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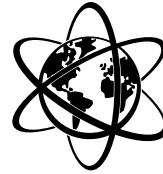
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## Trust in the public sector: is there any evidence for a long-term decline?

*Steven Van de Walle, Steven Van Roosbroek and Geert Bouckaert*

### Abstract

Concerns with declining public trust in government have become a permanent element of the contemporary political discourse. This concern also extends to levels of citizens' trust in the public administration and public services. Trust is said to be declining, and this decline is generally seen as detrimental to public service delivery. In this article, we examine the main elements in this discussion, review the existing international survey data and summarize the main findings for Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Citizens' trust in the public sector is found to fluctuate, and the data generally do not show consistently declining levels of trust. Furthermore, in some countries there simply are insufficient data to come to any conclusions at all about time trends in citizen trust in the public sector.

### Points for practitioners

This article summarizes some of the survey material on citizens' trust in the public administration. It allows practitioners to compare trends in public trust in their country across time and space. The findings lead us to reject the hypothesis of a universal decline of trust in the public sector. The article warns against using opinion poll results without considering context. The long-term and comparative perspective on citizens' trust in the public sector is all too often absent from the policy discourse that is frequently based on assumptions and ad hoc approaches.

**Keywords:** citizen–government relations, comparative public administration, public opinion, trust in government

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## Introduction: declining trust in the public sector?<sup>1</sup>

The debate on citizens' trust in the public sector is dominated by scattered observations, single opinion polls and a lack of historical perspective. Many policy-makers and indeed academics tend to rely on just one single event or poll to support their opinion of how citizens see the public sector. The debate is dominated by many assumptions, few of which can stand detailed empirical and theoretical scrutiny. The most common misconception is that there is a tendency among citizens to have an increasingly deteriorating view of the public sector, and the public services more specifically. The reason most commonly cited for this dislike is the public sector's failure to perform.

Certain public services undoubtedly enjoy low levels of public esteem. In their international comparison of civil service systems, the authors in Bekke and van der Meer's *Civil Service Systems in Western Europe* showed a generally positive attitude towards the civil service in countries such as Ireland or Norway, but a far less positive attitude in other European countries. Furthermore, they noticed a deteriorating situation (Bekke and van der Meer, 2000). To what extent these attitudes towards the public sector rest on actual performance of public services and administrations or on pre-established stereotypes remains unclear: 'Apparently, the present opinion on government performance has more to do with the image of government than with an observation of facts. It is this image that subsequently becomes the starting point for actions of political actors' (Ringeling, 1993: 225, author's translation). Adams and Marini (1995: 70) speak about a *bureaupathology*: 'The popular understanding of bureaucracy portrays the essence of bureaucracy in terms that a serious student might characterise as bureaupathology. That is, the word "bureaucracy" commonly conveys none of the theory of bureaucracy and its functionality; rather, it conveys the perversions and dysfunctions of bureaucracy as though these were its essence.'

What is needed in the debate on citizens' attitudes towards the public sector is the broader perspective, both in time and in space. In this article, therefore, we summarize the most important internationally comparable opinion data on citizens' trust in government and in the public sector more specifically. Rather than analysing drivers of citizen trust in the public sector, we review the existing survey data to check whether they actually support the assumptions of a long-term decline in public trust, and whether this decline also manifests itself with regard to the public administration. Our focus will be mainly on European and North American countries. Occasionally, we will refer to some non-Western OECD countries. We will focus strictly on trust in national government or public administration, and will not discuss satisfaction with specific services.

We start by summarizing some of the common explanations in the literature for declining trust in government and the public sector. We then look at long-term trends in overall trust in government by using Eurobarometer and some specific national-level data. Subsequently, we give a more detailed look at the public administration and civil service to check whether we actually see a decline in citizen trust in the public administration.

## Citizens' distrust in the public sector: common explanations

The debate on trust in the public sector has revolved around a number of issues that continue reappearing. Most notable are issues such as government performance or rising expectations. Often, the debate is influenced by the flavour of the month: citizens distrust the public sector because governments have not fully embraced e-government, because the third sector is not sufficiently involved in delivery, because government has not developed partnerships to deliver services, because politicians have too much or too little say in appointing leading officials, etc. It may be obvious that these fashionable explanations are unsatisfying because of their failure to explain the recurrence of the debate and the international dimension of the phenomenon.

Some explanations for the perceived or real decline of trust in the public administration and of trust in government more generally, however, are well established in the literature, and have been tested extensively and have often proved their merits. Below, we briefly introduce some of these factors, without pretensions of being exhaustive.

