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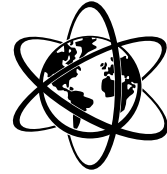
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# International Review of Administrative Sciences

## Contextualizing the Dutch drop in political trust: connecting underlying factors

*Frank Hendriks*

### Abstract

How can it be that a country — one that was envied until the very end of the twentieth century for its enduring high level of trust in the political system — could have suffered so much damage in just a few years at the beginning of the new century when it comes to reported rates of trust in political institutions? This article maps the loss of political trust in the Netherlands and sets out to explain the developments that the statistics describe. A thought-provoking article that Bovens and Wille published in this journal names a number of temporary factors (fluctuations in the national economy and incumbent national governments) to explain the Dutch drop. This article points to the influence of more structural, systematic factors or underlying 'currents' that are concealed behind the factors that Bovens and Wille address: the persistence of consensus democracy on the one hand and the surge of the emotional culture and the risk society on the other. The accumulation and interaction of these three currents form the basis for the explication of the declining levels of trust in politics.

### Points for practitioners

This article maps the loss of political trust in the Netherlands at the beginning of the new millennieum, and sets out to explain this phenomenon. The analysis points to the influence of more structural and systematic factors — the persistence of consensus democracy on the one hand and the surge of the emotional culture and the risk society on the other — concealed behind the more temporal and transitory factors that Bovens and Wille have highlighted in an earlier issue of this journal. Restoring trust is contingent on the accumulation and interaction of these three currents.

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## Introduction

How can it be that a country — one that was envied until the very end of the twenti-eth century for its enduring high level of trust in the political system — could have suf-fered so much damage in just a few years at the beginning of the new century when it comes to reported rates of trust in political institutions? How does a case that was special in one specific regard — stable, high rates of trust in a period at the close of the century when rates of trust in comparable cases were declining — change into a 'special case' for a different reason — instable, declining confidence figures in a period when comparable cases did not fluctuate so wildly?

The country, the case that we refer to, is the Dutch one. In 1997, 66 percent of the population reported having trust in the national parliament, even to a high degree. By 2004, that proportion had dropped 21 percentage points to 45 percent. In the same period the percentage of the population that felt confident or very confident about the government fell from 68 percent to 38 percent, a drop of no less than 30 per-centage points (SCP, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005). Much happened in the intervening years that caused foreign observers to take notice, too. Pim Fortuyn, a political entre-preneur and critic of multiculturalism and the politics of pacification, was assassinated in 2002. His political heirs saw their LPF party skyrocket from zero to 26 seats in the national parliament (see, among others, Pellikaan et al., 2007). Two years later, Theo van Gogh, filmmaker, columnist, critic of Islam and a Fortuyn sympathizer, was killed. It is no wonder that experts on the Dutch system are regularly confronted by foreign colleagues asking: what is going on in the Dutch case?

In this article, I try to formulate an answer to this question, focusing on the drop in political trust in the early years of the new millenium, just after 2001.[1] The fol-lowing section maps the loss of political trust in the Netherlands and describes the process based on the available, multi-year statistics. The next section then sets out to find an explanation for the developments that the statistics describe. A thought-provoking article that Bovens and Wille published in this journal (2008) points out two temporary factors (fluctuations in the national economy and incumbent national governments) to explain the Dutch drop. In this article, I emphasize the influence, or rather the 'confluence', of more structural, systematic factors, underlying 'currents' that are concealed behind the factors that Bovens and Wille address: the persistence of consensus democracy, the surge of the emotional culture, and rise of the risk society in the public eye. In my analysis, the Dutch decline in political trust is based on the accumulation and interaction of these three currents. The article concludes with a discussion of limits and prospects connected to the analysis presented here.

## The Dutch case: From high trust to growing suspicion

In a previous issue of this journal, Bovens and Wille (2008) already drew attention to the distinctive 'Dutch drop' in political trust. Below is an updated summary of the most relevant statistics that make the Netherlands a so-called 'special case' (Flyvbjerg, 2001), warranting separate and detailed treatment. Political trust statistics in the Netherlands

failed to follow international trends until well into the 1990s. Although the trend in many industrial countries was declining (Kaase and Newton, 1995; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004; Dogan, 2005), the Netherlands remained a high-trust society, even with regard to its political institutions, and exhibited growing confidence in politicians and in parliament from the early 1970s up to the late 1990s (Putnam et al., 2000, Thomassen, 2005; Dekker and Van der Meer, 2004; Dekker et al., 2006; Tiemeijer, 2006).

After the beginning of the new millennium, the political trust statistics in the Netherlands started to exhibit a marked disruption of the trend. A sharp decline started in 2001 (see Figure 1). The decline was sharper than in benchmark countries, where in some cases a slight increase could even be seen (see Figure 2). The Netherlands went from being a case of 'political trust conservation' to a prominent case of 'political trust loss' in a relatively short time — interesting for comparative public administration and political science, but also a cause for concern for Dutch people who saw a presumed asset turn into a widely discussed problem.

If we restrict ourselves to trust in national government (see Figure 3)[2] then it is striking that after 2001 the rate of confidence fell much more sharply in the Netherlands than was the case in the EU15 group of countries (the average of 15 West European countries, including the Netherlands). While the EU15 group remained largely within the 30–40 percent interval, the Netherlands dropped three intervals in a few years, to a level that was considerably lower than the level at the end of the 1990s. During the political 'honeymoon' of the new grand coalition of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, which went on a 100-day 'listening tour' of the country in 2007, 'trust in government' figures shot up for a short time, only to drop again and languish at the pre-honeymoon level. The Dutch statistical outlier in 2007 probably explains the EU15 freak value of the year; the EU15 outlier of 2001 is explained by the 'rally round the flag' tonic that coursed through the veins of most Western countries shortly after 9/11, and that failed to have staying power.

