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

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“The one who wishes to acquire a facility in the gaining of knowledge, should doubt judiciously.”

— Aristoteles

“Nobody said it was easy.”

— Coldplay, The Scientist

8. Conclusions and discussion

AS part of a broader research field into the origins of public trust, this study explores the relationship between open government and public trust, and more specifically, *how does open government affect the level of public trust?* This chapter first answers the research questions. Subsequently, it discusses how the findings contribute to the research field, where the study is limited, gives suggestions for further research, and describes the study’s implications for practice.

8.1 Answering the research questions

THIS section answers the four research questions addressed in this study. Although institutional openness does not affect public trust, the survey study does reveal a strong link between perceived openness and trust. The focus group respondents’ stories moreover reveal various mechanisms that influence the effect of transparency on trust. Local government can still be perceived as closed, which does not contribute to the image of its trustworthiness. The interviews show participants’ trust is related to their satisfaction with the procedure, created by both outcome-related and procedural factors.

Does openness affect public trust?

Institutional openness is only very weakly related to public trust. None of the hypotheses about the positive effect of institutional openness on public trust could be confirmed. Neither proactive transparency, responsive transparency, data insight, participation possibilities, nor their combination, result in more trust. The expected added value of the accumulation of institutional openness factors towards citizens did not materialize. Institutional openness did not negatively affect trust either.

Although a trust increase should not be its core objective, striving for more openness may very well serve various other purposes without the risk of a possible trust decrease. Contrary to institutional openness, openness perceptions are strongly related to trust. The more open citizens perceive the municipality to be, the more trust they have in it. However, perceptions of openness do not correspond with the level of institutional openness. This discrepancy between institutional openness and openness perceptions is a key finding. Depending on the way openness is conceptualised, openness's relation to public trust differs. Although no effect of institutional openness could be confirmed, the survey does show that perception formation is not entirely isolated from what government does either. Concrete experiences with government do affect public trust. There is a strong positive association between the level of satisfaction with municipal encounters and public trust. When citizens' satisfaction with the encounter grows, public trust increases. Participation's potential to promote trust lies in creating satisfaction and not so much in the openness of encounters, such as their availability and accessibility.

Which mechanisms influence the effect of transparency on trust?

Two main mechanisms are uncovered that prevent transparency from (positively) affecting trust. First of all, institutional transparency can only affect public trust when citizens actually use it or know about it. Hence, the first obstruction is *disuse*. Disuse can be a result of disinterest, which may not be a problem when it comes to public trust, as high-trust citizens are generally less interested in using transparency. At best, disuse can be considered a result of high trust. Disuse can, however, also result from a lack of visibility caused by a misfit in the way transparency is offered. The way transparency is generally set up assumes citizens actively search for information, while, in spite of their interest in it, they often take on a more passive role as 'information recipients'. Consequently, transparency is not conveyed to its target audience. The other set of reasons for a lack of effect can be categorised as transparency *disappointment*. Such disappointment can result from mistakes revealed by transparency, which do not benefit trust. Moreover, high expectations disappoint, when despite the information obtained, citizens still do not achieve any grip on decision making. Lastly, transparency users are not always able to judge what is

relevant, what the information means, or why it is provided. In the absence of a clear context, transparency can cause confusion instead of clarity. Confusion fuels uncertainty instead of reducing it. At worst, disappointing experiences with transparency can even create a sense of arbitrariness. The extent to which these mechanisms occur influences transparency's effect on trust.

What makes taxpayers perceive local government as open & trustworthy?

Despite being the tier of government closest to citizens, the image of the municipality as an impenetrable and anonymous bureaucratic apparatus is still present. Complicated language use and digital modes of communication can be perceived as means to keep citizens at a distance. Inadequate or *incomplete* answers can be experienced as *no* answer at all, leaving the citizen with the feeling their complaint is not addressed, unfinished, and thus still pending. Implementing digital openness measures, such as providing data insight, seems insufficient to increase openness perceptions. Although digitalization has undeniably increased the number of institutional openness implementations, it has not increased the image of openness. This is referred to as the *digi-paradox*. In fact, extended use of digital channels by municipalities, in conjunction with the deactivation of other modes of contact, is perceived by some as intentionally keeping citizens at a distance. Citizens tend to prefer and appreciate personal contact, even the distrusting ones. It gives a face to the municipality, the sense of dealing with a human being instead of a machine, and thereby contributes to the perception of openness. The demise of the street-level bureaucrat as a result of digitalization indeed seems like a somewhat naïve form of 'techno-optimism' (Hupe, 2022, 221). When it comes to trustworthiness perceptions, most citizens are positive about the benevolence of officials. Moderately critical citizens generally do not assume malicious intentions or question the sincerity of officials. Several themes are addressed by citizens, to which they attribute their *low* trust in the municipality. As they mainly occur outside the tax domain, these perceptions are not restricted to *taxpayers* alone and apply to municipal residents in general. The perceived unwillingness to rectify mistakes is detrimental to public trust. Whether the mistake is real or perceived, inadequate explanations of a decision's rationale create an

image of a government that is untrustworthy. Moreover, there is a general disappointment with municipal participation opportunities. The image is of a municipality that broadcasts instead of listens, and that views citizen input as a formality instead of a valuable contribution. By improving that image, an important source of discontent can be removed, both within and outside the tax domain.

