



**Joining hands: a study on the effect of citizen participation on political trust  
in the Netherlands**

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**Abstract**

The decline of political trust is frequently considered one of the most important political problems of modern time. Despite the multitude of explanations for varying levels of political trust, there is remarkable convergence about the idea that citizen participation will enhance political trust. This research has used a multilevel regression analysis on multiple-wave panel data, and included income as a moderating variable, to gain a more thorough understanding of the effect of citizen participation on political trust. A micro-macro interaction approach is used by applying Rational Choice Theory and Social Categorization Theory to explain the effect of citizen participation on political trust. Results show that people who took part in citizen participation meetings had higher political trust. There was no moderation effect, the effect was the same for all income groups. The results confirm previous research and suggest that citizen participation is an effective policy tool to increase political trust, for all income groups.

*Keywords:* Citizen participation; Political trust; Income groups; Political participation

**Ethical Statement**

The research question and design of this study is approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University. The approval is filed under number 22-0605. This approval is based on the research question, the secondary use of existing data (from the LISS panel), and the ethical procedure that was used by the researchers of the LISS panel. This means that there are no ethical objections against this study.

### **Joining hands: a study on the effect of citizen participation on political trust in the Netherlands**

The decline of political trust is frequently considered one of the most important political problems of modern time (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). Reason for this is that political trust is found to be essential for democratic societies to run smoothly. For instance, high levels of political trust are related to compliance with law and support for government policy (Lee & Schachter, 2019), less social conflict and more compromise (Newton et al., 2017), and higher voter turnout (Lee & Schachter, 2019). That is why, at the beginning of 2022 the Dutch government published the final Dutch coalition agreement of 2021-2025. Within this agreement, multiple goals were listed, including the restoration of the political trust of Dutch citizens (Rijksoverheid, 2021). This is because after a period of steady incline, the Netherlands has seen a significant drop of political trust since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of 2020 to the end of 2021, the percentage of people that indicated that they trust the Dutch government dropped from 70% to less than 46% (SCP, 2021). This means that currently, more than half of the Dutch experience low levels of political trust. However, political trust is unstable, and shown to be responsive to short-term variations like changes in the economy, elections or changes in law or policy (Uslaner, 2017). It is therefore difficult for governments to implement policies to restore declining levels of political trust.

Despite the multitude of explanations for varying levels of political trust (see Appendix A for the literature study), there is remarkable convergence about the idea that citizen participation will enhance political trust. The theoretical argument central to this is the “participation thesis”, which states that individuals are more likely to trust governmental institutions when they are involved in decision-making and feel empowered to influence public policy (Wu et al., 2017). Some even state that citizens will alienate from politics altogether without direct participation (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). That is why the Dutch government has started to use citizen participation as a political instrument to increase levels of political trust in the Netherlands (Michels, 2011). However, there is limited empirical research on the actual effect of citizen participation on political trust (He & Ma, 2021). Furthermore, the evidence that is out there shows very mixed results. First, citizen participation is not popular among the Dutch population. Research by the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) shows that more than 80% of the Dutch population has never participated in a citizen participation initiative (VNG, 2016). Furthermore, empirical research shows mixed results on the effects of citizen participation on political trust. For instance,

researchers have found that citizen participation lead to an increase in political trust in China (He & Ma, 2021; Ma & Christenensen, 2019), and in Israel (Mizrahi et al., 2009). On the other hand, Michels & De Graaf (2010) found that citizen participation resulted in increased expectations, which in turn led to less positive attitudes towards governmental institutions. More recently, similar results were found in Norway as well. There was a strong negative relationship between citizen participation and trust in local government (Holum, 2022). This was due to a selection effect: citizens who participated, did so because of protesting reasons. It is thus not clear how effective citizen participation initiatives by governmental institutions actually are, when the goal is to increase political trust.

The mixed results of previous empirical studies raise the question whether the theory that citizen participation has a positive effect on political trust is correct. Furthermore, most research that has been done so far have performed case studies or cross-sectional research. Causal evidence of the effect of citizen participation on political trust is difficult to establish with cross-sectional analysis (Lee & Schachter, 2019). For instance, the relationship could also be reversed, where political trust leads to participation (He & Ma, 2021). Lastly, according to Van der Meer (2017), in previous research on political trust not enough attention has been paid to moderating and mediating factors that influence relationships with political trust. Moderating factors could strongly impact the effectiveness of policies targeted at increasing political trust, which is currently largely overlooked. This research tries to add to the discussion on the effect of citizen participation on political trust by filling in these gaps, using the following research question:

*What is the effect of citizen participation on political trust and how does this effect differ for different income groups in the Netherlands?*