Trust in political institutions, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, concerns more than just trust in government, as shown in Figure 3. Trust in political institutions includes trust in parliament and in political parties, too. It is interesting to see that trust in parliament and trust in government exhibit the same general trend, even though these institutions play quite different roles in the political system. According to Tiemeijer (2006, 2008), respondents in survey research report general feelings about politics and government and do not differentiate strongly between, for example, the Second Chamber and the Dutch cabinet. For most respondents it is all the same, 'it's all The Hague' (Tiemeijer, 2008: 107).

Some respondents did differentiate, however, which can be seen by the fact that the trust statistics for parliament (representative politics) recovered somewhat quicker than those for the cabinet (executive politics) after the low point in 2004. Trust in political parties generally runs parallel to trust in parliament, the central stage for political parties, albeit at a lower confidence level; trust in Dutch political parties was not so high before, and therefore did not dip quite so far after the turn of the century (see Figure 1).

The graphs shown in the figures are based on data from the cross-national longitudinal Eurobarometer survey; survey research carried out by the Netherlands Social
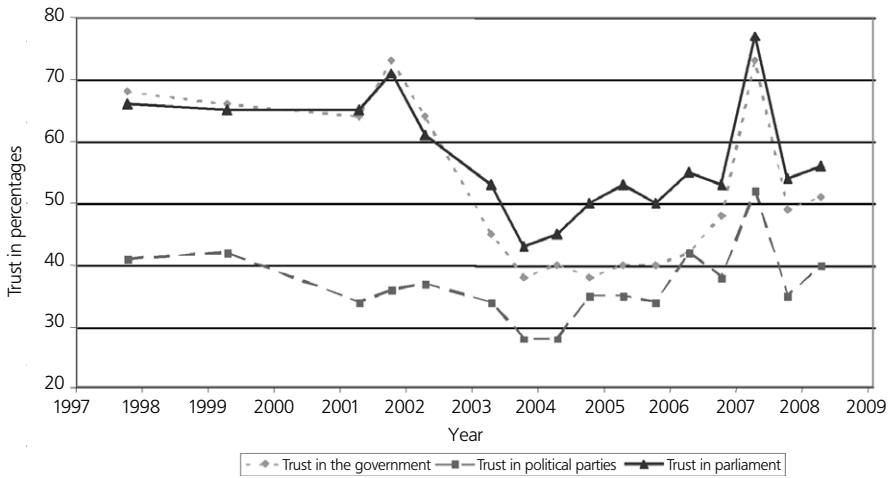
*Source*: Eurobarometer

**Figure 1** Trust in political institutions
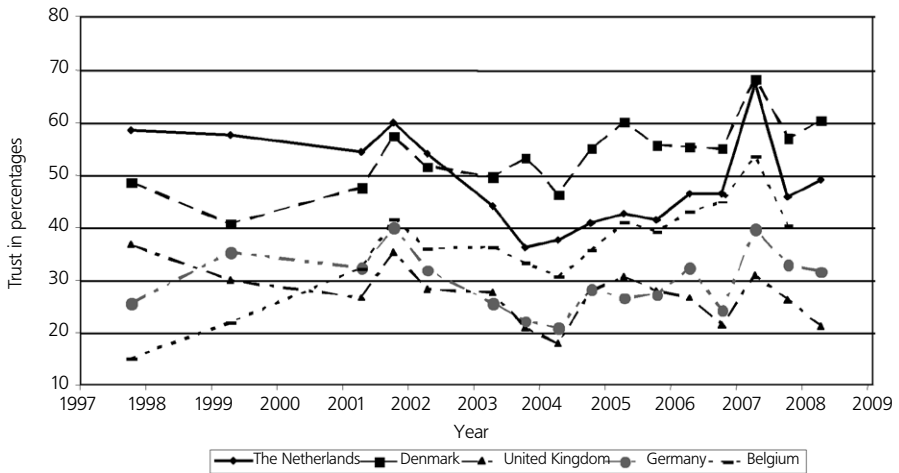


*Source*: Eurobarometer

**Figure 2** Trust in political institutions, in the Netherlands and four other European countries

and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) shows a similar pattern: relatively high rates of trust in politics before the turn of the century and sharply decreasing rates since then.[3] At this point in the argument, the question arises: what exactly is growing when political trust is diminishing? Do we see a growth of political distrust or perhaps even aliena-tion, a step higher on the cynicism ladder? (cf. Cook and Gronke, 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). This requires a bit of qualification.
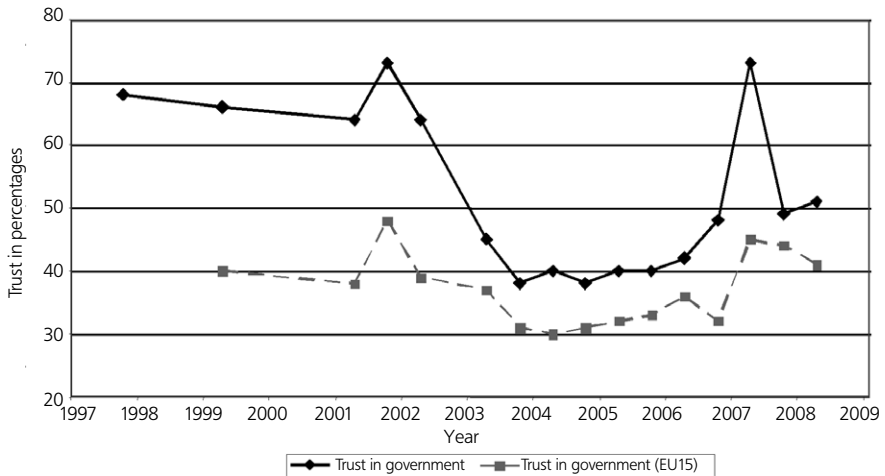
*Source*: Eurobarometer/Bovens

