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25. SAME OLD, SAME OLD?

VALUE CHANGE AND STABILITY IN
THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

Following up on Loek Halman's work on value change and stability, we investigate public opinion patterns between 1990 and 2017 in the Netherlands. While large-scale societal processes raise perceptions of severe value changes over time, prior research has shown that Dutch citizens generally rely on already existing values ingrained in Dutch society. Based on theories regarding fundamental differences between values, attitudes, and preferences, we propose different expectations regarding stability and change in public opinion. Based on regression analyses of European Values Study data (1990-2017), we find three main trends in the Dutch public opinion landscape: 1) conservatism and religiosity are declining, 2) preferences for government involvement grow, and 3) materialist values increasingly tend to be prioritized over post-materialist values. Given the revival of economic instability and the rise of cultural insecurity, we conclude that while circumstances change, people's attitudinal reaction generally does not. With the addition of new waves, the European Values Study will continue to deepen our understanding of value development and its relation to changing environments.

25.1 Introduction

Processes such as (post-)modernization (Inglehart, 1997), globalization (Kriesi et al., 2006), and the rise of the Artificial Intelligence Society (Inglehart, 2018) all indicate a gradual, large-scale values change. In a smaller timeframe, the current COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the perception of some people that life as we knew it before the pandemic is over (e.g. Dartnell, 2020). Whether we are in the midst of a pandemic or not, it is clear that our social environment is changing all the time.

Having been involved in the European Values Study (EVS) for decades, Loek Halman has been primarily concerned with how such social transformations influence our values, attitudes, and preferences. Influential work on stability and change in public opinion (Converse, 1964; Inglehart, 1977; Uslaner, 2002) has shown that large-scale contextual changes can slowly alter the value patterns of societies through the replacement of generations and their core values. Yet, compared to values, attitudes and preferences are more volatile and can change quickly within a person (instead of gradually across generations), depending on one's evaluation of the current context. In short, it is well established that a changing environment makes for changing public opinion, both gradually in the long-term, and sometimes abruptly in the short run.

However, in one of his own books on value change in the Netherlands (Halman & Sieben, 2011), Loek concludes that citizens fall back on long-standing values in Dutch society, despite fundamental societal changes and public perceptions of drastic value change. We will extend the work on values development in this contribution by investigating the idea that circumstances change, while people's response to their environment stays stable. To do so, we will make use of cross-sectional EVS data, collected between 1990 and 2017 in the Netherlands.

25.2 Stability and Change in Public Opinion

When investigating and explaining trends in public opinion, it is essential to differentiate between values and concepts such as norms, attitudes, preferenc-

es, and beliefs (Halman & Sieben, 2020). There namely exists a hierarchy in which values are believed to be largely stable, while preferences are considered highly volatile (Uslaner, 2002).

First of all, Halman and Sieben (2020, p. 1) defined values as:

“Deeply rooted motivations, principles, or orientations guiding, steering, channeling, or explaining certain attitudes, norms, opinions, convictions, and desires. Values justify, motivate, and legitimate human behavior, but they are of a more general nature. Adhering to a specific value constitutes a disposition, or a propensity to act in a certain way.”

Values thus form the basis for identity, behavior, and other kinds of beliefs, because they are ingrained in our belief system through socialization processes at an early age (Converse, 1964; Inglehart 1977; Uslaner 2002). This also means that the more central values are to our way of thinking, the less likely they are to change within a lifetime (Converse, 1964). Examples of such values are religiosity and political ideology, which provide us with moral guidance and a sense of identity and belonging (Carmines & Stimson 1980; Converse 1964; Inglehart, 1977; 1985; Uslaner 2002). Also (post-)materialistic values are thought to be rather stable, because they are formed by the circumstances we grow up in. Based on the socialization- and scarcity hypotheses, Inglehart (1997) argues that being raised in times of (economic) insecurity and instability causes people to prioritize materialistic values over post-materialistic ones. The more secure and stable one's environment becomes, the more room there is to prioritize quality of life over survival (Inglehart, 1997). Consequently, a societal shift in values has occurred through the replacement of less wealthy and less secure generations by those who grow up more prosperously: the ‘Silent Revolution’ (Inglehart, 1977).