### *Explanations related to the functioning and role of the public sector*

The most common explanation for the perceived decline in public trust in government and in the public sector is that government and the public sector fail to perform. Outputs and outcomes are below standard, efficiency and effectiveness are low, and governments fail to deliver what they promise. Increasing performance is therefore seen as a way of restoring trust in government. Theoretically, the relation between performance and trust is far from obvious and unlikely to work in a direct and mechanical way (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). Empirically, many problems emerge when studying this relation, because of difficulties in measuring the performance of the public sector as a whole. The evidence is also far from conclusive. The most notable study is *The Trouble with Government* by Derek Bok (2001). He investigated the relationship between declining trust in government and government performance in the United States. He found results to be very mixed, with performance either difficult to measure, or not declining. Others have also challenged the belief that government performance has declined (Light, 2002). Actually, while we may be critical of specific aspects of government performance, few will dispute the progress the public sector has made in many countries in recent decades, thanks to or despite a wide range of reforms. Yet, Bok adds one important qualification. While he did not find conclusive evidence for a decline in performance in the US, he did observe a decline relative to other countries: 'the United States has not progressed as far or as fast as other advanced democracies toward goals commonly shared by people everywhere' (Bok, 1997: 65). While this may be a very useful ad hoc explanation for the US, it does not explain similar debates in other countries.

An alternative performance-related hypothesis is that while government performance may not have decreased, citizens' perceptions of this performance may have (Bok, 1997, 2001). While citizens are generally quite good at evaluating the performance of a number of public services they use, their knowledge of what certain specific public agencies or even government in general do, is notoriously unreliable. Yet, establishing cause-effect relations is tricky: do citizens distrust the public sector

because it is seen not to perform, or do they think it does not perform because they don't trust it in the first place? Evidently, by analysing this relationship, we are entering a methodological quagmire, because distinguishing between 'perceptions of the performance of the public sector' and 'trust in the public sector' in surveys is harder than it may look at first sight.

This perception of a decline in performance may be due to a number of factors: citizens may use different standards to evaluate performance or may want other types of performance, their perception may be heavily influenced by ad hoc information such as scandals, or it may be influenced by negative media reporting and politicians' bureau-bashing behaviour.

The public sector in many Western countries has been through many reforms in recent years, but citizens and society have changed as well. This has led to a series of new demands which government cannot necessarily fulfil. These demands are not only different qualitatively, e.g. participatory demands by citizens (see later), but also quantitatively, resulting in government overload (Borre and Scarbrough, 1995). Furthermore, citizens may consider the public administration as a powerless institution, because it is unable to solve the new problems society is faced with in a context of globalization.

Another explanation for changes in perceptions of the performance of the public sector is the mediation of citizens' perceptions through the media. While negative reporting has received considerable attention with respect to political distrust (Cappella and Hall Jamieson, 1997), it has generally been neglected in research on trust in the public sector (with some exceptions, see e.g. Council for Excellence in Government, 2001). A more popular approach has been to look at the impact of scandals. Political scandals are known to affect citizens' trust in government, albeit not necessarily in the long term (Chanley et al., 2000; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003). The same probably holds for public sector scandals and trust in the public sector. Yet, there is no empirical evidence that there has actually been an increase in scandals across democracies. Alternatively, however, and related to what we said about media reporting, it is possible that the public's attention to scandals has increased, or that more scandals are uncovered while the actual number of dishonest government officials has remained the same (or even decreased). Some anecdotal evidence exists pointing in this direction (Orren, 1997).

A final and related explanation is bureaucrat bashing, or unjustified attacks on government employees (Goodsell, 2000). Quite often, politicians try to take the credit for policies that work, and shift the blame for policies that don't. In the latter category, 'bureaucrats' are a popular target. Yet, we have little information about whether there are evolutions in the extent of the phenomenon (Hall, 2002). While stating that bureaucrat bashing has become a more common way to generate popular support in election campaigns, Haque (1998) also admits that these attacks have always existed. For this reason, we feel that bureaucrat bashing may well be able to help explain negative stereotypes about the public administration, but that it is not necessarily good at explaining trends in distrust in the public sector.

### *Explanations related to evolutions in society*

A second series of explanations does not look at the public sector, but relates attitudes towards the public sector to broader evolutions in society. Citizens' distrust in the public sector is, in this approach, not something that should be studied by looking at the peculiarities of the public sector, government or public service delivery, but something that should be interpreted within broader societal trends. We distinguish between two major explanations. One is Inglehart's postmaterialism thesis and the resulting decline in deference for authority; the other is the posited decline in social capital and the resulting decrease in interpersonal trust.

Ronald Inglehart (1997a) described a shift in Western countries towards postmaterialist values, due to a generational change. Postmaterialists place an emphasis on different values, values related to self-expression and self-fulfilment. This distinguishes them from materialists, who did not take economic security for granted and were therefore less concerned about self-expression values. This shift implied greater participatory demands, an element touched upon earlier. Broad processes of bureaucratization in modern society as part of the modernization of society were gradually replaced by a movement towards debureaucratization. Authority, and big centralized organizations, came to be regarded with suspicion (Inglehart, 1997a: 78). Bureaucratic authority was rejected. This rejection was part of a general distrust and rejection of authority, which becomes especially visible in a decline in respect for hierarchical or order institutions such as the armed forces, the police and the church (Inglehart, 1999). The bureaucratic apparatus a modernist would have seen as 'good' because of its efficiency and procedures now alienates the postmodernist.