**Figure 3** Trust in government, the Netherlands and EU15

Alienation is not what we see growing in the Dutch case. Public support for the concept of democracy has never been higher. It has even been climbing, with some ups and downs, since the early 1970s. Nine out of ten Dutch citizens are still convinced that democracy is preferable to any other system of government (Halman et al., 2005: 90), which does not imply that they are consistently happy with the way in which political actors operationalize democracy (see Figure 1).

What we see growing in the Dutch case is probably better described as suspicion, a step lower on the cynicism ladder than distrust. If there is suspicion, probing questions are raised about the overall performance of politics: Are current politics still in sync with the demands of this day and age? Do politicians and political parties still deserve the benefit of the doubt? If there is distrust, such questions have already been answered: in the negative (see O'Neill, 2002).

## Understanding suspicion: finding an alternative explanation

How can we explain the sharp decline in political trust in the Netherlands in the period shortly after 2001? A number of explanations have been put forward in public and academic debate.

### Negative past performance: substandard public policies and services?

Some seek the explanation in an underlying performance problem: a purported systematic underperformance of the Dutch political establishment, which in this explanation offers too little 'value for money'. This argument was presented earlier as a potential explanation for the decline in political confidence in neighbouring Belgium in the 1990s. In the Belgian case, this explanation was unable to maintain credence (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003; Van de Walle, 2004), and 'performance theory'
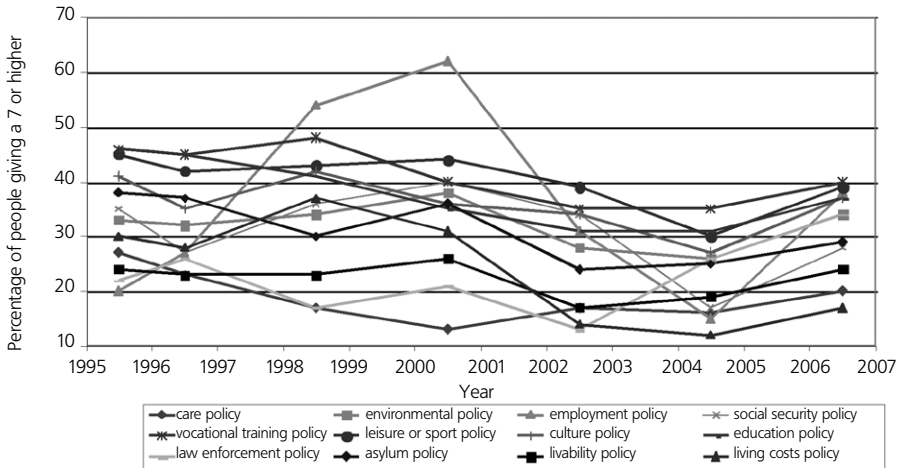
*Source*: SCP

**Figure 4** Appreciation for policies

as an exegetic vehicle in the Dutch case is now also considered to be highly doubt-ful (Hoogwout, 2003; Zouridis, 2004; Arentsen and Trommel, 2005; Korsten and De Goede, 2006, 2007; Halman, 2006; Bovens and Wille, 2006, 2008).

The SCP regularly conducts citizen surveys to see how the population rates performance in a number of policy areas, including the police, the environment, employment, social services, health care, education, municipal services and residential life. For each area, citizens are asked to give a mark of sufficient or insufficient, and indicate whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied. The majority indicates both 'suf-ficient' and 'satisfied'; most policy performance statistics gave no reason for concern until the beginning of the twenty-first century (SCP, 2002; see also SCP, 2004b).

When the political trust statistics began to decline after 2001, some policy appre-ciation statistics also began to decline; albeit to a lesser degree (see Figure 4). This is more than likely a confirmation of the existence of a spurious relationship (both sets of statistics have been affected by a third variable or variable cluster) rather than a causal relationship (sub-standard past performance has caused the present loss of political trust). The statistics do not support such a causal chain. Appreciation for employment policy drops relatively strongly after 2001, but this can hardly account for the decline in political trust after 2001, for in the directly preceding years appreciation for this very policy had been growing strongly.

As a major political challenger, Pim Fortuyn went on the campaign trail in 2002, claiming that government was failing to perform up to standard in a range of policy areas: education, integration, public safety, health care, transport and employment, most notably. The claim of widespread government failure was put firmly into per-spective in a study by policy scientists at the University of Twente (Arentsen and Trommel, 2005). The study corroborated large-scale research into the quality of the public sector in the Netherlands (SCP, 2002), containing many reassuring indicators

of micro-performance, as Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003: 299) describe the performance of government in terms of policy outputs and service delivery.