Another important reason why citizens distrust the municipality is a lack of uniformity in decisions. Citizens judge the trustworthiness of decisions on 'equal treatment', or *horizontal uniformity*. For example, 'Don't I pay more than my neighbour?' Considering it is difficult for citizens to judge which cases are actually equal, it is important that the municipality explains any differences. Failing to address perceived inequality reduces trust. Furthermore, citizens expect a logical trend in government decision making from one year to the next. This type of continuity is referred to as *vertical uniformity*. Previous decisions shape expectations about new ones. Living up to such expectations can be difficult when legislation prescribes that decisions are taken independently from decisions in previous years, such as the WOZ-value, or when legislation itself changes regularly. In the relationship between government and citizens, unpleasant events linger longer than positive ones. Such *grievance asymmetry* is confirmed by the stories of the focus group participants. They, however, do recognise and share positive experiences as well. They express their love for their city and appreciate friendly and professional officials that commit to promises, the convenience of fast services, and quick fixes of issues in public space that are visible to them.

What shapes participants' satisfaction and trust?

Central to the analysis of participants' satisfaction and trust is the comparison between 'formal encounters' (written procedure) and 'informal encounters' (verbal procedure). Both formal and informal participants attribute their *satisfaction* with the encounter to distributional as well as procedural factors, while explanations for *dissatisfaction* more often involve the outcome. Although outcome plays an important role in creating a satisfactory experience, not all objectors are dissatisfied when they do not achieve the desired result. A clear explanation of the decision (providing rationale) helps prevent

dissatisfaction and diminishes feelings of injustice. For both types of objectors, 'not obtaining results' combined with an 'inadequate explanation', is a recipe for dissatisfaction. A satisfactory outcome alone is not enough to promote trust. Both outcome-related and procedural factors need to be assessed positively for the trust of informal objectors to rise. A sense of procedural justice also helps to prevent a trust drop. An undesirable outcome, combined with low perceptions of the procedural aspects, can cause trust to decrease. This situation does, however, not occur among the informal objectors in this study, as all of them assess most procedural factors positively.

When citizens meet the state, this affects their attitudes towards that state, and what happens to public trust differs per type of encounter. Both the quantitative and the qualitative studies offer indications for the positive effect of informal contact on public trust. The trust of *informal* objectors can increase after the encounter. Among *formal objectors*, satisfaction about both the outcome and the procedural factors did not result in an increase in trust. The predetermined boundaries of the formal setting seem to 'limit the ability to address problems or to develop any personal relationships' (Bartels, 2015, 108). Even when formal objectors are satisfied, their experience is not positive enough to promote trust. Experiences with the formal encounter are just not as positive as those with its informal counterpart. The *informal encounter* has the ability to make citizens feel heard regardless of the outcome, in a way the formal procedure is unable to offer. The demeanour of the mode of contact thus matters, from being formal and detached to informal and close (Bartels, 2015, 200). The findings offer a relational perspective on public trust, in which the level of trust is an emergent property of concrete interactions.

In conclusion, as to the question of *how open government affects the level of public trust*, it has become clear that institutional openness measures are neither decisive in steering openness perceptions nor in creating public trust. Citizens do pay attention to individual encounters when it comes to their perceptions of government. Even though *institutional openness* may not be a knob to turn on the 'trust panel', governments are able to affect the way they are perceived by the public through these individual experiences. In addition to the different forms of transparency that

facilitate public participation, public encounters appear to be an even more important way to shape openness perceptions. During encounters, procedural factors provide important tools to prevent a trust decrease. Creating satisfaction through a combination of outcome-related and procedural aspects in informal encounters even has trust-building potential.

8.2 Contributions to the research field

THE following sections discuss what new insights this study brings and how they contribute to the research field on public trust. The results challenge general expectations on the positive effects of institutional openness on trust and extend the field in new directions, for example, regarding the effect of public encounters on trust. The discussion runs along three main lines: the discrepancy between practices and perceptions (8.2.1), the concept of transparency and its ambiguous effects (8.2.2), and the concept of public trust and its origins (8.2.3).

8.2.1 Discrepancy between practices and perceptions

Regarding the public perception of government, this dissertation adds two new insights to the research field. First, the survey study exposes a clear discrepancy between the effect of institutional openness and perceived openness on public trust. Second, any spill-over effect from trust in one public organization to another is contradicted by the respondents' stories.

The discrepancy found has important implications for examining the effect of openness on public trust. Openness perceptions and openness practices are simply different things. They do not correlate or show any interaction effect on public trust. A closer look at the literature confirms the discrepancy between these openness conceptualizations. Perception studies often find a positive effect, whereas studies on the effect of institutional openness on trust are much less straightforward. Even though gaining knowledge on topics that are inspired by public sector challenges inherently entails a certain degree of valorization (Mabillard & Pasquier, 2017), discussion sections of perception studies do not often mention the external validity to institutional openness as a limitation. In the literature the difference between practices and perceptions is still underexposed. Few theoretical models address this discrepancy between institutional

openness and openness perceptions, nor, to the best of my knowledge, have empirical studies previously confirmed their divergence. Awareness of their discrepancy is a first step towards gaining a more complete understanding of the openness-trust relationship. The discrepancy between institutional and perceived openness also questions the nature of open government. Open government aims to build 'sound connections between vision and voice that facilitate active citizenship' (Meijer et al., 2012, 26), yet the latter cannot be taken for granted. Even when opportunities to gain information and engagement are high, they are not always perceived as such or actively used.