A second major development is the posited decline in social capital. During the last decade the amount of literature on 'social capital' has risen phenomenally. Putnam (1995, 2000) describes social capital as the 'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. He portrays waning organizational membership as a key reason for declining social trust. Distrust in government and in the public sector is in this approach not so much a result of what government does, but just reflects a broader decline in interpersonal trust. While popular, the social capital thesis is also controversial. First, the conceptualization of social capital and, subsequently, its measurement is often problematic, and has been a major source of criticism (Foley and Edwards, 1999). Second, the evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between social trust and trust in governmental institutions. Weak relationships are found, at best (Newton, 1999).

Some support for these broader explanations for the decline in trust is found in the observation that trust in institutions is of a 'general' nature. Christensen and Lægheid observe that 'a high level of trust in one institution tends to extend to other institutions' (Christensen and Lægheid, 2005: 487). The World Values Survey shows moderate to strong correlations between confidence in institutions that are not directly linked, such as major companies and the civil service. Correlations are especially high between trust in public administration and political institutions. Explanations for low or declining trust in the public sector should therefore not focus exclusively on what is happening in the public sector.

## A long-term decline of trust in government?

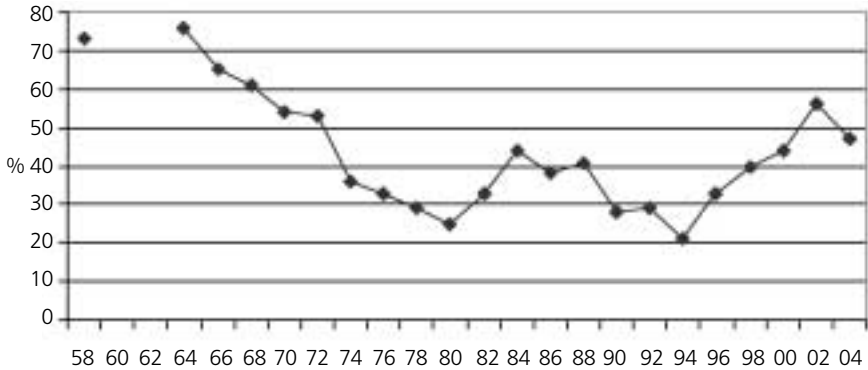
There is one important caveat with the explanations listed in the previous section. While many theoretical explanations for declining trust have been developed, the empirical data do not seem to support the basic assumption, that of a decline in citizen trust in the public sector. Opinions about citizens' trust in the public sector are often based on single polls, special events or crises, or beliefs in national exceptionalism and national stereotypes. Furthermore, there is a tendency to selectively refer to historical data trends and to levels of trust in the public sector in certain other countries. In what follows, we summarize the main findings of international survey research to show how citizens' attitudes towards the public sector have developed in OECD countries. The aim of this summary is not to explain trust, but merely to provide policy-makers with a useful historical and geographical framework to assist them interpret polls and surveys on citizen perceptions of the public sector.

The debate on the loss of trust in the public sector is generally framed within the broader debate of a declining trust in government. It is further fuelled by referring to cases of taxpayer revolt, privatization and demands for increased citizen involvement. The discourse of a wide and widening gap between citizens and government has become commonplace in political rhetoric and also in academic debate. When looking at many political writings, it looks as if democracy has always been in crisis (Dahrendorf, 2000), just as people have always been complaining about declining standards of today's youth. Some authors have seen a decline in confidence in some (Inglehart, 1997b) or almost all institutions (Newton and Norris, 2000), while others deny such a decline has taken place (Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995). Surprisingly, however, suitable time series data for proving the presence or absence of such a widening gap between citizens and government simply do not exist for many countries, or do not point in any clear direction.

Disagreement also exists about the meaning of levels of trust or changes therein. A certain level of distrust in government is healthy and may be functional because it keeps government accountable. Rather than striving for maximal trust, there appears to be an optimal level of trust that is contingent upon the political and administrative culture of a country. What is considered a high level of trust in one country may be considered low in another.

Referring to the US National Election Study has become an obligatory stop in trust in government research. This survey, organized in the USA since the late 1950s, shows that up to 70 percent of the respondents trusted government in the 1960s. In the early 1990s, this percentage had dropped to just 21 percent. While this looks like a dramatic change, looking at the entire time series reveals a much less distressing picture (see Figure 1). This figure does show that levels of trust are lower now than was the case in the 1960s, but it does not show a clear downward trend.

It is no surprise that some of the best-known publications on citizens' trust in government in the US have been written when levels of trust were historically low (Nye et al., 1997; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Current commentators, while referring to the findings in these books, have sometimes tended to neglect the increase in trust after 1994. Looking at the survey data between 1958 and 2004 in the USA mainly reveals a number of fluctuations rather than a straightforward decline.



Source: National Election Study. 'How much of the time can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?' Percentage saying just about always or most of the time, 1958–2004.

