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### Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior

Adriaansen, M.L.

**Publication date**  
2011

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Adriaansen, M. L. (2011). *Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior*.

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**Chapter 1**

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**DEFINING POLITICAL TRUST AND CYNICISM:  
DISSECTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL ACTORS**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,  
co-authored by Will Tiemeijer.*

**Abstract**

Common wisdom and scholarly literature emphasize the risks of growing political distrust and cynicism. We study what trust or distrust/cynicism actually means for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes. Our scrutiny of the political trust and cynicism literature reveals two main dimensions: political actors' reliability and competence. We test the validity and comprehensiveness of these dimensions using two surveys. The first study ( $n = 436$ ) builds on closed-ended questions and confirmed that both reliability and competence are important dimensions. The second study ( $n = 426$ ) uses open-ended questions and showed no important additional dimensions. In both studies we found that reliability and competence consist of more elements than most scholars have suggested and that reasons for distrust are not the same as reasons for trust. Therefore we argue that all those elements should be included in measurement instruments for attitudes towards political actors.

## Introduction

The rise of negative attitudes towards political actors (politicians and political parties) is a widely debated phenomenon. Political cynicism and distrust are rising in a lot of modern democracies: citizens are less trustful towards political actors than they were a few decades ago (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007; Nye, et al., 1997; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). The growth of negative attitudes, and its possible causes and consequences, have been discussed extensively. The Netherlands are an odd case when it comes to trust. While trust declined in most western democracies, trust remained high in the Netherlands. This rapidly changed at the turn of the millennium, when trust decreased sharply (Bovens & Wille, 2009). Recently, two interesting articles were published about the possible causes of this rapid change. Bovens & Wille (2008) showed that political and economic contingencies are the most important short-term causes, while Hendriks (2009) studied the impact of more structural factors which are concealed behind these short-term factors. Although these articles yielded highly relevant insights, we think we should first find an answer to a more fundamental question: what does trust or distrust actually mean for citizens and which dimensions underlie these positive and negative attitudes towards political actors?

In definitions of political trust and cynicism two dimensions are prevalent (Dekker, Meijerink, & Schyns, 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007). The first dimension is related to political actors' reliability: are they honest? The second dimension is related to political actors' competence: are they skillful? In this chapter we study the dimensions of attitudes towards political actors in depth, by reporting on two survey studies measuring attitudes towards government. First, we use closed-ended questions to test the validity of the two dimensions *reliability* and *competence*. Second, we analyze open-ended questions to examine whether there are other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses open-ended questions to dissect attitudes towards political actors and that questions the validity and comprehensiveness of reliability and competence as dimensions of these attitudes.

### Trust and Cynicism: Attitudes Towards Political Actors

Different concepts are developed to measure attitudes towards political actors. Political cynicism and political (dis)trust are frequently measured attitudes and often the concepts are used interchangeably. The ninth edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary described trust as a firm belief in the reliability or truth or strength of a person. Cynicism is described as a nickname for a cynic: a person that has little faith in human sincerity or integrity. We

think that the absence of a firm belief in reliability or truth can be regarded as the same as little faith in sincerity. Linguistically trust and cynicism can thus be seen as opposites.

In the literature, political cynicism is often regarded as the negative end of political trust. Eisinger (2000: 55-56 ) for example made a comprehensive inventory of definitions of cynicism and concluded that definitions of political cynicism: "...collectively denote that cynicism is more than mild distrust. Cynicism entails intense, antagonistic distrust or contempt for humanity. A cynic has a sense of the political; she is not politically indifferent, but rather keenly aware of her politics and her political environment by self-consciously distancing herself from it". Eisinger (2000) accordingly described cynicism as *harsh distrust*, in line with Miller (1974a) who described a dimension of trust which runs from high trust to political cynicism. In this vein, Krouwel and Abts (2006; 2007) developed a more comprehensive scale of the degree of negativity of political attitudes, ranging from trust, scepticism, distrust and cynicism to alienation.

Several other authors explicitly regarded political cynicism as the opposite of political trust as well (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dalton, 2002; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber & Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008), most of them referring to Miller. In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes towards political actors. We are nevertheless aware that trust and cynicism can be defined in a variety of other ways. However, we are primarily interested in which dimensions underlie attitudes towards political actors, instead of the possible conceptual differences between trust and cynicism.<sup>11</sup>

Political attitudes have many possible objects. Easton (1965; 1975) made a study of the objects of political support, which also applies to other attitudes. He made a distinction between three levels, later refined by Dalton (1999; 2004), based on the idea that positive or negative attitudes can be directed towards different objects: (1) the political community in general, (2a) regime principles which are the democratic principles, (2b) regime norms and procedures which include system performance and (2c) regime institutions which are parliaments and government and (3) the political authorities which consist of the political actors representing these institutions. In general, in developed democracies, support for the political community and the regime principles, procedures and institutions are high; even the most cynical citizen is more or less supportive (Dalton, 1999, 2004). The recent rise in cynicism

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<sup>11</sup> We acknowledge that some studies suggest that trust and cynicism are not opposites, but for the argument put forward in this article this additional distinction is of little relevance.

and distrust in many countries seems to apply to the level of the authorities. Although we do not argue that negative attitudes cannot be directed to other levels, this study therefore focuses on the authorities, which are the political actors that represent the institutions.