Somewhat less stable are attitudes referred to by Carmines and Stimson (1980, p. 78) as attitudes towards “easy issues”: Such issues elicit “gut responses” and are therefore often the topic of long-term political debate about symbolic policy goals. Issues of permissiveness (both public and private) are good examples, as we are guided by our core values in deciding what is acceptable behaviour

and what is not. Other examples are ethnic prejudice and attitudes towards gender equality. Although Uslaner (2002) considers the latter to be quite volatile, we follow the rationale of Reeskens et al. (2021) that gender equality better fits the definition of an easy issue as elaborated above. Uslaner's (2002) conclusion was based on the strong increase in gender equal attitudes around the 1970s, which was, according to Inglehart and Norris (2016), closely related to the rise of stable post-materialist values.

Lastly, most volatile are "mere preferences" (Uslaner, 2002, p. 57) or attitudes towards "hard issues" (Carmines & Stimson, 1980, p. 78). Contrary to values and attitudes towards easy issues, these kind of attitudes and preferences often regard complex issues that require a thorough evaluation of the current circumstances and information at hand. A clear example is institutional trust. Whether people trust institutions or not depends on their current performance, and when this performance changes, people adjust their trust accordingly. Another example is the preference for government involvement (Converse, 1964). This may sound paradoxical, as such preferences are often related to people's political ideology, which is considered a stable value. However, it makes sense that attitudes on ever changing, technical government interventions ask for more thorough evaluation and are thus more volatile.

In sum, we have argued that people hold values and attitudes that remain largely stable throughout their lives, but they also have preferences and other kinds of attitudes that change frequently within the same lifespan. However, instead of using panel data to study within-person change, we will use cross-sectional data to investigate changes in the Dutch population as a whole. If the theory holds and core values and related easy issues indeed change slowly through generational replacement while preferences and hard issues change back and forward in a relatively small timeframe, it is likely that cross-sectional analyses show the opposite pattern of within-individual analyses (the 'level of analysis paradox' (Inglehart, 1985)). That is, we expect to identify consistent, gradual patterns of change in values and easy issues, but inconsistent or even absent patterns of change in preferences and hard issues between 1990 and 2017 in Dutch society.

25.3 Data and Measures

We investigate the stability of nine Dutch values, attitudes, and preferences across the four most recent waves of the European Values Study (1990-2017) (see Table 25.1 for an overview). We choose these nine items because they are consistently repeated over the four EVS-waves and cover different kinds of public opinions on a variety of social, cultural, and economic issues.

Religiosity is measured by the frequency of church attendance (apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings) and ranges from 'never' (1) to 'more than once a week' (8).

To measure *political ideology* respondents are asked where they place themselves on the scale from 1 (left) to 10 (right).

Post-materialism ranges from prioritizing order and fighting rising prices to prioritizing freedom of speech and democracy on a 4-point scale. A higher score indicates more post-materialistic (as opposed to materialistic) values.

Private permissiveness is composed of five 10-point questions that ask whether the respondent thinks the following is justifiable (ranging from 'never' to 'always justifiable'): homosexuality, abortion, divorce, euthanasia, and suicide. The resulting scale is very reliable ($\alpha = .863$).

Similarly, *public permissiveness* is a scale of four 10-point questions asking to what extent the following is justifiable: claiming state benefits which you are not entitled to, avoiding fare on public transport, cheating on taxes, and accepting a bribe ($\alpha = .613$).

Ethnic prejudice is measured by asking whether the respondent would like the following people as neighbours: people of a different race, immigrants or foreign workers, Muslims, and Jews. We thus assume that more ethnically prejudiced respondents mention more groups (0-4).¹

1 We are aware that the measurement validity of these items is under scrutiny, but because of the reasons mentioned earlier, we have chosen to include them anyway. The items have been used in previous Dutch

Gender equality is operationalized as the mean score of four Likert scale items ranging from 'agree strongly' (1) to 'disagree strongly' (4): "a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work" (recoded), "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay", "a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works", and "a job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children". Reliability analysis shows the scale is reliable with $\alpha = .643$.