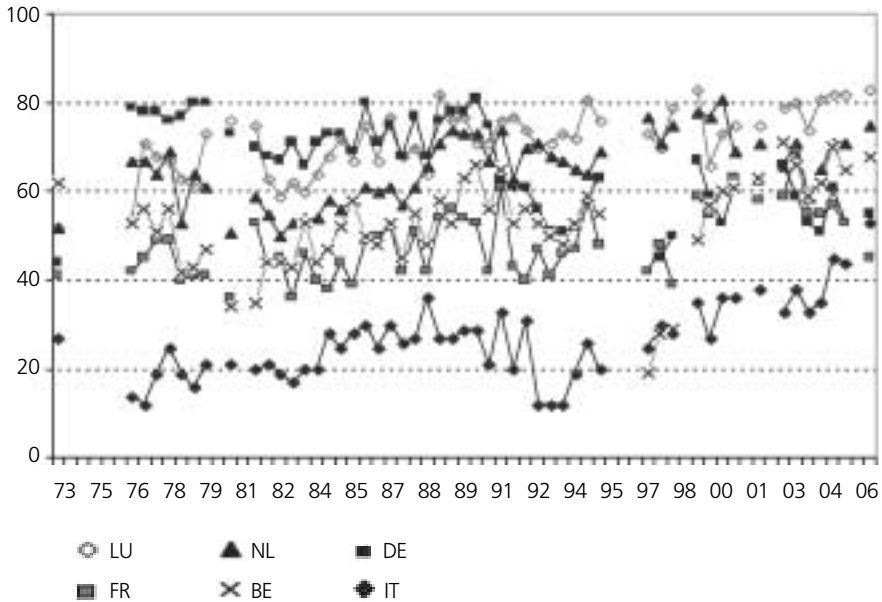
**Figure 1** Trust in government in the USA

Data going back further in time are scarce, but there are reasons to suggest that the high levels of trust in the 1960s may well have been an exception rather than a baseline for comparing current levels of trust. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995), for instance, used Gallup polls from the late 1940s which showed only 15 to 20 percent of Americans thought Congress was doing a good job.

Europe is another place where some detailed time series can be assembled. One of the few available data sources for cross-national time series is the European Commission's Eurobarometer. Since the Standard Eurobarometer surveys were first organized in the early 1970s they have contained a question about satisfaction with democracy, a question which is now often used as an indicator for trust in government: 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?' Satisfaction with democracy is far from perfect as an indicator for measuring and comparing trust in government (Kuechler, 1991; Holmberg, 1999; Canache et al., 2001; Linde and Ekman, 2003), but it remains one of the few available. In some European countries, other detailed time series are available (Weil, 1989), while in other countries such a survey tradition does not exist or started only recently. Around 1000 respondents in every EU country participate in the Eurobarometer surveys. The question on satisfaction with democracy is normally asked twice every year, leaving us with a very detailed picture that allows for international comparison. The wealth of available data forces us to make a selection of the most notable trends.

Overall, the 'satisfaction with democracy' time series do not show clear downward trends in satisfaction. Rather, the dominant finding is one of fluctuations in levels of satisfaction, and even upward tendencies in some countries. When there are declines, these are normally related to limited periods of time or to very specific events. Belgium experienced a sharp drop in satisfaction in the mid-1990s, related to the major Dutroux paedophilia scandal and the scandal's political fall-out, including one of the





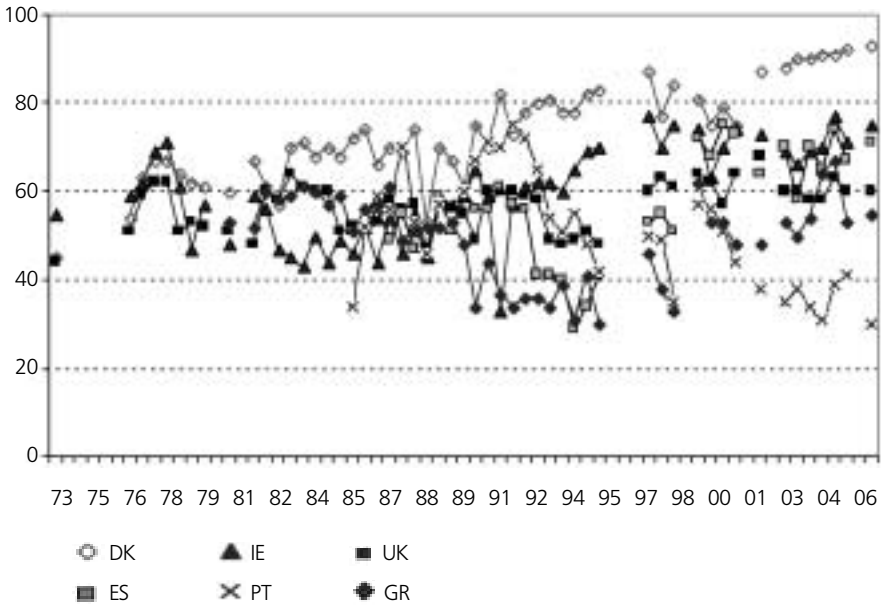
Source: European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer.