### **Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Political Actors**

We use the political cynicism and trust literature to make a first overview of the possible dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. Although not all authors studying trust and cynicism explicitly defined the concepts, we can trace back their implicit theoretical premises by studying the measurement instruments they chose. In the following, we summarize and order the literature. Most scholars who defined cynicism or trust mentioned that these attitudes had to do with (aspects of) political actors' reliability. Many authors also referred to (aspects of) political actors' competence. Some authors referred to both reliability and competence (Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007). However, definitions were operationalized in a variety of ways, which we discuss in this section and summarize in Table 1.1.

**Elements related to reliability.** Almost all scholars who have studied political cynicism and trust referred to attitudes towards political actors' reliability, but they referred to many different elements, which we summarize in three elements. A first element of reliability that appears in the literature is *honesty*. Political actors have to be honest (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Eisinger, 2000; Ulbig, 2002) and fair (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Owen & Dennis, 2001; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), they have to be sincere and trustworthy, but are blamed to be crooked (Aberbach, 1969; Miller, 1974a; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and manipulative (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Some authors added corruption as a specific element of integrity (Bennett, 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006). Also, citizens expect political actors to be open and clear (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), while they think that too many political decisions are made in secret (Listhaug, 1995).

A second element of political actors' reliability is the extent to which they keep their *promises*. The idea is that they consciously promise more than they can deliver (Listhaug, 1995; Van der Brug, 2003). Political actors are not able to do what they promise, because they have to make compromises and this may result in undesirable commitments (Agger, et al., 1961). In election times they promise the world, while they know that after the elections they cannot fulfil these promises, especially in consensus democracies, where government decisions are based on compromises between the different parties in government.

Table 1.1: Literature Summary: the Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Political Actors

Category	Good and bad qualities
reliability - honesty	honest, fair, trustworthy, sincere (good), crooked, manipulative (bad) corrupt (bad) politics open and clear (good), politics too closed and secret (bad)
reliability - promises	promise more than they can deliver, too much (bad)
reliability - motives	motivations and ethics, do what is best for the country (good) represent the public interest (good) self-interested and look after their own interest (bad) subcategory: too concerned with public opinion and getting re-elected subcategory: money is primary motivation represent special interests, the elite or a few big interests (bad) favoritism (bad)
reliability - responsiveness	listen to the public, responsive (good), not interested in opinions (bad) reference to people like themselves, the ordinary citizen (good)
competence - general	are competent, smart, do the right things (good)
competence - taking charge	decisiveness, effective (good) efficient (good), wasting tax monies (bad)
competence - awareness	are aware of problems (good) politicians are precise (good) or superficial when dealing with problems (bad) politicians give sufficient information for citizens to form an opinion (good)

A third element is political actors' *motives*. Some authors referred to political actors' motivations (Eisinger, 2000; Krouwel & Abts, 2006) and ethical norms (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998); political actors should do what is best for the country (De Vreese, 2005). Many scholars focused on the question in whose interest political actors act. The main question is whether political actors act in the public interest and for the benefit of all the people (Bennett, et al., 1999; Miller, 1974a). Political actors are blamed to be self-interested, self-serving and look after personal interests (Bennett, 1997; Eisinger, 2000; Listhaug, 1995; Miller, 1974a; Van der Brug, 2003). More specifically they are blamed to be primarily motivated by money (Agger, et al., 1961) or to be too concerned with public opinion and getting re-elected (Agger, et al., 1961; De Vreese, 2004). Also, political actors are blamed to serve special interests, the elite or a few big interests (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Agger, et al., 1961; Bennett, 1997; Bennett, et al., 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974a). Related to this is perceived favoritism, the suspicion that political actors are in position because of their friends (Listhaug, 1995; Van der Brug, 2003).

A fourth element of political actors' reliability is their *responsiveness*. Although this is related to the concept of external political efficacy, some scholars included it in their definitions and measurement instruments of political trust and cynicism. Scholars mentioned that people expect their voices to be heard (Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Ulbig, 2002) and that they want political actors to be responsive to their needs, concerns, values, interests and demands (Owen & Dennis, 2001; Van Wessel, 2009). On the contrary, political actors are accused to be mainly interested in votes instead of opinions (Listhaug, 1995). Also, a reference to ordinary people is often made: political actors are blamed to be unresponsive to ordinary people (Listhaug, 1995; Van Wessel, 2009) and not to care about the opinions of ordinary people (Bennett, 1997).