Moreover, it can be argued that a theoretical model that includes either institutional openness or perceived openness gives an incomplete picture. Merely involving perceptions paints a rosy picture when it suggests that openness and trust are strongly related, while it solely indicates a relation between two perceptions. Such perception studies can be interpreted as support for the premiss that institutional openness is an adequate tool to enhance trust. Then again, merely involving institutional openness creates the impression that there is no connection at all between openness and trust, resulting in claims that public trust is completely unrelated to what the government does. In both approaches, the gap between practices and perceptions is a missing link. When building models on the effect of openness on trust, one should bear in mind this discrepancy. Perceived openness and institutional openness cannot be regarded as the same construct. Creating complete conceptual models is important for understanding reality, as they ultimately serve the purpose of improving public administration through knowledge. There is much to be gained from closing the gap between perceptions and practices. To gain knowledge on what actually happens to public trust, perceptions need to be considered separately, in addition to whatever form of institutional openness is under examination. This may be done by gauging, as an intermediate step, whether institutional openness is actually seen and recognised as such by its intended audience, and if that is not the case, what is causing it to be blocked. Some institutional openness measures may be better able to create openness perceptions than others. Moreover, one could also leave out quantitative institutional openness implementations altogether and

focus on how the image of openness can be improved in other ways. With more insight into how the image of an 'open government' arises, the image of trustworthiness can be promoted as well. To this end, the present study has made a start.

Another insight about public perceptions of government is that no clear *spill-over effect* from trust in one government organisation to another arises. Such a *spill-over effect* assumes that if a citizen, for example, considers a key politician to be no good, this reflects on the image he has of other parts of government. From the correlation between general disposition towards government and trust in a particular public institution, it is often deduced that one influences the other. Although it may sound plausible, it does not become apparent from the survey results or the from stories of the respondents. The focus groups show that most citizens differentiate per government organisation and even per public task or department. The municipality is charged with diverse tasks that evoke different experiences and perceptions, which citizens are well able to recognize and distinguish.

The variety of municipal tasks is one of the reasons why it is difficult to find an effect of openness on public trust regarding one specific task. Yet more importantly, one's general attitude towards government cannot be regarded as a determinant of trust in the municipality. The correlation between perceptions of government in general and the municipality, is better explained by the overlap between the two. The municipality is simply part of the government. Trust in local government is not simply a reflection of citizens' thoughts on national government, as citizens view each layer of government through a different lens (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016, 140). The present study confirms that generally, citizens are able to discriminate among levels of government and the work of individual administrators (Kettl, 2019, 766). Studies on public trust thus need to clarify the government organisation involved and for what task or purpose. This complicates comparative studies that only inquire into 'trust in government in general'. Conclusions can be useful as a general gauge of public opinion, but they do not actually concern the concept of public trust. The finding that citizens base their opinion of openness and trustworthiness on concrete municipal experiences and that they

discriminate between parts of government implicates that public trust is more than one's general disposition or an 'abstract notice' of government. Reality is simply more complex.

8.2.2 Understanding transparency and its ambiguous effects

The finding that neither proactive transparency, responsive transparency, nor data insight affect public trust called for another reflection on the transparency literature. Normative optimism allures, even though mixed effects predominate empirically. Incidentally, this phenomenon is not limited to science. Still, this study helps to fill the research gap as to 'why the effect of transparency on trust is ambiguous'. The effect in the literature is mixed because of differences in conceptualization, as either practices or perceptions, but also because of the miscellaneous measures of institutional transparency. In addition, the qualitative focus group study describes various mechanisms that influence and limit the effect of institutional transparency on trust: disuse and disappointment, each with its own underlying causes. The extent to which these mechanisms occur causes the effect of transparency on trust to be mixed. These insights offer a valuable contribution to the research field and may offer a starting point for further exploration.

In scientific research, transparency –in whatever form– is still mainly approached from the side of the transmitter. A first step towards a better understanding of transparency effects, is to recognise that the concept is broader than just the sheer amount of information or its content. It is not just the act of providing information, it also entails ensuring that the information reaches its intended recipients. As the focus group study has revealed, true transparency conveys information, meets citizens' needs, and enables openness perceptions to correspond to institutional openness. It includes both sides. This insight may help improve future measures of transparency. Not trying to gauge transparency in an absolute sense, similar to the way the present survey study aimed to do, but adhering to a broader conceptualization of transparency and subsequently broader operationalization, including the recipient. For example, by including 'conveyed transparency', i.e. the extent to which it reaches the recipient, or 'user-transparency', i.e. the extent to which it meets the public's needs. The transparency measure then includes the receiver, in

addition to its broadcaster. Depending on its operationalization, transparency risks becoming a perception, which, as described in the previous sections, will quickly correlate with public trust. Still, in the present study, perceptions proved to be a valuable indicator alongside indicators of institutional transparency in the model. Even when only institutional openness is examined, a study benefits from including openness indicators that citizens deem important. In this way, the connection between research and practice, as well as between implementations and perceptions, can be improved.

The relationship between transparency and trust is complex. The present study offers a starting point for more insight into their *interrelationships*, for example, by examining the perceptions of citizens who do not use transparency. The survey results show that searching for information is related to the level of trust. Non-users are, on average, more trusting. This group apparently has less need for additional information. It can be argued that they do not look any further because they already trust. Website visitors have less trust than ‘non-visitors’, and citizens that consult the valuation report are less trusting than the ones that do not. On the basis of this survey, no explicit cause-and-effect relationship can be established among the group of transparency users. However, it becomes clear that the use of transparency does not improve perceptions, as trust is even lower among the group that visits the municipal website multiple times than among citizens that visit it only once.

Besides low trust, another plausible reason to search for information is a lack of knowledge. The present study finds that self-reported knowledge is weakly correlated with trust. Trust increases with increased knowledge, although only very slightly so. Low trust does not seem to result from too little knowledge, as ‘high knowledge’-citizens can be distrusting as well. Still, the group of citizens that indicates to have ‘*no understanding at all of how the WOZ-value is assessed*’ does have the least trust. This specific group could be served with the right type of transparency, i.e. information that is *relevant* to them and is obtained in a way that meets their needs: proactively and assisted with context. Moreover, the differences between transparency-users and non-users and between levels of knowledge, implicate that the effect of transparency may differ per group. Although

this study finds no general interaction effect of knowledge between openness and trust, it does provide starting points for distinguishing citizen types. Types that are not based on demographic factors but on other relevant characteristics that can influence the relationship, such as the level of knowledge or initial trust. The composition of society as a whole may just be too diverse to determine a single effect, and it may be better to examine the transparency-trust relationship among specific groups. In sum, the present study has contributed to a better understanding of the transparency concept and offers a step towards a more refined understanding of the relationship between transparency and trust.

