if they do. As it appears, there is more to it. For several **formal** objectors, 'the outcome' and 'knowing why' diverge: for example, their value is adjusted but they found the explanation insufficient, or they were not ruled in favour of but felt the explanation was adequate. The formal objectors, who are not happy with the outcome but do find the municipality's explanation –in legal terms, the motivation of the decision– clear, are less dissatisfied with the procedure. In that light, the ever-used phrase in written decisions, “The appraiser has looked at it and found the value to be correct,” is truly inadequate. It also becomes clear that when someone is (partially) ruled in favour of, yet the explanation is considered inadequate, this can still cause low satisfaction.

“It is actually, how do you say, an undocumented concession. Since nothing has changed, all objections still stand for me. With an unclear motivation, I am afraid that next time the case will be completely off track, because it isn't not clearly substantiated anywhere.” (PETE, formal objector, i8)

For the group of **informal** objectors, too, the picture is positive if both a favourable result and a clear explanation are given, and when both are experienced as poor, dissatisfaction allures. Also among the informal objectors, a clear and at times detailed explanation partly removes the feeling of injustice and causes them to nevertheless experience the procedure as moderately positive. Conversely, a partly favourable result can be accompanied by dissatisfaction if not all questions are addressed.

Although it offers clear advantages, providing the rationale behind decisions is no panacea. Sometimes explanations simply do not land. It can be quite difficult for a correct argument to compete against a strong conviction of one's own rightness and the sense of injustice it accompanies. Simply put, not everyone is willing to accept an unfavourable decision, even if it is in accordance with the regulations and, in that sense, just.

'In the first explanation, then I'll say it very honestly: she talked sheer nonsense! To put it very simply. And in the second explanation it was admitted that it was simply wrong. Well, then I don't need any further explanation.'
(JANE, informal objector, #13)

Moreover, among very low-trust citizens, a quick admission of a mistake is not always seen as meeting the objection of the citizen but can be interpreted as confirmation of a government that makes mistakes. It then casts further doubt on the conscientiousness of decisions. In most cases, however, acknowledging and correcting errors is perceived in a positive light.

'But I have also heard from several people, that they just call and then their value is lowered. Look, that doesn't come across very strong, does it?' (RAHEL, informal objector, #14)

In sum, for both types of objectors, 'not obtaining results' combined with an 'inadequate explanation', is a recipe for dissatisfaction and distrust. Behind the objections lie a range of questions the objector may have. If those are recognized and addressed, this has a clear positive effect on their

satisfaction with the procedure. Providing an explanation may be easier in an informal procedure because the official immediately hears from the objector whether the explanation is sufficient, enabling him to respond more flexibly to the objector's needs. Most **informal** objectors perceived the explanation to be sufficient. For both groups of objectors, the picture appears to be slightly more positive among objectors who were not happy with the outcome but did get a clear explanation as to why than among those who were partly ruled in favour of, yet considered the explanation to be unclear or absent.

7.4 Why does trust change after an encounter with government?

This section examines the role of procedural and distributive factors in trust change. Table 7.7 outlines the mechanisms through which positive and negative evaluations of both procedural and outcome-related factors affect public trust. Although reality is always more complex and more factors and circumstances influence individual perceptions, these mechanisms were present among all formal and informal objectors interviewed after their objection procedure. Before discussing the results, some explanation is needed as to the factors included in this table. 'Outcome' is the respondents' evaluation of the outcome. 'Procedure' includes feeling heard, feeling included, and the perceived ability to exercise voice. These procedural factors are at the core of procedural justice theory and are almost always judged similarly by the respondents.

Nearly all objectors who feel included in the process, felt they had the ability to express voice and feel heard, and assess the employee as 'being involved' as well, or vice versa. Considering these factors are perceived in the same way by most objectors, these three procedural factors are combined under the heading of 'procedural factors'. Nevertheless, the results also show that you cannot simply lump together all possible procedural factors. Terms and fairness evoke very different associations among the respondents. First of all, the *term* 'processing time' does not appear to be of any importance for the degree of overall satisfaction or trust. The informal objectors were clearly more satisfied than the formal objectors, while, contrary to expectations, they were also more negative

about the processing time. This factor is therefore omitted from the table. *Fairness* judgements clearly contain both procedural and distributive elements. As perceived fairness is intertwined with both, it cannot be categorized as either procedural or distributive.

First, notwithstanding that the outcome plays an important role in satisfaction with the objection procedure, the interviews show that more is needed for trust to change, and a positive evaluation of procedural aspects is additionally required. Both distributive and procedural justice thus play a role in the formation of trust. Assessing only one aspect as positive while the other one lingers, is insufficient to promote trust. Even when objectors have a dominantly consumer oriented self-view and the outcome affects their satisfaction, a satisfactory outcome alone is not enough to promote trust. Both aspects are necessary, albeit under the procedural factors, the emphasis is on feeling heard, feeling included, and exercising voice.

Second, what happens to trust differs per type of procedure. As table 7.7 shows, only the informal procedure offers opportunities to restore or improve public trust among objectors. The advantage of the informal procedure lies in its ability to make the citizen feel heard, in a way the formal procedure appears unable to offer. All informal objectors feel heard, regardless of the outcome. With a positive evaluation of the procedural factors, the first requirement to promote trust is met. Assessing both aspects of the procedure positively can cause a trust increase among informal objectors. This effect does not occur among formal objectors, though. When the value of a formal objector is lowered and they have a sense of procedural justice as well, somehow their perceptions are not positive enough to promote trust. The formal encounter is just not experienced as positive as the informal encounter. Formal objectors are never *very excited* about the procedure, whereas at times informal objectors are. It could also be that to those formal objectors, the outcome is still not completely satisfactory, as their expectations were even higher. Nevertheless, such a dampening effect of a 'partly satisfactory' outcome does not occur with informal objectors, while it certainly occurs in informal procedures as well.