**Elements related to competence.** Although reliability was most referred to in the political cynicism and trust literature, many authors included political actors' *competence* as well. We distinguish three elements in the literature. First, authors often referred to *general elements of competence*: political actors are expected to be competent (Dekker, et al., 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Schwartz, 1976; Ulbig, 2002), they have to be smart and they have to know what they are doing (Aberbach, 1969; Miller, 1974a) and they have to do the right things (Aberbach, 1969; Aberbach & Walker, 1970; Miller, 1974a; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001).

A second element of political actors' competence is that they have to *take charge* of important political problems. Political actors have to be decisive when dealing with problems (Owen & Dennis, 2001) and they have to be effective (Owen & Dennis, 2001; Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998). Also, political actors have to be efficient (Stokes, 1962 op cit. Hetherington, 1998; Ulbig, 2002) and should not waste tax money (Aberbach, 1969; Bennett, et al., 1999; Listhaug, 1995; Miller, 1974a).

A third and final element of political actors' competence concerns their *problem awareness*: they have to know what is going on and to be aware of important problems (Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006). Political decisions have to be well considered and negative attitudes may have to do with the idea that political actors are too superficial when dealing with specific issues (De Vreese, 2004, 2005; Owen & Dennis, 2001). Also, since citizens have to monitor government, they need sufficient information to form an opinion and political actors should help them gathering the information about relevant political issues (De Vreese, 2005; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008).

### Key Questions

The main question of this study is what the dimensions of positive and negative attitudes towards political actors are. Based on the literature, we hypothesize that (H1) the perception of political actors' reliability is a dimension of attitudes towards political actors and that (H2) the perception of political actors' competence is a dimension of attitudes towards political actors. Although our literature review revealed these two dimensions, they have not been studied systematically in one study. In addition, we assess whether other dimensions, not yet emphasized in the literature, are of relevance too. We therefore formulate an additional research question (RQ): are there other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, apart from perceptions of reliability and competence?

We use two surveys to address our expectations. In Study 1, we use closed-ended questions with several items to test whether reliability and competence are indeed important dimensions of positive and negative attitudes. In Study 2, we use open-ended questions to disentangle possible other dimensions. To our knowledge this study is the first to employ open-ended questions for studying attitudes towards political actors.

### Study 1: Testing the Dimensions Reliability and Competence

#### Data and Method

To measure the dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, we needed an unbiased question. Asking respondents whether they are cynical about political actors is *not* sufficiently neutral given the negative connotations of cynicism. We therefore chose a question about degrees of trust in political actors.

We used a dataset which was collected in May 2009 by market research company Veldkamp, commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). From a panel of approximately 120.000 Dutch citizens, a sample of the population of 18 years and older was selected, 600 persons, and invited to participate in a questionnaire. Of these persons, 436 completed the questionnaire, which yields a response rate of 73 percent. Appendix B shows that our respondents mirror census data in terms of age, gender, and education. We used a Computer Assisted Self Interviewing method (CASI), which means that the selected respondents received an email to participate and they filled in the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. To tap attitudes towards political actors, respondents were asked whether they trust government. In a follow up question these respondents were asked to indicate why they trust (34 percent) or distrust (61 percent) govern-



ment. Respondents were asked for their arguments in closed-ended questions showing several possible answer categories. These answer categories include the four elements of reliability and the three elements of competence. The exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix C. Those who answered “don’t know” (5 percent) were not asked for reasons.

We note that our question addresses government. However, additional analyses of the data did not provide a different pattern in answers for individuals favoring incumbent parties. We compared respondents who voted in 2006 for the parties that formed the government after the 2006 elections, with respondents who voted for parties that were not in government after the elections. Although respondents who voted for a governmental party felt more often positive about government than those who voted for a party that was not in government, the reasons for positive and negative attitudes were not significantly different for these two groups.

### Results

Table 1.2 shows the elements of positive as well as negative attitudes towards government.

**Reliability.** A large majority of the respondents mentioned an argument related to reliability, on the part of respondents with a positive attitude towards government (87 percent) as well on the part of respondents with a negative attitude (74 percent). The four elements related to reliability distinguished in the literature above are not equally often mentioned by respondents with positive and negative attitudes. *Honesty*, the first element, is not often mentioned, neither by respondents with a positive attitude (13 percent), nor by respondents with a negative attitude (10 percent). Second, *promises* were important for respondents with a negative attitude, half of them mentioned that government does not do what it promises (47 percent), while the opposite (government fulfils promises) was hardly mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude (1 percent). Third, *motives* were relevant for all respondents. A large majority of the respondents who expressed a positive attitude argued that what is best for the country (83 percent) prevails for government. Motives also lie behind negative attitudes; the idea that governmental actors only care about their own interests or the money they earn (combined 36 percent) was often mentioned by respondents with negative attitudes. Fourth, *responsiveness* to people like themselves, is not frequently mentioned, neither by respondents with a positive attitude (4 percent), nor by respondents with negative attitude (12 percent).