8.2.3 So what is public trust and how does it originate?

This research on openness and trust offers wider insights into public trust and its origins. This section discusses insights about performance theory, reciprocal trust versus perceived polarity, and the role of both distributive and procedural justice theory in building and maintaining public trust.

8.2.3.1 *Performance theory*

In the background of this study on the effect of institutional openness, the question lingers whether the origins of public trust lie in government acts, such as the performance of public institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001, 34; Stoyan et al., 2016, 19) and satisfaction with public services (Gustavsen et al., 2017, 9), or whether trust is unrelated to what government does. Some scholars question whether governments can actually influence public trust. This is a valid argument, as none of the institutional openness forms were found to affect public trust in this study either. In the absence of an effect, it is sometimes concluded in the literature that it does not matter what the government does and that public trust is merely the result of people's degree of 'trusting disposition' or the prevailing 'social mood'. On the basis of similar average trust levels in many municipalities too, the conclusion can be drawn that it does not matter what a municipality does. However, in an argument based on municipal averages, trust is regarded as a characteristic of government instead of a public perception. A similar average per municipality teaches us nothing about why one citizen has more trust than another. Instead, public trust needs to be approached as a characteristic of the citizen.

Public trust is not entirely unrelated to what the government does. Even though the survey study cannot provide conclusive support for performance theory, the qualitative studies do. The survey study finds a strong positive correlation between *perceived performance* and trust in the municipality, yet the possible discrepancy between perceptions and other performance indicators prevents substantiating the theory's main premise. Public trust in government could be influenced by 'subjective measures of citizen perceptions only' (Yang & Holzer, 2006, 115). Institutional openness may not be decisive in citizens' assessment of municipal trustworthiness, but the government can certainly do things right or wrong during encounters. The image citizens have of government is affected by concrete experiences, both positively and negatively. This is at odds with the idea that perceptions of administrative performance and attitude formation are not embedded in what government does (Van de Walle, 2004). Still, it is difficult to deduce any 'classic' key performance indicators that enhance trust. For example, the absolute processing time did not affect the satisfaction or trust of objectors. Both qualitative studies show that trust is not a broad social attitude, a general notion, or an abstract gauge of public opinion. It is an evidentiary phenomenon that changes with evidence in favour of or against it (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2015, 55). It is not rigid and can fluctuate continuously.

8.2.3.2 Reciprocity and polarity

The present study provides indications that trust between citizens and government works both ways. Both the focus group study and the interview study suggest an interplay of public trust in government and the government's trust in citizens. Such reciprocity can cause the relationship to go into a downward spiral, where both parties, when they interact, reinforce the image they have of each other. Mayer et al. (1995, 728) already proposed a model that showed 'the dynamic nature of trust', in which the outcome of the trusting behaviour affects trust through the perceptions of trustworthiness at the next interaction. Reciprocity, based on leadership literature, could be a fruitful topic for research (Schoorman et al., 2007, 347). In their research on citizens' reluctance to use online government tools, Dashti et al. (2009, 8) find evidence of such reciprocity when it comes to building trust in e-government, and 'felt trust', i.e. the

citizen's belief that he is trusted by government, is positively related to trust in e-government tools and to trust in government in general. Often, in research, the focus is on what governments can do to increase trust. However, the relationship consists of two parties and the citizen's perspective is still underexposed. Trust may be mutual and is perhaps broader than the one-sided image of one party in another. Several focus group participants address reciprocity as something that could contribute to improving their relationship with the government. They instead experience that the municipality acts as an opponent and prefers to cast disputes in a legal mould. Government letters are perceived to be more concerned with building up a legal defence than providing information, creating an image of conflict. This perception is not reserved to low-trust citizens. The latter fuels feelings of being opponents or even of hostility. *Perceived polarity* is detrimental to public trust. When public encounters are characterised by distrust in citizens, this can be mirrored by distrust in government. (Hupe, 2022, 307). Such communicative patterns stress the need for a different conversation (Bartels, 2015, 108), moving away from debate towards dialogue. The nature, tone, and conditions of conversations can diminish or promote the productiveness of communication (Bartels, 2015, 5), for example, when communication is aimed at defending one's own position or at finding common ground.

Reciprocity and polarity may differ per public domain. In the tax domain, the public and individual interest are more likely to conflict. Obviously, when interests are parallel, creating pleasurable relationships is easier. When it comes to taxation, the government cannot always simply trust citizens, or in other words, government must be strict in order to guarantee equality in taxation. Nevertheless, creating a sense of parallel interests, to the extent that the image of enmity is avoided, offers opportunities for improving the relationship, even in domains where the public interest is not in line with the individual interest. A closer consideration of individual interests can enhance understanding and perceptions of trustworthiness. Citizens benefit from a harmonious relationship with the government as it helps create a sense of belonging. Among low-trust citizens who feel left out, antagonistic ideas of government allure. Informal encounters lend themselves well to such

reciprocity. When citizens can share their arguments as to why a decision is incorrect, 'felt trust' by the official can be experienced. By voicing arguments, they experience that their word is valuable to local government too. Without any direct or personal interactions, there is little room for (felt) trust to develop.