Macro-indicators similarly do not suggest a system plagued by structural under-performance. In 2002, the year marked by what has come to be known as the Dutch 'voter revolt', the Netherlands was at the top of European rankings for prosperity and standard of living, as calculated by the French statistical institute INSEF. When political trust statistics showed a marked decline, from 2002 to 2005, the Netherlands was still ranked near the top of the World Competitiveness Scoreboard compiled by IMD. The Dutch system also scores highly on the government quality indices of both the World Bank and the European Central Bank, as well as in international rankings of welfare and happiness, social inclusion, integrity, freedom and equality.[4]

Looking at both micro-performance and macro-performance (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003), it becomes clear that past performance alone cannot provide sufficient explanation for the sharp drop in political trust statistics post-2001. This is consistent with the conclusion of Nye and colleagues (1997) that confidence in government cannot be explained properly based on concrete government performance. But if past performance does not provide an explanation, what else can?

## Temporal movers: Balkenende cabinets and economic cycle?

Bovens and Wille (2008; see also 2006) presented an interesting and provocative explanation in an earlier issue of this journal. They argue that the pronounced drop in political trust statistics in the Netherlands reflects a temporal problem, to be explained by temporal movers. According to Bovens and Wille (2008: 283), the most plausible explanation of the Dutch drop is: 'a combination of an economic decline, combined with high political instability and contestation during the first Balkenende cabinets'. Thus, they refer to two temporary factors, related to fluctuations in the economic cycle (the Dutch economy entered into recession) and changes at the cabinet level (government came into the hands of relatively instable, centre-right cabinets that were led by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende).

Bovens and Wille (2008; see also 2006) mounted an ingenious search for an explanation of the Dutch drop. They built up a set of ten potential explanations: (1) deterioration of government performance, (2) dissatisfaction with Balkenende cabinets, (3) lack of consumer confidence, (4) Fortuyn and drama democracy, (5) scandals and fiascos, (6) media, (7) change in political culture, (8) changing expectations, (9) generational change, and (10) loss of social capital. The set of explanations follows from the (inter)national literature on the topic, the authors efficiently providing a great deal of information on each.[5]

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental problem with the explanatory strategy the authors adopt. Having distinguished all the potential explanatory factors, the authors examine and weigh them one by one, attempting to ultimately separate chaff from wheat. In the jargon of the natural sciences one could say that they are searching for the prime mover(s). In the end the authors reduce the number of potential explanations to two prime movers, both temporal and transitory (changing government and the economic cycle). The problem with this approach is that it does not give enough consideration to cumulation and interaction effects. Dalton, analysing the erosion of

political support in advanced industrial democracies, has pointed out how important such effects are: 'There is no single causal factor, no single guilty party', Dalton writes, 'rather, a multiple set of causes are normally at work' (Dalton, 2004: 193). And these causes can accumulate with time and they can start to interact with each other in due course.

A factor can be present for a long time without much effect until a critical moment is reached and quantity turns into quality (a latent source of discontent becomes an overt source of discontent). It is also possible that a factor becomes meaningful only in interaction with another one (the confluence of circumstances makes all the difference in this case). In an explanatory strategy that looks into seperate explanations one by one, such factors are often undervalued and tend to be eliminated because their timing does not seem to make sense (they had been around as factors for a while already) or because their singular effect is too limited (they are not solely responsible for the decisive push).

## Underlying currents: risk society, emotional culture and consensus democracy

In the following analysis, I have deliberately chosen an explanatory strategy that is more holistic in nature (cf. DiTomaso, 1982). This means that the big picture of interdependent clusters of factors will be taken into account as much as possible in an attempt at contextual understanding ('*verstehen*'). Three related tendencies, or currents, are central to this analysis, rather than a large number of separate explanations. Taking cumulation and interaction effects into consideration, the Dutch drop of confidence after 2001 will be understood as the result of three major currents that wash over and interact with one another:

1  the slow undercurrent of the Dutch *consensus democracy* (characterized by a tendency to pacification and inhibition), which has developed in the course of many years;
2  the additional current of the *emotional culture* (characterized by an inclination to passion and expression), which is a more recently swelled current washing over the previous one with accumulating strength;
3  and a third current, dramatically inflicting itself upon the public perception most recently, washing over the previous two: the surge of the *risk society* (characterized by a predilection for fear and insecurity).

The explanation for the Dutch drop is thus sought in the accumulation of and the interaction between three circumstances that are more structural and systematic, concealed behind the temporal and transitory factors that Bovens and Wille identify.

In my analysis, the Dutch system is facing a fundamental, more-than-episodic problem. The structural problem facing the system is primarily a problem of legitimacy. The much-debated distance between politics and citizens (*de kloof* in Dutch), whether too large or too small a distance, is not the issue here. In my interpretation, the legitimacy problem springs from a fundamental mismatch between relational patterns that are an integral part of the dominant consensus democracy on the one

hand, and shifting expectations and perceptions that are related to the rise of an emotional culture and an increasingly perceived risk-society on the other.)

## Consensus democracy: institutionalizing pacification and inhibition

The first 'current' refers to the pattern of democracy. Bovens and Wille (2006, 2008) also look into this, narrowing down their analysis to the polarizing style that Fortuyn and his adherents introduced in opposition to consensus democracy's tenacious culture of pacification. Korsten and De Goede (2006, 2007) examine a number of more pervasive phenomena — the citizenry's lack of direct say, the elite's credibility deficit, the crisis of representation — which encompass factors that are more compatible with the analysis below.