Table 1.2: Attitudes Towards Government, Closed-Ended Questions

Elements of positive attitudes	%	Elements of negative attitudes	%
<b>Reliability</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>Reliability</b>	<b>74</b>
honesty:		honesty:	
are honest and integer	13	are dishonest and not integer	10
promises:		promises:	
do what they promise	1	do not do what they promise	47
motives:		motives:	
try to do what is best for country	83	only care about own interests	31
-	-	only care about money they earn	10
responsiveness:	4	responsiveness:	
stand up for people like me		do not care about people like me	12
<b>Competence</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>Competence</b>	<b>74</b>
general:		general:	
are competent and able to do their job	45	are incompetent and unable to do job	14
taking charge:		taking charge:	
are decisive in taking care of problems	18	not decisive in taking care of problems	38
awareness:		awareness:	
know what is important for the people	10	don't know what is important for people	56
other reasons	2	other reasons	5
no reason	5	no reason	7
<i>average number of answers</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>average number of answers</i>	<i>2.2</i>

Note. Respondents could give 3 answers maximum.  $n = 436$ , positive  $n = 147$ , negative  $n = 266$ . Those who responded “don’t know” ( $n = 23$ ) were not asked for arguments.

**Competence.** Arguments related to competence are also mentioned by a majority of the respondents, by those with a positive attitude (59 percent) and even more by those with a negative attitude (74 percent). The first element of competence, *general competence*, was often mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude; they qualified government as competent and able to fulfil their tasks (45 percent), while respondents with a negative attitude not often mentioned this element (14 percent). Second, the idea that political actors have to *take charge*, was relevant for the respondents with a negative attitude, they mentioned the argument that government is not decisive in taking care of problems (38 percent), while the opposite was not often mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude (18 percent). Third, *problem awareness*, the perception that the government does not know what is important, was also more often mentioned by respondents with a negative attitude (56 percent), than the opposite was mentioned by respondents with a positive attitude.

### **Conclusions Study 1**

The results of Study 1 suggest that both reliability and competence are important dimensions of negative as well as positive attitudes and the results provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Remarkably, respondents who expressed negative attitudes mentioned *more* arguments than those who were positive. Also, we found that elements of positive attitudes (trust) are not necessarily the same as elements of negative attitudes (distrust). In Study 2 we pay more attention to these differences.

### **Study 2: Testing for Other Dimensions**

In our second study, we use open-ended questions to tap respondents' attitudes towards government. This study tests whether there are other dimensions of attitudes towards political actors, apart from reliability and competence. This study also provides a second test of the validity of reliability and competence.

### **Data and Method**

The dataset for this study was collected in May 2009 by market research company Veldkamp, commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). A sample of the population of 18 years and older was selected from the same panel as in Study 1 and the CASI method was used as well. 600 persons were invited to participate in a questionnaire. Of these persons, 426 completed the questionnaire, which yields a response rate of 71 percent. Appendix B shows that our respondents mirror census data in terms of age, gender, and education.

Respondents were asked whether they trust government and in a follow up question they were asked why they trust (35 percent) or distrust (57 percent) government. Those who answered "don't know" (8 percent) were not asked for reasons. Respondents were asked for their reasons in open-ended questions and could mention as many reasons as they wished. The exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix C. The data collection for Study 1 and 2 was highly comparable; the only difference is that the respondents in Study 1 were asked for arguments in a closed-ended question, while respondents in Study 2 were asked for arguments in an open-ended question.

**Reasons for using open-ended questions.** There are several advantages and disadvantages of open-ended questions, which are extensively summarized by Van Holsteyn (1994) and Swyngedouw (2001). Some advantages of open-ended questions compared to closed-ended questions apply specifically to this study. First, open-ended questions are useful

for exploring dimensions in reply behaviour, which is the aim of this study. Second, respondents can give replies from their own perspective. Academic scholars are usually politically interested and the way they talk about political actors may deviate strongly from the way “normal” citizens express their attitudes. Third, open-ended questions pose no limitations on reply alternatives: respondents can give as many answers as they wish. Fourth, open-ended questions limit the danger of socially desirable answers, especially when using a Computer Assisted Self Interviewing method (CASI), which we did.

Some disadvantages of open-ended questions that apply to the study of attitudes are that respondents give answers that are most accessible to them and that the answer may be dependent on verbal skills (Swyngedouw, 2001), although Geer (1988) has questioned this. In this study it is not relevant to know exactly how often reasons are mentioned, but to determine the existence of reasons. We prevented the disadvantage of greater interviewer effects (Shapiro, 1970) by using the CASI method.