8.2.3.3 Distributive and procedural justice theory

Increasing public trust is no easy task. Still, under favourable circumstances, it is possible. The present study has yielded several insights into the participation and trust relationship that have implications for theory. Citizens object because they disagree with a certain decision, which they often perceive to be unfair. The question then is which form of justice is best suited to remove or reduce that sense of injustice, and thereby improve perceptions of government. This study reveals that the evaluation of the encounter (satisfaction) is strongly related to future expectations (trust). Evidently, citizens who obtain a favourable result are more often satisfied. However, a sense of procedural fairness is additionally needed for trust to grow. A sense of procedural fairness helps prevent a trust drop when citizens cannot be met in their requests. Both distributive and procedural justice-related factors thus occupy an important place in maintaining and enhancing trust. It is notable that satisfaction among formal objectors does not translate into more trust, whereas a trust increase does occur after informal encounters. Somehow, during formal encounters *customization* is experienced less. Although customisation in government decisions can be in contrast to legal equality, within a set legal framework, experiences of personalised encounters do offer opportunities to enhance trust. Citizens tend to appreciate customisation to such an extent that it can increase their trust. Key elements of customisation are the directness of the interaction and personal contact with an official. The *direct interaction*, in which a citizen gives immediate input and receives an immediate response, increases mutual understanding. This is in line with deliberative democracy theory. Moreover, the directness of the encounter can give citizens a sense of control over the decision and the outcome in an otherwise dependent situation. This is in line with the self-interest model of procedural justice, in which process control is associated with outcome control (Lind & Tyler,

1988, 222). When such a direct interaction does not take place, citizens are left with a feeling that decisions ‘happen to them’. Moreover, *personal contact* with a civil servant most often leads to the image of a trustworthy official. The more concrete experiences get, the more positively they are assessed (Goodsell, 1994, 139). In the absence of a tangible official, the image of a distant, impenetrable, and abstract government remains.

The distinction between formal and informal modes of contact is endogenous and thus limited to the objection procedure. Public encounters and participation encompass much more than such procedures. In cases of public encounters that do not aim for an individual outcome, the importance of procedural and distributive justice may be different. When encounters do not pursue a concrete outcome but concern the collective, the process may gain importance. Still, under the conditions that: 1. a citizen is dependent on 2. the judgement of the government that 3. affects his personal situation, the results of this study can apply. Procedural and distributive justice transcend the specific subject matter of a procedure, and their role in maintaining and enhancing public trust is likely to be applicable to (legal) procedures in other domains as well. For example, the effect of a favourable outcome and the sense of customisation, personalised encounters, and directness of interactions. The focus group data also show that disappointment with participation is municipal-wide. Remarkably, the experiences the respondents mention are not restricted to real estate assessment, but nearly all do have to do with their immediate living environment, leaving out a multitude of other public domains. This suggests that the government-citizen relationship may fall into certain categories within which imagery takes place.

In sum, for a government to influence public trust, there must be a concrete view of government. When government is an abstract and distant notion, the effect of whatever it does –whether it is its openness, performance, or fairness– on public trust remains limited. The public perception is then based on other things, maintaining the discrepancy between institutional practices and public perceptions.

8.3 Limitations

THIS research has its limitations. On the one hand, the results may not reflect all parts of government or be applicable to all the different roles citizens have in relation to government. The choices made in the research design each have their limitations as well.

8.3.1 Generalizability

8.3.1.1 Government context

The relationship between open government and public trust has been examined in the context of local government and, more specifically, in the context of real estate assessment and taxation. The question is whether the results from this study within this domain can also apply to the central government. Trust in the municipality is not the same as trust in the central government, and its determinants may differ as well. The municipality is a rather concrete administrative body of which citizens form an image based on concrete experiences, whereas central government is a more abstract entity, and most national administrative bodies largely operate out of citizens' sight. Public encounters have potential, yet they are much more likely to take place at the local level than at the central level. When citizens have no concrete experience with a government organisation, they are more likely to base their perceptions on other things than what the government actually does. Media coverage, for example, may then serve as a heuristic for trust in government. The results from this study in this specific domain, in which citizens are able to speak out of concrete experiences as all of them at least received an assessment notice, may therefore not be fully applicable to more abstract public domains. Building public trust through government acts appears even more difficult, and the discrepancy between institutional openness and perceived openness may even be more present at the national level. Although the national government has more resources to convey messages to the general public, at the same time, it is more difficult to tailor the message to the variety of user needs. In national government too, institutional openness may not easily translate into openness perceptions. Even within local government, it is important to consider the context of the public service, as the specific service relationship may determine citizen attitudes and perspectives. Lastly, these findings in the Dutch socio-cultural and political context may

differ from other national cultures. In the Netherlands, there is a low power distance and a generally direct communication style, in which openness may be less likely to act as a 'power-reducing mechanism' or have an effect on trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013, 583). Similarities and differences between public contexts need to be taken into consideration when reading the results.

8.3.1.2 Citizen roles

Moreover, citizen roles differ. A citizen can be a beneficiary of public services or a taxpayer, a municipal or a national resident, and a voter or a protester. These roles can influence attitudes and perceptions. Although no clear pattern emerged from the demographical factors in this study and no profile can be made of a high- or low-trust citizen on the basis of these characteristics, home owners' relation to local government differs from that of disadvantaged citizens who claim welfare benefits and have to deal with a national agency. It is likely that the level of dependency on government and *power inequalities* create different types of encounters, possibly with different effects on trust. Per role, the stakes involved differ, as do the degree of dependence and the ratio between the public interest and the individual interest. Vulnerable citizens have both a collective level of interest and a personal level of interest that makes them adopt a fair state, service state, or surveillance state perspective (Lips 2010, 286). The question remains how procedural and distributive fairness relate to each other when the degree of dependency increases. Dependent vulnerable groups may not experience encounters as equal and open dialogues but as an unequal negotiation in which their eligibility for financial aid is at stake (Oldenhof & Linthorst, 2022, 206). Moreover, not everyone has an interest in public issues. Citizens who are active offline are also more likely to engage online (Schmidhuber et al., 2017, 465), yet digital competence and electronic literacy may differ across demographic lines (Hupe, 2022, 215). High technology-savvy online users are likely to have more opportunities to participate, as is high literacy. Both factors influence one's accessibility to public information and its benefits (Moon, 2020, 544), and the combination of both is required for active citizenship. The group of citizens that actively participates and co-produces may be small. This study

is unable to uncover possibly different perceptions of citizens in other public domains.