**Figure 2** Satisfaction with the way democracy works, % satisfied, moving average, 1973–2006, EU-6 countries<sup>2</sup>

country's biggest demonstrations ever. The decline in satisfaction in 1996 is actually the sharpest for all EU countries since measurement started. The Netherlands recently saw a decline in satisfaction, occurring shortly after the rise of the populist politician Fortuyn and the *Leefbaar* political parties, and the murder of the former in 2002. This decline is also visible in the surveys organized by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2005). Data for Germany show a rather misleading drop in confidence in the early 1990s, which is mainly due to the inclusion of data for East Germany which were not included before (Niedermayer, 2001). The decline in 1993 in Italy could be explained by the corruption scandals related to the *Tagetopoli* investigations (Suleiman, 2003: 77) (see Figure 2).

Some declines in Spain, Ireland and Portugal in the 1990s are difficult to explain. In Spain, there was an unexplained drop in 1993–94. There were a number of scandals in that period, but Montero et al. (1999) do not consider the decline significant. In Greece, there are quite strong fluctuations. The sharp decline in Portugal after 1991–92 is said to be partly due to the stability of the political situation between 1985 and 1991, and partly due to increasing political tension after that, joined by a sharp rise in unemployment.

Some countries have unmistakably seen positive evolutions in levels of satisfaction. The most notable example is that of Denmark, which has seen an almost permanently increasing level of satisfaction with democracy since measurement

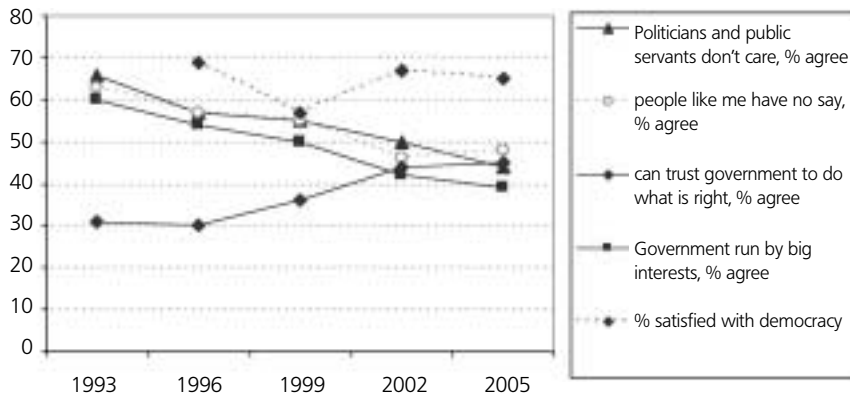


Source: European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer.

**Figure 3** Satisfaction with the way democracy works, % satisfied, 1973–2006, EU-6 countries

started. With more than 90 percent of the Danes now saying they are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, we can speak about a Danish exceptionalism. In other countries, we also see increases in satisfaction: the three Benelux countries, Ireland and France. Italy is still suffering from very low levels of satisfaction with democracy from a European perspective, but there is an unmistakably positive trend. Data are sketchier for Finland, Austria and Sweden because these countries joined the EU only in 1995, but the data thus far suggest an increase in satisfaction (not shown in the figure; see Figure 3).

Trends in countries other than the USA or European countries are less well documented. Researchers have to rely on a combination of data from several resources, or reconstruct time series by consulting various data archives. A single indicator that allows for cross-national comparisons is thus not available. In New Zealand, the New Zealand Election Study (see Figure 4) contains a number of items related to trust in government and in the democratic institutions. While not being very detailed, and only going back in time to just over a decade, we can clearly distil a positive trend since 1993. The number of citizens saying they can trust their government to do what is right is increasing, while fewer and fewer citizens think that government is run by big interests or that politicians and public servants don't care. Some additional information on New Zealand is available in a 2000 State Services Commission Working Paper (Barnes and Gill, 2000).



Source: New Zealand Election Study, <http://www.nzes.org>

**Figure 4** Evolution in (dis)trust, New Zealand, 1993–2005

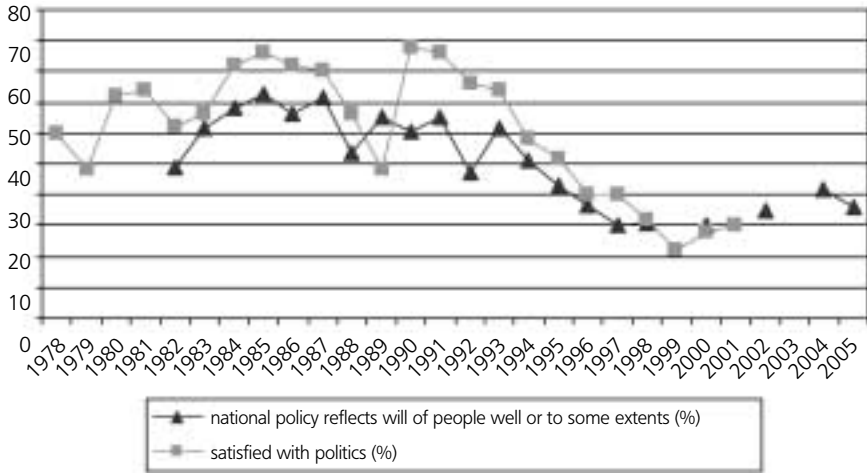
In Japan (see Figure 5), a time series can be reconstructed by relying on newspaper opinion polls. The political satisfaction indicator thus obtained clearly shows there has been a decline in political satisfaction between 1991 and 1999.