**The coding procedure.** The answers to the open-ended questions were coded in two steps. We used the literature summary in Table 1.1 to make a first version of the coding scheme. This first version of the coding scheme was pretested (on 25 percent of all open answers) and adapted to allow every substantive answer given by respondents to be coded uniquely. The final version of the coding scheme is included in Appendix D and shows which categories are based on the literature and which are based on the pre-test. All categories are coded as dichotomous variables. All aspects of the answers respondents gave were coded.

The coding was carried out by two coders<sup>12</sup> who both coded all answers independent of each other. To test for inter-coder reliability we compared all answers given by both coders. We calculated mean pair-wise agreement and Cohen’s Kappa, which is a measure that controls for chance (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). The values for the mean pair-wise agreement range between 93 percent and 100 percent. The Cohen’s Kappa values range between .87 and 1.00. Overall, we find that the reliability of our measures was good.

## Results

Table 1.3 displays the results of the coding. We first have to make a general observation. The respondents were asked about government, which can refer to the institution or to the authorities, which are the political actors that represent the institution. Respondents’ answers revealed that they clearly thought of the latter. Most of the respondents referred to

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<sup>12</sup> The coders have at least a master’s degree in political sciences.

## VERSATILE CITIZENS

politicians in government and / or to politicians in general, but respondents never referred to government as an institution.

**Reliability.** Arguments related to perceptions of political actors' reliability were mentioned by more than a third of the respondents with a positive attitude towards government (38 percent) and more than half of the respondents with a negative attitude (58 percent).

First, the element of governmental actors' *honesty* was mentioned, as an element of positive attitudes (8 percent) as well as negative attitudes (18 percent). More precisely, respondents with a positive attitude mentioned that actors are trustworthy and sincere (5 percent). Respondents with a negative attitude mentioned the opposite, that actors are dishonest, crooked and manipulative (12 percent), but also that there is too much quarrel or actors blaming each other (6 percent).

The second element, concerning promises, was often mentioned by respondents who expressed negative attitudes; they complained that politicians in government do not hold their *promises* (26 percent), while the opposite – that they do hold their promises – was not often mentioned to explain positive attitudes (3 percent).

Third, perceived *motives* are used to explain positive (31 percent) as well as negative attitudes (20 percent). An often mentioned argument for a positive attitude was the idea that governmental actors have good intentions and will do what is best for the country (25 percent) and that they represent the general interest (8 percent). On the contrary, those who express negative feelings stated that actors represent their own interest (12 percent) or special interests (7 percent), instead of the general interest (5 percent).

The fourth element, a lack of *responsiveness*, was an argument for a negative attitude for some respondents (11 percent), while responsiveness was hardly ever mentioned to explain a positive attitude (1 percent). Respondents with negative attitudes complained that political actors do not listen to the public and that their voice is not heard and had the idea that political actors are more interested in their vote than in their opinion (6 percent). Also, respondents claimed that political actors do not stand for the common man or people like themselves (7 percent). Like in Study 1, responsiveness was not a very important element, but well over ten percent of the respondents with negative attitudes mentioned it.

## DEFINING POLITICAL TRUST AND CYNICISM

Table 1.3: Attitudes Towards Government, Open-Ended Questions

Elements of positive attitudes	%	Elements of negative attitudes	%
<b>RELIABILITY</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>RELIABILITY</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>reliability - honesty</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>reliability - honesty</b>	<b>18</b>
honest, not manipulative	5	dishonest, crooked, twisters, manipulative	12
not corrupt	-	corrupt	0
politics open, no backroom politics	3	politics to closed, backroom politics	2
not too much quarrel, blaming each other	-	too much quarrel, blaming each other	6
<b>reliability - promises</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>reliability - promises</b>	<b>26</b>
do what they promise	3	do not do what they promise	26
<b>reliability - motives</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>reliability - motives</b>	<b>20</b>
good intentions, do what is best for country	25	bad intentions, do not what is best for country	0
represent general interest	8	do not represent general interest	5
do not represent their own interest	1	represent their own interest	12
with getting re-elected, own career	1	not with getting re-elected, own career	2
money is not primary motivation	-	money is primary motivation, pocketbook	4
do not represent special interests, elite	-	represent special interests, elite	7
no favoritism	-	favoritism	0
<b>reliability - responsiveness</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>reliability - responsiveness</b>	<b>11</b>
responsive to the public	1	unresponsive, mainly interested in votes	6
refer to people like them, common man	-	refer to people like them, common man	7
<b>COMPETENCE</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>COMPETENCE</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>competence - general</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>competence - general</b>	<b>22</b>
competent, government performs or is good	25	not competent, government performs or is bad	12
things look good for country, will work out	6	things look bad for country, it is going worse	10
<b>competence - taking charge</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>competence - taking charge</b>	<b>36</b>
decisiveness, effective	15	no decisiveness, put things off, not effective	29
efficient, using tax money efficiently	-	not efficient, wasting tax monies	7
<b>competence - awareness</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>competence - awareness</b>	<b>9</b>
aware of problems, what is important	-	not aware of problems, what is important	7
precise when dealing with problems	3	superficial when dealing with problems	1
sufficient information to form opinion	-	not sufficient information to form an opinion	1
<b>POLICY AGREEMENT</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>POLICY AGREEMENT</b>	<b>22</b>
respondent agrees with policy, ideology, political parties	14	respondent disagrees with policy, ideology, political parties	22
<b>DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM</b>	<b>0</b>
democratic elections or decision-making	15	not democratically chosen, decision-making	0
<b>OTHER</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>OTHER</b>	<b>7</b>
focused on the long term	-	focused on short term, instead of long term	4
stable	4	not stable	1
cannot satisfy all, do everything perfectly	7	-	-
politics is important, interested	-	politics is unimportant, not interested	0
negative motivation	4	positive motivation	0
<i>average number of answers</i>	1.6	<i>average number of answers</i>	2.0