The specific context of this study in the context of home ownership and taxation is not only very personal, it also involves a financial interest, which is not the case in all relationships with the government. The taxpayers' direct self-interest and the subsequential view of local government as a service provider, may make citizens more critical of government and may cause them to attach more value to municipal performance than to municipal openness. When more general, less tangible public goals are pursued, openness about decision making may play a more important role in public trust than performance. At the same time, a strong sense of self-interest makes citizens more involved in what the government does, making the degree of openness more likely to be recognised. If institutional openness does not lead to perceived openness among tax payers, it is reasonable to argue it may not enhance trusting perceptions in other roles or administrative contexts either. However, this study cannot provide a definitive answer to the influence of varying citizen roles on the relationship between openness and public trust. This means that not all the results can be generalized to citizens with other characteristics. Participants with a low social-economic status may need to juggle the contradictory roles of either an active citizen or a passive client of public services (Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019, 1640). In those encounters, citizens might not see themselves as co-producers and may pay attention to different 'trustworthiness cues' than tax payers. Although in this sample of home owners in the context of local taxation, the perspective of the municipality as a service provider emerges, the effect of agency and clientship on trust would need further examination. Lastly, older age groups are overrepresented among the sample in this study. In public encounters, younger respondents may be better used to and more satisfied with digital modes of communication, such as an app (Prokop & Tepe, 2022, 438), than for example, a conversation over the telephone or 'paper procedures'. When it comes to creating satisfaction and trust, different age groups may require different encounters.

8.3.2 Research design choices

Research designs, conceptualizations, and operationalizations of both public trust and open government in the literature are so fragmented that it comes as no surprise that different outcomes are observed. The present survey study opted to come up with a measurement that was the best possible representation of practices, by including all institutional openness measures that citizens can actually encounter. However, this measure has not contributed to unity in the research field. Moreover, merging multiple elements of 'institutional openness' may cause possible effects to fade because citizens may not be able to recognise the degree of openness of the measures equally. It may thus be better not to strive for completeness yet to concentrate on the effects of specific elements of openness separately. Although the survey research attempted to make the relationship between openness and trust concrete and measurable by limiting it to one specific municipal domain, the qualitative studies also show that other municipal experiences influence the image of the municipality as well. Moreover, in a 'real world' context, many exogenous factors cannot be controlled. This complicates distilling specific determinants of trust, such as openness. For example, negative coverage may overrule a possible positive effect of institutional openness (Worthy, 2013, 405). The generally negative media coverage is not part of this study, as the choice was made to focus on what the government can do to promote public trust.

Moreover, this study aimed at combining methods that reinforce each other, yet the design still has its limitations. For example, the effect of data insight on public trust has not been addressed outside of the survey study. Whether certain data characteristics may be decisive in determining an effect, the survey alone is unable to answer. An experimental design would be better able to provide therein. Another limitation of the survey study is the general issue of causality. Although citizens are questioned about their trust after openness measures have been implemented, the survey cannot fully establish whether municipal openness was consulted and assessed first. The interaction between trust and openness, whereby trust also influences openness perceptions, cannot therefore be ruled out.

Participants in all sub-studies are generally involved citizens who find it important to make a contribution to public administration. Not all citizens are consciously concerned with their relationship with the government or their general perceptions thereof. Although attempts were made to mitigate this bias, for example, by empanelling all focus groups with both high and low trust citizens and with different levels of experience, a self-selection bias cannot be ruled out. For both the focus groups and the interviews, the group of respondents is not large. For uncovering mechanisms this does not constitute a problem. However, it does mean that no general statements can be made about the extent to which the mechanisms occur. The interviews give a voice to participants and provide a rich insight into their perception creation. Yet for comprehension purposes, the qualitative analyses are moulded into charts. At times, objectors are then divided into categories, which in reality are not so black and white. For example, the division between being 'happy' or 'unhappy' with the outcome, while there may be a partial result with which they are 'moderately happy'. Their stories provide clear common themes, yet they risk losing personal nuances. Translating complex real-world processes into understandable overviews or schemes risks unwarranted complexity reduction. Even when general mechanisms become apparent, individual nuances should not be overlooked when reading the qualitative results. In general, not everything always applies.

8.4 Suggestions for further research

8.4.1 Discrepancy between conceptualisations

The contemplation about public trust in government is far from complete. Gaining a full understanding of the relationship between openness and trust necessitates the repetition of studies in other public domains, among other target groups, and in other countries. As the administrative context and the citizen role may influence the relationship, a recommendation for further research would be to shed light on these differences. Simultaneously, the research field would benefit from more unity to make study results more comparable. The field is still fragmented as both openness and trust operationalizations greatly vary, preventing studies from being comparable, let alone create consensus on their effect on trust. The silver lining is that more unity arises regarding the public trust

measure. Although public trust is always affected by a combination of factors, when it comes to the effect of openness on trust, it may be better to focus on openness indicators separately, instead of an accumulation of open government indicators, as their aggregation may fade their effect. An important point of attention in future research on open government and public trust is the way in which openness is conceptualized. Much of what the government does is not seen or recognised by citizens. If openness doesn't get across, it cannot affect perceptions. Yet, openness perceptions are more important to trust than institutional openness. Including both provides a more integral research model on the relationship between openness and public trust. This can provide more insight into their discrepancy and how they can be connected. The link between the two is still unexplored territory, yet aligning perceptions with practices may be a crucial step towards building trust. Moreover, this study indicates the existence of a digi-paradox. Although digitalization increases openness practices that aim to increase efficiency and user-convenience, somehow openness perceptions linger. As further digitalization is inevitable, research into how digital interactions with government can be designed in such a way that the image of openness can keep up, is crucial. The relationship between digitalization and public trust is an essential topic throughout all aspects of government and remains relevant.