Consensus democracy distinguishes itself from rival forms of democracy in a number of essential ways. The juxtaposition of two fundamental dimensions in democratic theory — direct versus indirect democracy; aggregative versus integrative democracy — makes it possible to distinguish the consensus model from three rival models of democracy (see Table 1). The consensus model has long been the dominant model in the Dutch system, not only during the past 'century of democracy' (Dahl, 2000), but also in earlier periods (Lijphart, 1968; Daalder, 1995). Joint consultation among representatives of various sections of society has traditionally been the dominant pattern of collective decision-making. The process of reaching consensus has traditionally been in the hands of representatives — initially regents and later executive politicians — who came from the small circle of spokespersons who worked for specific social and cultural constituencies.

The consensus model contains a range of built-in strengths and weaknesses (see Table 2). The core quality of consensus democracy is the institutionalized tendency toward pragmatic collaboration, the attempt to reach agreement through careful deliberation. The accompanying pitfall is the risk of coagulation, the danger of viscosity and cartel formation in the ranks of the meeting-room experts (Hendriks and Toonen, 2001; Hendriks, 2009). There is a range of strengths and weaknesses connected to this core quality and its mirror-image pitfall. The weaknesses listed in Table 2 have received more attention in the post-2001 years than the strengths, most notably the weaknesses referred to as: cartel and backroom politics; technocracy and expertocracy; avoidance and ostrich behaviour.

**Table 1** Models of democracy

| | Aggregative democracy (majoritarian) | Integrative democracy (non-majoritarian) |
|---|---|---|
| Indirect democracy (representative) | Pendulum democracy | Consensus democracy |
| Direct democracy (self-governing) | Voter democracy | Participatory democracy |

*Source*: Hendriks, 2006/2009

**Table 2** Strengths and weaknesses of consensus democracy in the Netherlands

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|
| Integration, collaboration | Viscosity, coagulation |
| Proportional representation | Effect of elections |
| Informal basis in policy networks | Accountability in formal terms |
| Channelled pluriformity | Cartel and backroom politics |
| Administrative expertise | Technocracy, expertocracy |
| Pacification and accommodation | Avoidance and ostrich behaviour |
| Integrated policy programmes | Compromise policies |
| Caring approach | Paternalism |
| Keeping things together | Making all contingent |
| Sharing responsibility | Fragmenting accountability |
| All have a say | No one is responsible |

*Source*: Hendriks, 2006/2009.

The weaknesses that are emphasized in the Netherlands also stand out in discussions on the consensus systems of countries like Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. There is criticism there, too, of solidified relationships in systems that, comparatively speaking, do not do poorly in terms of technical performance (Caramani and Mény, 2005).

The strengths and weaknesses of Dutch consensus democracy manifest themselves to greater or lesser degrees depending on concomitant circumstances (cf. Van Praag and Van der Brug, 2006: 42). The consensus model has been the foundation for a functioning system, recognized as such, for quite a long time. It enabled the Dutch to keep their feet dry, to cultivate and parcel out the land effectively, and to boost prosperity and well-being to heights that often inspired awe abroad. In a strongly divided society, with the conflict potential of Northern Irish magnitude, the system managed to keep the vital parts together in a practical sense.

Consensus democracy calls for a certain pattern of citizenship and a certain pattern of democratic leadership. Leadership in a consensus democracy is typically of the 'regency' type — not grand and exhilarating, but careful and scrupulous (Daalder, 1995; Te Velde, 2002). The dealing-room experts would reach compromises in a pragmatic, de-politicized and usually unspectacular way. Citizenship in a consensus democracy is traditionally of the compliant type — a pattern of habitual observation and occasional participation. This used to be the time-honoured and accepted pattern of relations.

But relational patterns have changed strongly in recent decades. Citizens have become less likely to confidently observe their representatives and guardians; elite decision-making is increasingly criticized for being too paternalistic and patronizing (Van Gunsteren, 1992; Van den Brink, 2002). Citizens want to be part of the action; they want to put crucial decisions to the vote, which is more common in alternative, majoritarian models of democracy. Politicians, on the other hand, have found it increasingly difficult to earn and maintain respect when engaged in the meetings and deliberations that are a traditional ingredient of consensus democracy. Spectators

have come to demand that they deliver plain-talk, pluck and purpose, which is difficult to produce in a model of consensus, compromise and consultation.

Relational patterns between citizens and elites that had previously been considered to be logical and warranted are now regarded ever more critically. Is the average Dutch meeting-room expert still the right (wo)man at the right time? Is the accommodating style of politics still suited to the rapidly changing world of today? Are responsibilities properly divided between citizens and elites? Penetrating questions like these are being asked more and more emphatically, and amenable reactions are becoming less and less common.

In response to the large-scale Internet survey '21minuten.nl', just 8 percent said they were satisfied with the government's ability to listen; 76 percent felt that the government does not do its best to get citizens involved in the policy-making process;[6] and 65 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that their politicians lacked the skills needed to run the country.[7] SCP research (2005: 348) shows that in 2004 some 61 percent of Dutch people agreed with the statement, 'What we need is fewer laws and institutions, and more courageous, tireless and devoted leaders whom the people can trust'. In 1992 just 38 percent of people agreed with this statement.

The above is not just related to the persistence of consensus democracy in the Netherlands, but also to the surge of the two previously mentioned currents that put consensus democracy to the test: first the surge of the emotional culture, and then the swell of the risk society in the public perception.

## Emotional culture: leaning to passion and expression

First of all, there is the tension between the persistent consensus democracy and the emotional culture, which is gaining in strength. Taking their cue from the Anglo-American literature, Bovens and Wille (2006, 2008) pay attention to the postulated surge of a 'postmaterialist' culture since roughly the end of the 1960s. According to Inglehart (1990), the younger generations in particular have higher expectations in life and tend to be more emancipated, critical of authority and elite-challenging. Following Putnam (2000), Bovens and Wille go into the alleged decline of social capital and civic institutions in the slipstream of individualization and dehierarchization.