*Note.* Respondents could give as many answers as they wished.  $n = 426$ , positive  $n = 150$ , negative  $n = 241$ . Those who responded “don’t know” ( $n = 35$ ) were not asked for arguments.

## VERSATILE CITIZENS

**Competence.** Arguments related to competence were mentioned by half of the respondents with a positive attitude (47 percent) as well as the respondents with a negative attitude (52 percent).

First, respondents referred to *general elements of competence*, though this was mentioned somewhat more often by the respondents who expressed positive feelings (31 percent) than the ones who were negative (22 percent). The idea that political actors are competent, capable, skilful or smart, and that government performs good was most often mentioned by respondents who had a positive attitude (25 percent), and the opposite was also mentioned by respondents with a negative attitude (12 percent). Both respondents who were positive (6 percent), as well as those who were negative (10 percent) referred to the general state of the country.

The second element, about governmental actors *taking charge* of problems, was especially important for respondents with negative attitudes (36 percent), but also for respondents with positive attitudes (15 percent). Respondents with negative attitudes disapproved the lack of decisiveness, they claimed that the government puts too many things off and fails to do what is necessary (29 percent), respondents who were positive mentioned the opposite argument as well: that government is decisive (15 percent). Some negative respondents explicitly claimed that the government wastes tax money and is inefficient (7 percent), while the opposite argument was not mentioned by respondents who were positive.

The third element, *awareness*, was not as often mentioned as the other elements, neither by positive respondents (3 percent), nor by negative respondents (9 percent). This is remarkable, since it was often mentioned by negative respondents in Study 1.

**Other elements.** Respondents mentioned many other elements, which do not clearly belong to the dimensions reliability and competence. First, many respondents mentioned arguments related to *policy agreement*. Respondents' view on specific policy decisions or political ideology was a reason to express positive attitudes towards government and some people said they agreed with specific political parties in government (14 percent). For respondents with negative attitudes, policy disagreement was also an important reason (22 percent). Second, many respondents who were positive about government referred to the electoral system (15 percent). Respondents mentioned that political actors are democratically chosen and at the end of the electoral cycle one can choose someone else. Also, parties in government have to negotiate with other parties, which is good for democracy.

Finally, other arguments were mentioned as well, but not very often. Some respondents who were positive wanted to put negativism into perspective; they stated that

they do think government will do the best possible although nobody performs perfectly and argued that since one cannot satisfy everybody there will always be people complaining (7 percent). Some respondents who expressed a positive attitude gave a negative argument: it could have been worse or there is no alternative (4 percent).

### **Conclusions Study 2**

Study 2 reinforced our conclusions of Study 1: both reliability and competence are important dimensions of attitudes towards political actors. This provides additional support for our first and second hypothesis. Remarkably, the dimensions reliability and competence consist of more sub elements than most scholars suggest. Most scholarly definitions of political trust and cynicism include general references to reliability and competence, without specifying it. Most measurement instruments of attitudes towards political actors measure some specific elements, but not all elements. Based on the findings of this study, we think that a measurement instrument should comprise *all* these elements.

Two other elements were often mentioned as well, policy agreement and references to the electoral system, but we do not think we should see these elements as dimensions. With regard to the first element, it is questionable whether we should see policy agreement as an extra dimension or as a cause of negative or positive attitudes. Low policy satisfaction can lead to negative attitudes towards government and high policy satisfaction can lead to positive attitudes. Also, citizens who voted for a governmental party have more positive feelings about government than those who voted for another party (Anderson & Guillory, 1997). We do not think, however, that policy (dis)satisfaction should be regarded as an extra dimension. The second element, the fact that respondents refer to the political system, has to do with democracy as a safeguard for political actors' behaviour. In other words, trusting the regime principles as well as norms and procedures (Easton's second level) seems to be a precondition for trusting political actors. The electoral system is rather a precondition than a dimension of attitudes towards political actors. With regard to the research question we therefore conclude that there are no other important dimensions.