8.4.2 Valorisation and the citizen perspective

Although perception studies in a real world context are not without problems, public administration research merits continued attention to valorization. To this end, the citizen perspective can be a valuable source. Their rich qualitative complement has proved to be of great added value to the quantitative findings. Moreover, there are indications of a supporting role of reciprocity in the formation of public trust. The citizen perspective can contribute to knowledge on how reciprocity takes shape. The discrepancy between openness practices and perceptions, the qualitatively identified mechanisms, such as transparency disuse or disappointment, and the experienced customisation in procedures require further examination of perceptions as well. Public encounters have the ability to change trust, yet the insights obtained from the interviews with formal and informal objectors are just the beginning. Why these types of

encounters are experienced so differently and what creates perceptions of customisation and control can be fruitful topics for further research in other types of encounters too. More attention could be paid to the effect of communicative aspects of encounters on public trust, such as non-verbal communication, opportunities to speak freely, or even rituals (Bartels, 2013, 477).

It could also be that perceptions are formed differently when direct self-interest is involved as compared to pursuing public goals. As participants' objectives differ per domain, other factors may be dominant in enhancing trust. Still, elements of procedural and distributive justice may also be present in public encounters outside legal procedures and in other types of participation. Differences and similarities in the formation of trust merit further exploration. Repetition within the tax domain can be insightful as well, in relation to the rise of 'sovereign' tax refusers. This study merely presents a snapshot of objectors. Subsequent groups that are larger and have a different composition, in a dynamic housing market and in an ever-changing public domain can certainly provide additional insights. Trust is not static, nor may be its origins.

8.5 Implications of new insights for practice

SCIENCE cannot always provide for practice' desire for ready-made solutions. The task of science, however, is to provide insights. Subsequently, it is up to practice to convert these insights into policy, which they can do in the way they see fit. As any practical recommendations risk extending beyond the findings, this section is limited to concrete insights from this study and their practical implications. If anything becomes clear from the qualitative studies, it is that *the* citizen does not exist. Any statement about the citizen should be approached with caution, as it does not do justice to the citizen's diversity.

8.5.1 Continuous attention to citizens' perceptions

Paying closer attention to *openness perceptions* offers opportunities to build trust. Many openness strategies are based on what government can or should do to pursue more openness implementations, whereas perceptions of openness still linger. Policy is devised and implemented by civil servants, yet their experience and expertise can make it difficult to

fully empathize with the situation of individual citizens. A closer consideration of what citizens want serves as a first step towards better communication. Public sector communication is recognised as 'goal-oriented communication that enables public sector functions within specific settings for the purpose of building and maintaining the public good and trust between citizens and authorities' (Luoma-Aho & Canel, 2020, 458).

Contrary to popular belief, this study does not show that the use of an administrative organisation increases the distance between citizens and the government, neither in terms of institutional openness nor in trust. Many government organisations already try to be open and transparent. Still, there is room for improvement, as even local governments can be experienced as anonymous entities to which no direct access is possible. For example, complicated language use and rigid references to digital communication channels are perceived as ways to keep citizens at a distance. Citizens tend to miss the non-anonymous official in their encounters with local government. More digital possibilities to provide data or contact channels, do not necessarily result in higher perceptions of openness. Still, mitigating this digi-paradox by bringing back a human face to the municipality, may be a matter of imagery rather than reducing automation. Even though parts of citizen-government interactions can and will be automated further, human contact in those interactions remains indispensable (Hupe, 2022, 229). Smart use of technology that retains the feeling of personal contact. Such choices start with an interest in what citizens experience, expect, and need from local government.

Moreover, the increased complexity of government decisions as a result of complicated automated decision-making processes, can weaken support for the system. This development is certainly broader than that of local government. Complexity reinforces feelings of elusiveness among citizens. Even the word *algorithm* seems to have taken on a negative connotation. The use of algorithms can increase perceptions of opaque government processes in which data are entered and then a number is produced. The hope is that the creation of the Dutch 'algorithm register' can change the image of automated processes for the better. The Dutch courts already try to get a grip on the 'black box' behind government decisions and prescribe

guidelines for administrative bodies for providing more data from that box. The difficulty remains, however, that citizens may not benefit from more data when they simply want to obtain clarity. The legal field doesn't seem to have the proper handles to enhance the perceived grip on automated decision making just yet. A lack of grip on governmental decision making (the WOZ-value) undermines the *perceived legitimacy* of and trust in the system as a whole (taxation). In turn, when public trust in government decreases, so does the willingness to contribute to that government. This emphasises the importance of public trust for the acceptance of increasingly automated decision making in the future. The upside is that public trust is not static. It is something that government organisations and officials can continue to work on.