For the Dutch case and the specific type of consensus democracy that has ripened there, however, the tempestuous rise of the 'emotional' culture in the same period appears to be more meaningful. The case in point is not so much the postmaterialistic values or the atomistic tendencies of the individualized Dutch, as it is their growing predilection for passionate expression. The latter is characteristic of the emotional culture, which stands in stark contrast with the trend toward depoliticization, sobriety and modesty that traditionally characterized Dutch consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1968; Daalder, 1995).

The current of the emotional culture rose dramatically in the second half of the 1960s (the Netherlands experienced its '1968' two years earlier, in 1966). The expansion of the emotional culture, discernable in various Western countries, took a special course and had an exceptionally strong impact in the Dutch situation. The Netherlands used to be a country with severely tempered 'public emotions' — letting these emo-

tions run loose would put undue pressure on the complicated pattern of social and political relations. In a only a few decades, however, the Dutch changed course and 'went for the title of Emotional Champion', as Beunders (2002: 17) put it (see also Van Stokkom, 1997, 2008). In the Netherlands, where the compression of emotion went further than elsewhere, the 'decompression of emotion' went further than elsewhere too (Wouters, 2007).

The advent of emotional culture in the Netherlands accelerated in the 1990s with the rise of the digital and the commercial media. The soft side of emotionalism ('listen to your feelings') and the tough side of it ('call a spade a spade') stayed neck-and-neck for a while (Van Stokkom, 1997; Wouters, 2007). The tough side, however, appeared to be taking the lead in the early years of the new millennium as tensions in society and politics grew (in connection with developments described in the next section). The image of the Netherlands as a culture of acceptance, tolerance and avoidance — don't crowd each other out, live and let live — was tempered by heated discussion on issues including immigration and integration, religion in the public domain, freedom of worship and freedom of expression. Heated cultural competition and fierce identity politics had its heyday (Van Stokkom, 2008).

Personalism, expressionism and emotionality had been kept at a distance in Dutch politics for a long time, but are now sought after. The difficulty is that the Dutch model of consensus-building has not evolved in connection with such phenomena. This is in contrast with the more aggregative or majoritarian versions of democracy (see Table 1), which are more used and attuned to struggles and passions (part and parcel of highly competitive win-or-lose elections in pendulum democracy and hard-fought yes-or-no plebiscites in voter democracy).

Dutch consensus democracy, in contrast, has always worked to curb egos and emotions and to contain moods and temperaments. It has produced a relatively austere form of rule that can be categorized as governors' government with a limited emotional repertoire (Te Velde, 2002). The modern media broadcast this to the public in no uncertain terms, making use of devastating close-ups and replays (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Van Vree et al., 2003). Dutch consensus democracy may be capable of working out sophisticated policy programmes, but it appears to be less performative when it comes to the non-instrumental, 'soft' side of policy-making (Hendriks, 2003). This is a problem in an emotional culture in which it is simply not enough that something is 'good'; it must also 'feel good'.

With risk society coming to the fore in the public perception, negative emotions regarding consensus democracy have been roused further. Many observers have come to the conclusion that Dutch consensus politics, with all its depoliticization and incrementalism, is fundamentally out of sync with the grave dangers and challenges presented by the 'risk society'. It is not that the critics of consensus have finally been proved 'right'. Rather, their criticism has gained credibility by a series of dramatic events around and after the turn of the century.

## Risk society: fearing unrest and disorder

In the same way that 1966 was a banner year for the rise of the emotional culture in the Netherlands, 1989 was a banner year for the proliferation of the risk society — a

sociological concept that continued to flourish throughout the 1990s (Beck, 1992, 1998). The Berlin wall was rent asunder in 1989 and the Internet received a tremendous impulse as the 'network of networks' in that same year (Guéhenno, 1993). Concurrently in the Netherlands, the wall surrounding the public broadcasting system was torn down, giving commercial and new media full freedom. This meant that new outlooks on the public domain began to develop, even less 'restrained' and more 'dramatic' ones (RMO, 2003).

In the 1990s, revolutionary developments in transportation and especially communication technologies hastened the ongoing process of deterriorialization. The world of clearly defined units was quickly changing, or so it seemed at least, into an interconnected world of complex networks, the *space of places* into a *space of flows* (Castells, 1996). This livened things up but also brought confusion. The change processes that are related to the network society — globalization, migration, multiculturalization, multimediatization — led to new questions and anxieties. Undigested social change is a major contributor to the growing sense of uneasiness in society, argues Elchardus (2002; also Elchardus and Smits, 2002).

In the Netherlands, resistance to processes of internationalization (especially EU enlargement) and multiculturalization (especially the 'Islamization of Dutch society' as some would call it), latently developing in the course of the 1990s, was manifestly and increasingly voiced in the early years of the new millennium (Aarts and Thomassen, 2008a, 2008b). Resistance deepened, especially around the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn (2002) and Theo van Gogh (2004), as well as around the Dutch no-vote in the referendum on the new 'European Constitution' (2005). In the first years of the new millennium, the country was gripped by a series of dramatic events, which were interpreted in a similar, worrisome light: the disaster at the fireworks storage facility in Enschede (2000), the New Year's Eve fire in Volendam (2001), and a series of animal-borne diseases — foot and mouth (2001), bird flu (2003) and bluetongue (2006) — which raised existential doubts about food safety and security more generally.