Other results were worth mentioning as well. First, when we asked respondents why they trust or distrust government, most of them referred to politicians in government and sometimes to politicians in general, but never to the institution. This is a relevant notion for scholars studying attitudes towards political actors and institutions. Although scholars might distinguish between government as an institution and the actors that work for the institution, many citizens seem to focus on the latter. Related to this finding, Tiemeijer (2006; 2008)



argued that most respondents in opinion surveys do not differentiate between politicians in government and in parliament. Although Easton's three levels are of great value, we need to realize that for many citizens this distinction is not fully clear. Nevertheless, some respondents mentioned that the political system as a safeguard for untrustworthy politicians and these citizens do seem to be able to distinguish between the levels.

Second, although overall reliability and competence are both important dimensions of positive and negative attitudes towards political actors, elements for positive attitudes are not always the same as elements for negative attitudes. We found this in Study 1 as well as in Study 2. While respondents with positive attitudes towards government mentioned that political actors try to do the best, respondents with negative attitudes were more precise and mentioned that political actors fail to do what they promise and represent their own interest. Also, respondents with positive attitudes said that governmental actors are competent, while those who are negative claimed more specifically that they are not decisive and do not know what is important. Those who expressed negative attitudes thus gave more specific arguments than those who expressed positive attitudes.

Third, those who expressed negative attitudes mentioned on average *more arguments* in the open-ended questions than those who expressed positive attitudes (on average 2.0 arguments compared to 1.6, significant  $p < .001$ ). In Study 1 we also saw that respondents with negative attitudes gave more arguments than respondents with positive attitudes. In summary, those who express negative attitudes not only mention more arguments, but also give more specific arguments. This suggests that people who expressed negative attitudes about political actors either feel more obliged to come up with arguments or they feel more emotional arousal when thinking about political actors, and that they consciously express themselves.

### **General Discussion**

This chapter used two survey datasets to further develop the validity and comprehensiveness of reliability and competence as dimensions that underlie attitudes towards political actors. In our first study we analyzed closed-ended questions and reinforced the validity of reliability and competence. In our second study we examined open-ended questions and found again that these are the most important dimensions, but we also found that reliability and competence consist of more elements than extant research suggested.

We used datasets that asked respondents about (dis)trusting *government*. We do think however that the results of Study 1 and 2 can be generalized to political actors in general.

First, the answers of Study 2 and other studies (Tiemeijer, 2006; 2008) revealed that many citizens are not aware of the distinction between Easton's three levels. When asked about government, most respondents thought about *politicians* in government or in general, not about the institution. Second, we compared the results of Study 1 with a study that included questions about (dis)trusting national politicians, with answering categories that were almost equal to Study 1 (Steenvoorden, Van der Meer, & Dekker, 2009).<sup>13</sup> The results of this other study were highly comparable to Study 1, which suggests that the elements of (dis)trust towards government are the same as the elements of (dis)trust towards national politicians.

### **Lessons for Future Research**

Both Bovens and Wille (2008) and Hendriks (2009) showed that trust has become volatile in the Netherlands. After a sharp decrease at the turn of the century, trust figures seemed to recover in 2007, but dropped again the year after. As Hendriks points out, it is hard to determine what exactly grows if trust declines. In other words: what does an increase of negative attitudes mean? In our view, this question has two aspects: how strong negative attitudes are and which dimension attitudes are directed to. An adequate measurement instrument should enable us to answer both questions.

First, a measurement instrument should differentiate between levels of negativity (and positivity). A simple measurement item like "to what extent do you trust government" only fulfils this first criterion if the answers are not dichotomous. Both Bovens and Wille (2008) and Hendriks (2009) used Eurobarometer data, which have the advantage of regular measurement, but the disadvantage of dichotomous answer categories. A measurement instrument should enable a researcher to distinguish between different levels of negativity or positivity, not only between those who trust and those who distrust. Some large data collection projects such as World Values Survey and European Social Survey do use answer categories with more variation – they allow the respondent to tell to what extent s/he trusts actors – and fulfil this criterion.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, we would prefer a measurement instrument that consists of several statements with different levels of cynicism, instead of a single measurement item.

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<sup>13</sup> The question about government in our Study 1 permitted a maximum of 3 answers. The question about national politicians in the SCP study permitted a maximum of 2 answers. Also, the answer category on motives differed slightly in the surveys.

<sup>14</sup> Eurobarometer measures trust in government, parliament and political parties, using two answer categories: 0 (tend not to trust) and 1 (tend to trust). World Values Survey measures confidence in six different institutions, using four answer categories, ranging from 1 (none at all) to 4 (a great deal). European Social Survey measures trust in parliament, political parties and politicians, using eleven answer categories ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust).