According to some, not so much more transparency but a simplification of decision making should improve the sense of grip and perceived legitimacy. In this societal call for simplification, the belief is that a simpler system is easier to control, less error-prone, and thereby more objective. However, most citizens cannot oversee that a 'simpler' system for distributing the tax burden also means a completely different distribution of taxes, perhaps a less equitable one. Even when they do, simplicity allures because of its explainability and controllability. While using automated decision-making processes, officials need to be able to properly fathom what is happening inside the black box in order to be able to explain to citizens how decisions are made. To quote a focus group attendee, *'It's a bit like having a calculator, at a certain point, you're unable to do the math yourself'*. Even officials long for more simplicity, as it is expected to lower the number of objections. This is, however, based on the misconception that public criticism should be avoided as much as possible. Critical citizens in particular, are able to make a valuable contribution to public administration. Instead of wanting to simplify government decisions, it would be better to invest in knowing how to explain them. Investing in such skills, requires the continuous attention of administrators.

8.5.2 Realistic expectations of institutional transparency

Local governments should have realistic expectations of transparency measures when it comes to promoting public trust. The present study offers little indication that any of the municipal transparency measures, actually result in more trust. Still, transparency does not hurt trust either. Institutional transparency can thus be pursued on the basis of other norms or values, such as wanting to be an open and transparent government or wanting to meet increasing public expectations regarding transparency. Public trust should, however, not be its core objective. In line with the literature, this study shows that the effect of institutional transparency on public trust is limited. The assumption that transparency is a remedy for distrust, is not supported. Distrust is not necessarily the result of a lack of information either. The causes of distrust tend to lie elsewhere, such as in disappointment with encounters. Negative experiences linger longer than positive ones. When it comes to promoting public trust, prevention is indeed the best cure. Opportunities to prevent a trust drop lie in the procedural aspects of encounters.

Nevertheless, when deploying transparency, it can be useful to consider the concept more broadly. One of the reasons that more institutional transparency does not translate into citizens' perceptions of transparency is because supply and demand do not match. It is a misconception that making more information proactively available, as is the philosophy of the new Dutch open government Law, will increase trust. Any FOI-law that is primarily used by the media is unlikely to enhance the public perception of government. Many citizens are passive information recipients, not active gatherers. When information does not reach recipients, their perceptions will not change. There is no point in increasing supply if it does not meet user-demand. Maintaining a one-sided notion of transparency as 'making information available', limits its effect. To increase the image of openness, attention needs to be paid to conveying transparency, through active delivery and giving context. This means providing relevant information and explaining why it is provided. 'Assisted information' helps prevent confusion. The government needs to continuously reflect on citizen demand and centre those in transparency programs instead of experts expectations of citizen needs. In general, active delivery, tuning in with

needs, and providing context are critical for transparency to come across and improve perceptions. People who do not look for additional information are generally more trusting. Simply increasing the group of users, does not seem the best strategy for promoting trust. As users of transparency are generally less trusting, aligning transparency with their needs can be a first step.

8.5.3 The potential of going informal

Governmental organisations have an opportunity to build trust through encounters. The informal route has shown to have potential to improve perceptions, as at times they are assessed so positively that they are able to increase trust. Procedural factors are as important as the outcome. Even when citizens' needs cannot be met, a sense of procedural fairness helps prevent a decrease in trust. This 'informal potential' can be utilised and explored further. Elements of informal encounters can be applied outside the framework of the objection procedure as well. For example, by creating a sense of customisation during encounters. The direct exchange of points of view increases mutual understanding and gives the citizen a greater sense of control over government decision making. *Communicative etiquette* such as taking the time to listen and making a sincere effort to address questions or resolve problems (Bartels, 2015, 201), can affect public perceptions. In addition to making informal options available, governments could do their best to persuade people to choose the informal route more often. Although it may seem in stark contrast to the image of the 'empowered' citizen, home owner, or tax payer, many citizens benefit from being guided in their encounters much more. Exactly how this is organised can be left up to the choice of local governments.

Another lesson practice can take away from the stories of the respondents is the strength of explaining why. It is of great added value to provide a reason, an understandable explanation, for why something is as it is. While this may seem obvious, often it is still missing. Explaining why –or what scientific literature refers to as 'providing rationale'–, appears crucial for the acceptance of decisions and affects the image of government. Providing rationale and the logic behind decisions helps create understanding and acceptance. Failure to do so, will leave citizens unsatisfied, regardless of the amount of data provided or whether the

decision is taken in accordance with relevant legislation, and *in that sense* just. Dissatisfaction goes hand in hand with distrust. Especially when failing to address genuine grievances, trust can drop. Not being able to meet all the wishes of citizens is a given. In those cases, providing rationale can counteract dissatisfaction and distrust.

Finally, civil servants need to be aware that what they say and do in their encounters influences public perceptions. In concrete terms, this means that one should try to have a dialogue instead of a debate and not rigidly stick to the preset rules of an encounter (Bartels, 2015, 10). The communicative capacity of both public professionals and citizens is imperative to the added value of participatory democracy (Bartels, 2015, 3). Reciprocity in the trust relationship between government and the public can be used to the benefit of officials. In public encounters, it is important to minimise feelings of conflict and instead emphasise where the public interest coincides with the individual's interest.

There are indications that 'felt trust by government' increases public trust in government. For example, by relying on the correctness of the information provided by citizens in appropriate situations. The boundaries of where this is possible differ per domain. Still, consideration can be given to this strategy. Change starts with administrators who understand the importance of promoting trust and the opportunities that public encounters can offer. Facilitative leaders are needed to facilitate encounters that help civil servants enhance mutual understanding, satisfaction, and trust. Trust can be built on 'the ground floor of government' (Hupe, 2022, 229). The good news for civil servants, who are generally considered to be benevolent and integer professionals, is that they can contribute to promoting public trust, even though it is not an easy job. Improving public opinion as a whole may be hard-won, but at the micro-level, building trust is feasible. One person at a time.