In many other countries, it is hard to very hard to find solid data to study trends in citizens' trust in government, or indeed other attitudes towards government. In Canada, despite the increasing amount of valuable data that have become available during the last decade, constructing a long-term trend is hard. We are constantly faced with changing question-wording and irregular surveys. The more recent data, however, tell us that negative attitudes towards political parties and the House of Commons are increasing, yet there has not been a generalized decline of confidence in representative institutions. There has been a significant increase in the number of people who believe that many in government are crooked, and that tax money gets wasted (Mendelsohn, 2002). In countries such as Korea or, surprisingly, Australia, finding time series data has proved to be very difficult. We can find data covering the latter half of the 1990s due to an increasing number of surveys and articles (Papadakis, 1999; Rose et al., 1999), but we can only occasionally go further back in time.

### Evolution in confidence in the civil service

We have shown that the evidence for a decline in citizens' trust in government over time is far from conclusive. Generally, we see fluctuations rather than trends. The debate on attitudes towards the public administration is generally framed within this broader debate. While we do not see trends in general trust in government, do we then see evolution in citizens' overall attitudes towards the public administration?

Unfortunately, the empirical material is not very detailed, or cannot be compared across countries. Coverage of public services in opinion surveys has generally been much more limited when compared to institutions such as, for example, parliaments (Bouckaert et al., 2005). In this section, we rely on two main sources. One is the World



Source: 'How well do you feel that national policy reflects the will of the people?' Prime Minister's Office, public opinion survey on society and state, Tokyo, Foreign Press Center. 'In general, are you satisfied with politics today, or are you dissatisfied?' Somewhat satisfied + satisfied. Note that there have been frequent changes in question wording. Asahi Shimbun Tokyo Morning Edition. We use the statistics for December, except for 1989 and 1991. Figure based on statistics assembled by Pharr (1997, 2000), and by Keiichi Muto and Masao Kikuchi.

**Figure 5** Evolution in trust in Japan, 1978–2005

Values Survey. Originally organized as the European Values Study, this survey now covers around 80 societies (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>). Data have been collected in different waves since 1981. The other source is again the Eurobarometer.

The World Values Survey contains a series of questions on value change in societies. Some of these questions deal with confidence in institutions. One of these measures confidence in the civil service, measured on a four-point scale. In Table 1, we show the percentage of respondents in the OECD countries expressing 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the civil service, in the subsequent waves. In the penultimate column, countries are ranked according to their score.

The results show large differences between the OECD member countries. Confidence is rather low in countries such as Greece, Japan, Mexico and the Czech Republic. On the other hand, we see very high levels of confidence in the civil service in Turkey, Korea, Luxembourg and Ireland. When we compare levels of confidence over time, we do not see any overarching trends. In many countries, levels of confidence in the civil service remain remarkably stable when we compare the earliest measurement to the most recent one (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain, USA). In some countries there is a decline (Australia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Korea, Norway, Poland, Northern Ireland), while in others confidence increased over time (Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, Turkey). A universal decline has not taken place, as far as

**Table 1** Confidence in the civil service, World Values Survey, OECD countries, % showing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the civil service

Country/region, % confidence	1995–				Evolution	Rank	N in last wave
	1981	1990	97	2000	1981–99/ 2000	in last wave	
Australia	47		38		↓	23	(n=2005)
Austria		42		42	=	18	(n=1438)
Belgium	46	42		45	=	17	(n=1853)
Canada	51	50		50	=	11	(n=1851)
Czech Republic		34		22	↓	29	(n=1869)
Denmark	47	51		55	↑	6	(n=978)
Finland	53	33	34	41	↓	19	(n=1009)
France	52	49		46	↓	14	(n=1574)
Germany	32	38	48	39	↑	21	(n=1954)
Great Britain	47	46		46	=	14	(n=903)
Greece				14		31	(n=1129)
Hungary	74	50		50	↓	11	(n=953)
Iceland	34	46		56	↑	5	(n=944)
Ireland	54	59		59	=	3	(n=973)
Italy	27	25		33	↑	25	(n=1944)
Japan	31	34	38	32	=	27	(n=1249)
Republic of Korea	88	61	78	67	↓	1	(n=1149)
Luxembourg				59		3	(n=1097)
Mexico	23	28	41	22	=	29	(n=1353)
Netherlands	44	46		37	↓	24	(n=985)
New Zealand			29			28	(n=1082)
Northern Ireland	59	57		52	↓	9	(n=904)
Norway	58	44	51		↓	10	(n=1116)
Poland		79	35	33	↓	25	(n=1008)
Portugal		36		54	↑	8	(n=917)
Slovakia		30		39	↑	21	(n=1225)
Spain	39	35	42	41	=	19	(n=2290)
Sweden	46	44	45	49	=	13	(n=941)
Switzerland			46			14	(n=1137)
Turkey		50	67	60	↑	2	(n=4,507)
United States of America	58	60	51	55	=	6	(n=1133)

Source: CD-rom; ICPSR 2790, World Values Surveys and European Values Studies, 1981–84, 1990–93 and 1995–97, 1st ICPSR version, February 2000. Values for Germany in 1981, 1990 and 1995 refer to West Germany only. Opinions measured separately for Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

available data allow us to conclude (see also Stoyko, 2002). This contradicts the commonly held belief that confidence in the civil service is constantly declining.