Institutional trust is indicated by trust in four major societal institutions: the parliament, the justice system, civil services, and the police. The answers range from 'a great deal of confidence' to 'no confidence at all'. Items have been recoded so that a higher mean score on these items reflects greater institutional trust. The scale is reliable with $\alpha = .733$.

Finally, preferences for *government involvement* are composed of five 10-point semantic differential questions: "people versus the government should take more responsibility", "incomes should be made more equal versus there should be greater incentives for individual effort" (recoded), "the private versus government ownership of business and industry should be increased", and "competition is good versus harmful". The scale is reliable with $\alpha = .609$.

Across four waves, we have a final sample of $N = 5,346$ Dutch citizens (sampling weights are not applied). Item nonresponse is limited, with the highest proportion in left-right self-placement (7.6%) followed by post-materialism (2.7%). The proportion of missing values is approximately equal across waves. Missing values are excluded listwise. The mean values and respective N per wave are presented in Table 25.1.

The mean values between waves suggest that values, as well as some attitudes and preferences do change over time. Church attendance, as a proxy for religiosity, steadily decreased with 27.2% between 1990 and 2017. Post-materialism decreased with 10.1% between 1990 and 1999, after which values stabilize. Relatedly, private permissiveness increased with 24.8%, equivalent to one point

research as well, and results were in line with that of parallel studies in the same journal issue (see Lubbers & Scheepers, 2019).

on a ten-point scale. Attitudes in favour of gender equality increased with 15.5% between the four waves. Public permissiveness drops slightly (-5.2%), while the average Dutch citizen wants more government involvement over time (+14.4%). Ethnic prejudice increases substantially over time, with 16.4%. Political ideology and institutional trust fluctuate but stay stable over time.

Table 25.1 Descriptive statistics

	min	max	m	s	1990	1999	2008	2017
Religiosity	1	8	3.00	2.416	3.54	3.11	3.19	2.57
Political ideology	1	10	5.45	1.976	5.47	5.11	5.47	5.59
Post-materialism	1	4	2.68	0.973	2.88	2.66	2.68	2.59
Private permissiveness	1	10	6.57	2.242	5.86	6.25	6.15	7.31
Public permissiveness	1	10	2.07	1.220	2.16	2.16	1.98	2.05
Ethnic prejudice	0	4	0.38	0.859	0.35	0.23	0.47	0.41
Gender equality	1	4	2.80	0.604	2.55	2.75	2.75	2.96
Institutional trust	1	4	2.55	0.508	2.61	2.51	2.52	2.56
Government involvement	1	10	4.85	1.376	4.52	4.63	4.73	5.17
N					907	952	1397	2090

Source: EYS 1990-2017

25.4 Results

We test our expectations on the societal-level stability of public opinion with a fixed-effects regression (see Table 25.2). We do not account for explanatory factors, testing only the total mean differences between timepoints. Contrary to our expectations, all values, attitudes, and preferences under scrutiny change significantly over time. However, the explained variance shows that not all public opinions change at an equal pace. Political ideology and institutional trust are most stable, whereas private and public permissiveness are most volatile.

Table 25.2 OLS fixed effects regression

	Intercept	1999	2008	2017	R ₂
Religiosity	3.537 ***	-0.423 (.111) ***	-0.351 (.102) ***	-0.962 (.095) ***	0.022
Political ideology	5.471 ***	-0.363 (.092) **	-0.003 (.084)	0.115 (.079)	0.007
Post-materialism	2.883 ***	-0.223 (.045) ***	-0.202 (.041) ***	-0.292 (.039) ***	0.011
Private permissiveness	5.856 ***	0.392 (.100) **	0.294 (.092) ***	1.451 (.086) ***	0.072
Public permissiveness	2.163 ***	-0.002 (.057)	-0.179 (.052)	-0.112 (.049) *	0.003
Ethnic prejudice	0.352 ***	-0.124 (.040) **	0.118 (.037)	0.058 (.034)	0.009
Gender equality	2.551 ***	0.202 (.027) **	0.197 (.025) **	0.408 (.023) ***	0.059
Institutional trust	2.608 ***	-0.100 (.024) **	-0.088 (.022) **	-0.048 (.020) *	0.005
Government involvement	4.517 ***	0.113 (.063)	0.217 (.058) ***	0.652 (.054) ***	0.037

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

note: Standard errors in parentheses. Sampling weights apply.