The fact that networks come with risks and not only opportunities was brought home by the attacks on New York and Washington by the terrorism *network* of Al Qaida on 9/11 (2001), followed by intensely watched acts of terrorism in Bali (2002), Istanbul (2003), Madrid (2004) and London (2005). In the Netherlands, the large-scale anti-terrorism sweep in the Hague (2004) engendered fearful associations with the international wave of terror inspired by a radical version of Islam. The clash of civilizations thesis (Huntington, 1996) resurfaced, and not much was left of the illusion that prevailed during the 1990s that the triumph of Western liberalism would herald the end of the great ideological contradictions (cf. Fukuyama, 1992).

The rise of the risk society, in the public eye, can be characterized as a broad trend displaying a special and intense dynamic in the Netherlands. For longer than many other countries, the Netherlands had been able to cherish and maintain the illusion of 'manageability'. According to the cherished self-image, no other country was as orderly and safe as the Netherlands (Boutellier, 2002). A political figurehead like the prime minister used to walk the streets of the city without bodyguard. The shock that awakened the Netherlands from this pollyanna dream at the beginning of the twenty-first century was therefore more intense and harsh than in many other countries. Disrupted was the illusion of the Netherlands as an oasis of peace and security.

Basic necessities — safe food, safety in the public domain — became less of a sure thing, or so it seemed.

The series of shocking events mentioned above did not trigger the decline of political trust in a simple, monocausal way, but contributed to the statistics going down and staying down for a number of years in combination with the heightened emotional culture and the persistent consensual manner of decision-making. The Oosting Commission (2001), writing on the calamity in Enschede, explicitly called for a 'new governance culture' — to be characterized by more political determination and less tolerance in the face of risk, a suggestion echoed repeatedly in succeeding years.

Bovens and Wille (2008) consider the assassinations of Fortuyn and Van Gogh in their analysis, without connecting them to the series of other shocking events, as was actually done in public discourse. They conceive of them as isolated incidents, which at most can explain the 'steepness and length of the decline of trust' in the Netherlands; their prime movers are still the Balkenende cabinets and the economic cycle (Bovens and Wille, 2008: 283). When they consider the role of 'drama democracy' (Elchardus, 2002), they allow for the distorting effect of the image-makers in symbolic society. They do not pay sufficient attention, however, to the accumulation of dramatic events in the given period, providing the image-makers in symbolic society with hitherto unknown and vast resources (see also Figure 5).
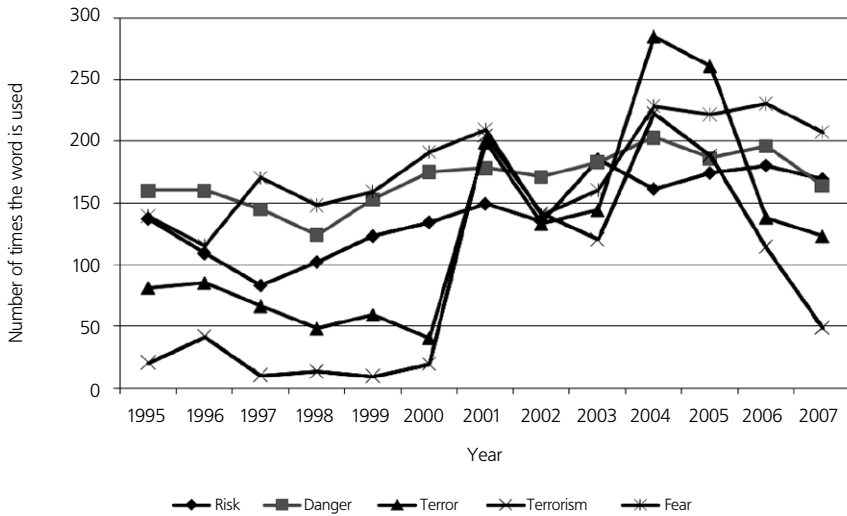
In support of their thesis that disappointing economic conditions form a major explanation for the Dutch drop in political trust after 2001, Bovens and Wille point to parallels in the development of political trust and consumer confidence. The drop in political trust is indeed accompanied by a decrease in consumer confidence. In my analysis, however, the two display a spurious relationship driven by a trailing third variable: the generalized 'social mood' (cf. Van de Walle, 2004; Tiemeijer, 2006), which deteriorated sharply as a result of the rapid accumulation of alarming events. It is likely that this, at the same time, engendered negative emotions in the Dutch both as consumers (witness the indicators of consumer confidence) and as citizens (witness the indicators of political trust), negative emotions magnified in an emotional culture like the prevailing one.

## Risk *plus* emotion *plus* consensus propels suspicion

The Dutch drop in political trust after 2001 cannot be explained by the constraints inherent to consensus politics alone; with the persistence of consensus politics *plus* the expanding surge of the emotional culture *plus* the pointed swell of the risk society in the public eye taken together, we are able to make reasonable inroads.

In the previous sections, I have set out how the three currents develop and interact in a tension-ridden way that culminates in the years 2001–05. In summary: the already troublesome combination of a persisting consensus democracy (taking things slowly, moderately) and an expanding emotional culture (taking things heatedly, excessively) becomes rapidly more troublesome at the start of the new millennium when, in the public perception, risk and danger (and supposedly the need to act swiftly and firmly) jump up pointedly. Figure 5 illustrates to what extent risk consciousness comes to the fore in the public perception after 2001. Disquieting messages — headlines signify-

**Figure 5**  Risk consciousness in Dutch newspaper headlines, 1995–2007

ing risk, danger, fear and terror(ism) — are conspiciously in the news and thus in the public eye. And as the well-known Thomas theorem puts it: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. The challenges of the risk society are defined as real, and the consequences in terms of emotional responses and suspicious perceptions are real as well.