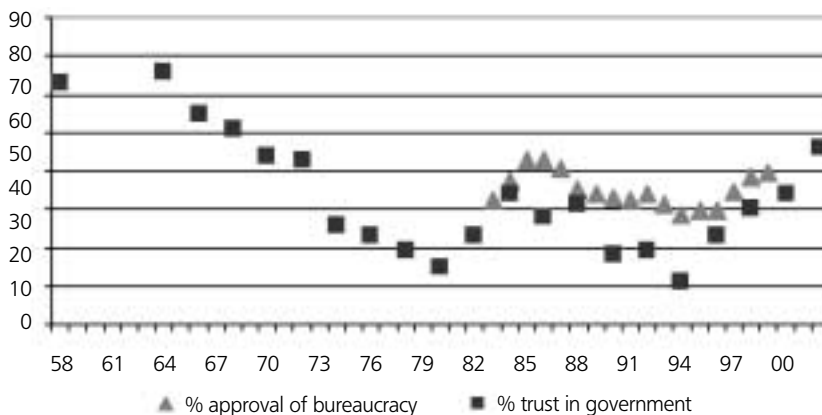
We can now explore more detailed recent evolutions in some EU countries. Since the autumn of 1994, the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer (EB) regularly contained survey questions on trust in the institutions (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Trust in the civil service, OECD member countries covered in Eurobarometer

Country	Autumn 1997	Spring 1999	Autumn 2000	Spring 2001	Autumn 2001	Spring 2002	Autumn 2002	Spring 2003
Austria	65	65	64	69	68	66		
Belgium	29	37	41	46	52	51		
Czech Republic					36		28	29
Denmark	58	50	55	57	58	60		
Finland	38	43	50	46	43	43		
France	47	44	51	49	46	45		
Germany	37	43	46	48	45	45		
Greece	42	43	31	31	34	31		
Hungary					42		46	44
Ireland	61	61	64	62	62	64		
Italy	24	27	31	27	28	29		
Luxemburg	57	51	65	63	61	64		
Netherlands	58	57	52	52	59	55		
Poland					28		34	30
Portugal	34	44	37	44	50	47		
Slovakia					30		29	37
Spain	37	39	51	44	46	43		
Sweden	50	45	52	51	56	60		
Turkey					52		21	27
UK	46	44	46	45	45	48		

Source: European Commission, Candidate Countries Eurobarometer and Standard Eurobarometer. *N* is approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per EU member state (except Germany: 2000, Luxembourg: 600, United Kingdom 1300 including 300 in Northern Ireland).

Between 1997 and 2002, a question on trust in the civil service was included, asking whether respondents tended to trust it or not. The figures show evolutions in a number of EU countries. Of all EU countries, trust in the civil service is highest in Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands, where more than 55 percent of the population trusts the civil service. In Belgium, we see one of the strongest increases in trust of all EU countries: while just 29 percent trusted the civil service in 1997, this increased to 51 percent in 2002. In Southern European countries, levels of trust are lower overall, with a mere 30 percent trusting the civil service in Italy, but patterns in the region are quite diverse. A decline occurred in Greece after 1999, and there is a slight upward trend in Portugal. Levels of trust are traditionally quite high in the Scandinavian countries, and increasing in Sweden. Apart from Scandinavia, we find similar high levels of trust only in Luxembourg, Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands. Surprisingly, with just 43 percent in 2002, trust in the civil service is quite low in Finland. In Turkey, trust in the civil service halved from 52 percent in 2001 to 27 percent in 2003. Trust is exceptionally high in Hungary: among Central and Eastern European countries, only in Estonia is it higher.



Source: National Election Studies (<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/>); (Webb Yackee & Lowery, 2005).

**Figure 6** Trust in government index and approval of the bureaucracy, USA, 1958–2002

Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer does not give us more recent data, but again the general picture becomes clear: There are important differences between countries, but only very occasionally we can see real trends over time.