Table 7.7 Mechanisms behind public trust change among objectors:
outcome and procedure*

Formal participation procedure					Informal participation procedure				
Outcome evaluated positively	&	Procedure evaluated positively	→	trust remains the same	Outcome evaluated positively	&	Procedure evaluated positively	→	trust increases or remains the same (high trust)
Outcome evaluated negatively	&	Procedure evaluated negatively	→	trust decreases or remains the same (low trust)	Outcome evaluated negatively	&	Procedure evaluated negatively	→	does not occur here, everyone feels heard
Outcome evaluated negatively	&	Procedure evaluated positively	→	trust remains the same	Outcome evaluated negatively	&	Procedure evaluated positively	→	trust remains the same
Outcome evaluated positively	&	Procedure evaluated negatively	→	does not occur; everyone who is satisfied with the outcome also feels heard	Outcome evaluated positively	&	Procedure evaluated negatively	→	does not occur here, everyone feels heard

* The procedural factors included are feeling heard, feeling included, perceived voice, perceptions of involved officials.

An important remark about table 7.7 is that no exactness can be derived from it, and it is not intended to represent quantitative precision. This would not be possible using a qualitative approach. It is, however, intended as an overall outline of some of the mechanisms underlying trust creation through satisfaction with public encounters. Nor is the model a complete representation of reality, as more factors or mechanisms may exist. For example, the handling term is not included because no relation was found in the stories of these respondents.

Third and last, although only the informal objectors speak of an *increase* in their trust, trust can decrease after an encounter as well. The results show the fragility of the relationship with citizens, which can easily spiral downward because of misunderstandings and frustrations (Bartels, 2015, 201), resulting in a decrease in trust after an encounter with the government. The combination of an undesirable outcome and low perceptions of procedural aspects, can lead to a *decrease* in trust among the formal objectors. Understandable in itself, but it is striking that this situation does not occur among the informal objectors, who all largely assess the procedural aspects positively. When the outcome is unsatisfactory but the procedural aspects are considered adequate by the formal objectors, their trust is less likely to decrease. A sense of procedural justice thus helps prevent a trust decrease, even when the desired outcome is not obtained. This confirms the meaningful place of procedural justice in maintaining public trust.

7.5 Concluding remarks on public encounters and trust

THIS sub-study shows that procedural and distributive aspects of justice are intertwined in several areas. For example, in the interrelationship between *feeling heard* and *being content with the outcome* among formal objectors. Their interdependence makes it difficult to determine which of the two is dominant in creating citizen perceptions. It has become clear, however, that both are necessary to increase trust or to maintain high trust, and that procedural aspects help prevent a trust decrease too. In addition to the influence of procedural and distributive factors, this study offers a more relational perspective, as public trust

emerges as a property of interactions with certain settings. Public encounters are not only about exchanging arguments. They are also a process of reciprocal relationship-building and interacting. In this relational approach, public officials can influence the quality of the ongoing interactional process of encounters (Bartels, 2013, 478). This study substantiates that public encounters influence public trust.

Moreover, this study has examined the effect of different types of encounters on citizen perceptions. Even though an increase in trust did not occur among all informal objectors, some evidence is found that supports the hypothesis that informal participation is positively related to public trust. The informal mode of participation is able to increase public trust, whereas the formal mode of participation is able to maintain existing trust at best. The demeanour of the mode of contact apparently matters, from being 'formal and detached' to 'informal and close' (Bartels, 2015, 200). Traditional and legal ways to participate may reaffirm citizens' role as opponents (Leighninger, 2014, 305), instead of creating mutual understanding.

The way in which the process is set up influences how trust is affected. Face-to-face, or *voice-to-voice* contact, makes it possible to adopt a 'cooperative style of relating' that can create a connection, moving the contact forward (Bartels, 2015, 174). Without being able to give a complete review of communication sciences, several starting points about communicative aspects can be found in the literature on public encounters. For example, the nuances of oral communication are simply not always possible in writing (Samantha & Hand, 2022, 142). They argue that interactions are largely shaped by a noticeably positive practice of officials, in which they avoid negative talk, do not get into a discussion, and citizens' statements are not directly contradicted, yet empathy is always the starting point. This practice helps flatten the traditional asymmetrical relationship between bureaucrats and participants (Samantha and Hand, 2022, 145).

Although the focus, in both the literature and in practice, is often on what the government can or should do to increase trust, trust in government is a matter of public perception. The citizen perspective, their expectations

and experiences, and their effect on public trust are still underexposed. This qualitative sub-study may offer a starting point to give their voice more weight in the research field on open government and public trust. Even though Mila and Jack –the fictitious citizens from the introduction– are hypothetical municipal residents, these findings show that the different routes they choose to shape their contact with the municipality can make a difference. Direct and personal contact has trust-building potential. Mila, however, called for legal assistance because she felt that the municipality would not listen to her otherwise. Engaging an intermediary party in most cases blocks all direct and personal contact, closing this route to regain her trust. Even if she would have started a formal legal procedure herself, this does not lead to the same satisfaction as Jack's informal approach, who decided to call to discuss his questions about the data and their consequences. During direct and personal encounters, he most likely feels taken seriously and, as a brand new resident of this municipality, feels included instead of a counterparty. While conversing, he is more likely to receive an explanation to his satisfaction, as to why the differences that initially struck him were nevertheless correct. The feeling a citizen is left with after a public encounter is influenced by more than just hard numbers.