Figure 5 also illustrates the relative relaxation after 2005, a development detected by SCP (2007) in other statistics as well. The chain of dramatic events witnessed in the years 2001–05 is broken, at least temporarily, in the years 2005–08. The emotional culture gets less dramatic material to respond to, while consensus politics gets the opportunity to win back some terrain. In 2007, the new grand coalition organizes a large-scale, interactive PR tour around the country. Critical journalists call it an artificial 'charm offensive', but it does seem to have an effect, albeit temporarily: trust statistics fall back again after the sudden peak of 2007. In the second half of 2008, the international 'credit crisis' hits the Netherlands like many other countries. This might again raise the level of existential anxiety, triggering other effects, but at the time of writing it is too early to tell.

Returning to the focus of my analysis, the Dutch drop in political trust in the early years of the millennium, I conclude that it were not isolated incidents — the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, for instance, or the killing of Theo van Gogh — but a connected

chain of dramatic events, combined with tensions that were already growing on the intersection of emotional culture and consensus politics, that explain the quantum leap in reported suspicion in the Netherlands after 2001. Bovens and Wille (2008) point to the tension-ridden Balkenende cabinets post-2001, and the disappointing economic cycle at the time. Although these developments are relevant for understanding the context in which political trust in the Netherlands declined, they are only part of this context. The troubles of the Balkenende cabinets are not isolated matters; they are symptoms of the underlying syndrome analysed in this article. Neither is the disappointing economic cycle isolated from the worrisome 'social mood' (Tiemeijer, 2006, 2008) that takes its cue from the tendencies analysed above.

## Limits and prospects

The study presented here is a single-case study, focusing on the sudden and pronounced 'Dutch drop' in political trust in the early years of the new millennium. Other countries in Western Europe have also witnessed a decline in political trust in the same period, albeit on average less steep and pronounced than in the Netherlands (see Figure 3 again). An interesting case is Germany, which displays a similar steep decline in the same period, albeit at a lower level. Explaining multiple cases is beyond the scope of this particular article — each country case should be analysed on a time- and place-contingent way. It would, however, be worthwhile to do follow-up research into comparable country cases. An interesting option would be a 'most similar systems design', comparing the Netherlands to country cases like Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Germany, which can also be categorized as consensus democracies (Lijphart, 1999). The combined explanatory factors — consensus democracy, emotional culture and risk society — are arguably relevant to such 'similar systems', albeit in case-specific ways. The cumulation and interaction of such factors should always be reconstructed on a careful, case-by-case basis.

This case study has resulted in a structural explanation of the 'Dutch drop', coined as such by Bovens and Wille (2008), and explained by them as a temporal phenomenon primarily driven by temporary movers. This study has articulated a rival perspective, focusing on the structural tension between consensus democracy on the one hand and emotional culture and risk society on the other. All three currents display ups and downs, higher and lower points, but they do not display the tendency to disappear. The risk society is driven by structural changes in society, emotional culture by fundamental cultural shifts, and the institutions of consensus democracy are so deeply rooted that their departure from the Dutch scene is almost unthinkable. Therefore, a substantial level of suspicion must be recognized as a structural phenomenon, albeit with the expected cyclical ups and downs.

After a period in which suspicion flared up, in the years shortly after 2001, a period of diminishing distrust may well follow. This is what we have seen earlier in the Belgian case. Regarding the Netherlands, however, we should seriously consider that political trust will fluctuate at a level lower than the level experienced in the late 1990s, when political trust indicators were exceptionally high. In stock-market terms one might say: the rates were so high that a structural correction towards a more realistic level was to be expected.

## Notes

**1** This article is a highly reworked and translated version of an article in Dutch (see Hendriks, 2006b). Translation costs were approved and funded by the Dutch KNAW Vertaalfonds.

**2** Thanks to Mark Bovens who shared this compilation of Eurobarometer data with me (personal communication)

**3** Political institutions are also specified in the SCP statistics. The SCP reported in 1997 that 68 percent of the population had confidence in the government. SCP statistics for this item in 2002 were 64 percent, making use of data collected before the 'voter revolt' of 2002. The percentage quickly drops to 45 percent in the spring of 2003, 38 percent in the autumn of 2003, and 38 percent again in the autumn of 2004. Twenty-eight percent of the population had confidence in Political parties in the spring of 2004; in 1997 that percentage was 41 percent. Confidence in the Lower House has traditionally been higher, but even here a sharp decline can be seen. In 1997, 66 percent of the population reported having confidence in the Lower House; in the spring of 2004 that percentage fell to 45 percent. (SCP, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

**4** Periodically appearing surveys from the World Bank, the European Central Bank, IMD and INSEE have been accessed through the internet: http://www.worldbank.org/reference/; http://www.ecb.int/pub/html/index.en.html; http://www.imd.ch/research/publications/; http://www.insee.fr/en/publications-et-services/. See also Oosterbaan (2005) for a sample sheet of rather positive statistics with regard to the performance of the Dutch system.

**5** For details, see Bovens and Wille (2008; see also 2006).

**6** 21minuten.nl 2005 (2005: 51–3). http://www.21minuten.nl/21minuten/index.asp/

**7** 21minuten.nl 2005 (2005: 51–3). http://www.21minuten.nl/21minuten/index.asp/

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