These results point to three crossing trends in the socio-cultural landscape. First, society is shifting away from religious conservatism and the traditional breadwinner family model. Church attendance is decreasing, as private permissiveness and support for (binary) gender equality is rising. This indicates that core values such as religiosity indeed (partly) guide attitudes on related easy issues, and that such public opinions gradually change over time.

Second, there is increasing support for government intervention in the economy, although this trend is contradicted by fluctuating institutional trust and political

ideology. We indeed expected ambiguous fluctuations in institutional trust, as a clear example of an evaluation-dependent preference. However, we also expected this for preferences for government involvement (which turns out to increase consistently), and not for political ideology (which fluctuates inconsistently).

Third, the Dutch cultural landscape has shifted towards a more materialistic and authoritarian position. Although we hypothesized that this value would change over time, we expected this trend to be more pronounced. Moreover, the population became more materialistic as opposed to post-materialistic between 1990 and 1999, and this shift persisted over time. Similarly, the acceptance of breaking the law has dropped persistently since 1999 and 2008.

Lastly, ethnic prejudice does not fit any of these trends, as it displays ambiguous fluctuations of decrease, increase, and stability. Especially the sharp increase in prejudice in 2008, the year the economic crisis hit, may indicate that this attitude is more context-dependent and volatile than the definition of 'easy issue' would suggest.²

25.5 Discussion

In this contribution, we built on prior work on value development in the Netherlands. We investigated earlier conclusions that values change less drastically than we may expect based on large-scale societal changes, and that citizens often fall back on long-standing values in Dutch society (Halman & Sieben, 2011). At first glance, our findings seem to indicate that, in fact, *everything* changes. However, when we zoom out and look at the substantive changes on a more general level, we indeed find indications that circumstances change, but people generally do not.

More specifically, we identified three crossing trends in the public opinion landscape of the Netherlands between 1990 and 2017. First of all, conservatism decreases along with declining religiosity, while, secondly, the wish for more government involvement grows. Lastly, we observe a tendency towards the pri-

2 Yet, this could also be due to the specific measurements used, as elaborated earlier.

ortization of materialist values over post-materialist ones. According to Inglehart (1977; 1997), people are more focused on materialism, authority, and order in times of (economic) insecurity and instability. Not only has secularization decreased the authoritarian and orderly influence of the church, economic developments may also strengthen feelings of insecurity and instability among the Dutch population. That is, while Dutch citizens become wealthier on average, wealth inequality is enormous in the Netherlands, especially compared to other countries (Toussaint et al., 2020). Moreover, the insecurities brought by the rise of the Artificial Intelligence Society (Inglehart, 2018), the increasingly flexible labor market (Green, 2017), and the instability of the housing market (Lennartz, Arundel & Ronald, 2016) can further increase the desire for state authority and the prioritization of the economy over post-materialist issues such as self-expression; not only among the older, lower educated, but also among the younger, higher educated citizens (Green, 2017). Furthermore, the cultural changes resulting from secularization, (post-)modernization and globalization can induce insecurity regarding identity and belonging, and thus strengthen the need for more stability and order among some groups in society (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). These interesting yet rather descriptive findings ask for future research including more advanced statistical analyses and formal tests of the possible, explanatory mechanisms.

In sum, our findings corroborate earlier work on value change in Dutch society and emphasize the important contributions Loek Halman has made in this field. At the same time, new societal developments and theoretical insights ask for more research in the years to come, indicating that Loek's research agenda as well as the importance of the European Values Study have not come to an end with Loek's retirement. We are honoured to be able to continue this tradition at our very own Tilburg University.

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