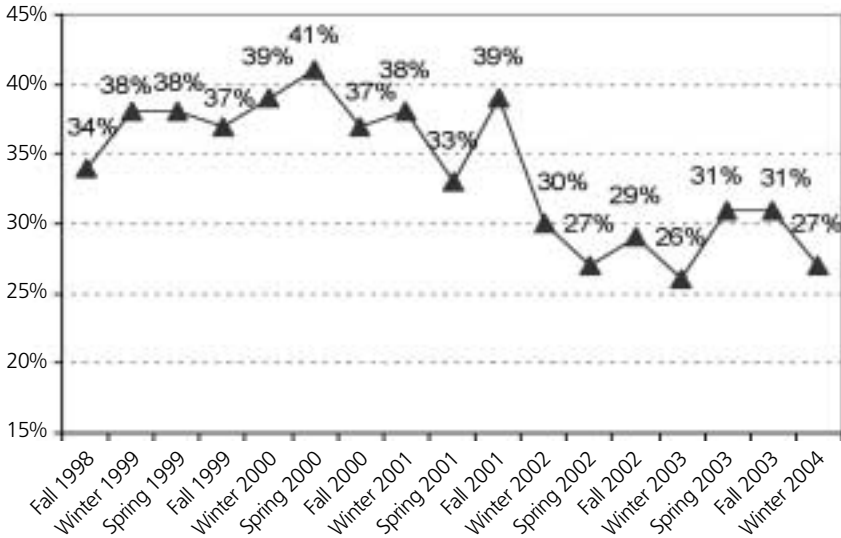
In non-EU countries, it becomes somewhat more difficult to construct trends. In several countries we have snapshots (Papadakis, 1999; Barnes and Gill, 2000), but in most, detailed data are not available. Exceptions are the USA and Canada. In the USA, Webb Yackee and Lowery (2005) constructed a *Bureaucracy Approval* index, which is an aggregate of a series of opinion poll questions related to the US Federal bureaucracy. They found that that assessments of the bureaucracy vary markedly over time. What is interesting about their findings is the strong correspondence of the aggregate indicator with the often-used National Election Studies' 'Trust in Government' index (see Figure 6).

In Canada, recent developments can be mapped using the now defunct 'Listening to Canadians' survey, which includes the question 'Generally speaking, how would you rate the performance of the Government of Canada?' It shows a rather stable picture in the late 1990s, yet a decline in 2002 (see Figure 7).

Even while we are able to construct some kind of time series for the USA and Canada, the data are not entirely satisfactory. In both cases the data are not specific enough to be sure that they are only measuring attitudes towards the civil service and public services, and not the more general attitudes towards government, or the somewhat different attitude towards the incumbent administration.

## Conclusion

In this article, we screened some of the major international surveys to map differences in citizens' attitudes towards the public sector in general. Despite worries about declining levels of trust in government, and in the public administration more specifi-



Source: Adapted from Communication Canada, Listening to Canadians Communications Survey.

**Figure 7** Evaluation of Canadian government performance, 1998–2004 (% saying good performance)

cally, these worries are generally only backed by the odd reference to a single opinion poll or an incomplete time series. Access to a good summary of both internationally comparative data and country-specific time series data has been very difficult for policy-makers and academics. By relying on a series of surveys, including the Eurobarometer surveys and the World Values Surveys, we have summarized the main trends in citizen trust in government and in the public sector, with a focus on the OECD and EU member states.

The findings somehow contradict the political and the popular discourse. Empirically, there is little evidence of an overall long-term decline in trust in government, although there are institutions that have suffered from a loss in trust. Attention to attitudes towards public services has been very limited in the major international surveys, and at the national level the bulk of survey material is rather recent. Where the empirical data allowed us to map changes over time, there was generally no conclusive evidence of decline in public trust.

Despite the persistent opinionating about trust in the public sector, many countries are faced with a lack of reliable data. This is especially the case for time series and internationally comparative data. With the exception of the international social surveys used in this article, the quality and detail of most opinion data is insufficient. Even where data are available, data analysis lags behind.

The most interesting phenomenon, however, is the strength and tenacity of the policy discourse on a decline in citizens' trust in the public sector. The indicators do



not show a decline in public trust in the public sector, yet it is quite generally believed by policy-makers there is such a decline. The question then obviously is: Why? Without further exploring it, we want only briefly to introduce one hypothesis. Concerns about public trust entered the agenda at about the same period internationally, and the attention shows a number of fluctuations (Schedler, 1993). In some countries, certain events have brought political trust onto the public agenda, while the polls did not show declines. Examples are Belgium, where trust started to decline in the early 1990s *after* a wide debate about the gap between citizens and government had started. We see a similar thing in the Netherlands, where public trust became an issue in the political discourse *and* in the polls *after* it had been put on the agenda by a new populist party (van der Brug, 2003). It therefore seems that we can treat 'trust in government', or better – distrust, as a phenomenon that first has to be put on the agenda before it starts to influence the polls. Rather than studying levels of trust, or searching for reasons for this distrust by looking at public sector performance, political performance, the economy, or specific events, we should perhaps refocus our attention and look at why public trust – in government or in the public sector – becomes an issue on the political and social agenda at a certain moment, and why it does not at other moments.

## Notes

- 1 Part of this article is based on Van de Walle et al. (2005) *Strengthening Trust in Government: What Role for Government in the 21st Century: Annex: Data on Trust in the Public Sector*. Analytical annex prepared for the OECD meeting of the Public Governance Committee at ministerial level, Rotterdam, 27–28 November 2005. Paris: OECD.
- 2 Data for spring 1996 (Eurobarometer 44.3OVR) are not included in the figure due to important differences in question order with a potentially strong impact on the results.

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