Second, attitudes towards political actors consist of several elements of the dimensions reliability and competence. Therefore we would like to argue that a measurement instrument should at least include the key elements of *both* dimensions, while existing measurement instruments either map a general sense of trust or only a few elements. With respect to reliability, a measurement instrument should not only map general feelings of political actors' honesty, but also map to what extent respondents think that political actors hold their promises, whether they are interested in what is best for the country instead of their own interests or special interests and whether they are responsive to the public or only interested in their votes. With respect to competence, a measurement instrument should map to what extent respondents think political actors are competent and able to do their job, but also whether they are decisive in taking care of problems and whether they are aware of important problems. A measurement item like "to what extent do you trust government" does not fulfil this second criterion. In summary, a measurement instrument should comprise several statements which vary in their level of negativity and positivity and contain several elements of reliability and competence. Further research is necessary to develop such statements.

### **Attitudes in Different Political Systems**

When measuring attitudes towards political actors we should be aware that these attitudes may be contingent on the democratic system; different systems may lead to more positive or negative attitudes towards political actors. Some authors compared attitudes in consensus democracies with attitudes in majoritarian democracies. Whereas majoritarian democracies are characterized by disproportional two-party electoral systems and the concentration of governmental power in one-party, consensus democracies are characterized by proportional multiparty electoral systems and power sharing in coalition cabinets (Lijphart, 1984, 1999). Anderson and Guillory (1997; see also Lijphart, 1999) and Van der Meer (2009) found higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust in consensus democracies compared to majoritarian democracies, while Norris (2002) did not find this relationship. Banducci, Donovan and Karp (1999) studied the transition from majoritarianism to proportionality in New Zealand and found that political trust had risen after the transition.

Several aspects of the democratic system may affect attitudes towards political actors. On the one hand, in consensus democracies with multiparty governments more different voices are represented, in parliament as well as in government, and this may induce positive attitudes (Van der Meer, 2009; Wattenberg, 2007). Also, the consensus culture of proportional systems may make citizens realize that politics is the art of compromise and may therefore

make them milder when judging political actors (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). On the other hand, in majoritarian systems with single party governments it is easier to assign responsibility for policy choices to a specific party and this may induce positive attitudes (Van der Meer, 2009). Also, political actors in proportional systems have to reach consensus with their opponents, since government is always run by more than one political party. For this reason, parties cannot fulfil all promises they made during election time (Hendriks, 2009). Furthermore, political actors in proportional systems have to deliberate carefully to reach consensus and therefore cannot take charge of problems quickly (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Hendriks, 2009). Also, publicly claiming a victory after a political deliberation process can destroy the relationship between politicians of different parties. Following, political actors in proportional systems may seem to be less decisive in taking care of problems.

Some of the elements we found may be related to the proportional democratic system of the Netherlands and results in a majoritarian system could have been different. We suppose that two elements may be found more often in proportional systems than in majoritarian systems. First, the idea that political actors do not fulfil their promises was an important element of negative attitudes in our study. Politicians in consensus government simply cannot fulfil all their promises, because they have to negotiate with other parties. This element may not be equally important in majoritarian systems, since it is much easier for parties in single party governments to do what they promised – which does not necessarily mean that they do. Second, the idea that political actors are not decisive in taking care of problems was often mentioned in our study. This may be related to the fact that political actors have to reach consensus with many other actors and with the fact that they cannot claim victory. This element may therefore be less important in majoritarian systems as well.

Other elements may be found more often in majoritarian systems than in proportional systems. First, political actors' responsiveness was mentioned in our study, but not very often. Due to the proportional electoral system, many different voices are represented in parliament and government. In majoritarian systems, government is formed by only one party and parliament consists of just a few parties. For this reason, it is possible that the idea of responsiveness is a more relevant element in majoritarian democracies. Second, political actors' awareness might be mentioned even more in majoritarian systems. Because not so many different voices can be represented in majoritarian systems, citizens might more often think politicians do not know what is important for people like them. When a specific group

## VERSATILE CITIZENS

of citizens is not heard in a consensus democracy, one of them can decide to found a new party and fill this gap.

In summary, it is likely that some elements are more important in consensus democracies, while other elements are more important in majoritarian democracies. We have no reason to expect that in one of the systems there will be more cynicism towards political actors' reliability or competence. In consensus democracies, both an element of reliability (promises) and competence (taking charge) is specifically vulnerable. Equally, in majoritarian democracies, one element of reliability (responsiveness) and competence (awareness) is a vulnerable spot. Future research could shed more light on these potential differences. It would be highly interesting to compare all the elements in the different systems. We do think however, that all elements will be found in both systems and that the findings of this study therefore apply to all democratic systems.