This research will use multiple-wave panel data, and a corresponding research method to solve some of the methodological issues of cross-sectional research methods. Income will be included as a moderating variable, to gain a more thorough understanding of the effect of citizen participation on political trust. This research will also use the literatures and outcomes of the study to assess whether citizen participation is a fitting political tool to increase political trust in the Netherlands. This will be done using the following policy question:

*How can municipalities implement or improve citizen participation policy, in order to increase political trust?*

## **Theory**

### **Definition of political trust**

Political trust is defined as the belief that political institutions (such as the executive government, municipalities and the police) are motivated and competent to act in the individual's interest, and will actually do so (Uslaner, 2017). Another definition of political trust is the individual belief that political institutions will stick to their obligations and do everything they can to try and fulfil them (Newton et al., 2017). Low levels of trust thus indicate that citizens do not think that the government is competent, or doing the right thing for them (Lee & Schachter, 2018). As stated before, political trust is not stable over time, as governments are continuously performing, and individuals are continuously evaluating this performance (Van der Meer, 2017). This is very different from other types of trust, which do remain relatively stable over time (Uslaner, 2018).

### **The effect of citizen participation on political trust**

It is largely agreed that citizen participation increases political trust. Citizen participation can take on many forms, that can be roughly divided into two main categories. The first is indirect participation, which is when individuals select representatives that make decisions for them. The second is direct participation, which is the direct involvement of citizens in the preparation, implementation or evaluation of governmental policy (Jo & Nabatchi, 2021). This research focuses on direct citizen participation, as this is the type of citizen participation that is used in policy to increase political trust (Michels, 2011). Most recent research on political trust, states that the effect of citizen participation on political trust can be best explained using the Micro-Macro Interactive approach (also known as the Trust as Evaluation approach; Van der Meer & Hakverdian, 2017). This approach pays close attention to the interaction between individuals and the context they live in. Citizens evaluate the political context they operate in, by looking at the political procedures and outcomes that are relevant to them. Based on this evaluation, individuals adapt their level of political trust accordingly (Noordzij et al., 2021; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Van der Meer, 2017). Examples of Micro-Macro interactive approaches are Rational Choice Theory and Social Categorization Theory. Both theories explain that citizen participation is part of the political context, to which people react and adapt their political trust.

### ***Rational Choice Theory***

The Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is of economic origin and is used to explain a

broad range of individual behaviors. RCT states that individuals evaluate their environment or a specific interaction, and make rational choices to achieve the outcome that is in their best interest (Cook & Santana, 2017). When the political environment does not produce policy outcomes with the best perceived outcome for the individuals, it is a rational choice to decrease or withdraw trust in political institutions. He & Ma (2021) have confirmed that when an interaction with the government is largely positive, citizens will evaluate the competency of the government positively and place trust in it.

Citizen participation could lead to more positive interactions between the government and citizens, resulting in a better evaluation of the political context and the choice to trust the government for the next exchange. For instance, it is shown that citizens who participated in policymaking, perceived the government to be more democratic, accountable and responsive (Ma & Christensen, 2019). As a result, they were more likely to trust the government than those who did not participate (Ma & Christensen, 2019). However, some researchers found opposite results. For instance, Kweit and Kweit (2007) found that when citizens participated, they were sometimes exposed to a political system they disliked, which made them frustrated and decreased their political trust.

Besides stimulating positive interactions between the government and citizens, citizens that are involved in decision making can push topics or policies that are in their best interests (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). This means that citizen participation can produce the optimal outcome for individuals. For instance, Hong & Cho (2018) found that citizen participation in public budgeting resulted in larger budget allocation to low-income groups, compared to traditional bureaucratic decision-making. It is then the rational choice to trust the political institutions within the current political context, because citizen participation produces good policy outcomes.

Rational Choice Theory assumes that the decision maker has the perfect amount of information to make the best rational choice on whether to trust government institutions. In reality, information on political processes is limited. In fact, complexity and lack of understanding of the political processes were named as factors that decreased political trust (Peeters et al., 2020). Citizen participation can improve understanding of the decision-making process, and transparency between government and citizens. The ability to understand political processes well, results in more confidence in the exchange with political institutions, which in turn has a positive effect on political trust (Agger, 2012; Pagliara et al., 2021). Research by He & Ma (2021) and Michels & de Graaf (2010) has shown that citizen

participation increased the understanding of political processes, which in turn increased political trust.

### *Social Categorization Theory*

A second theory that uses a Trust as Evaluation approach to explain the relationship between citizen participation and political trust is social categorization theory (Turner, 2010). Social Categorization Theory emphasizes the process by which people categorize themselves and others into differentiated groups, distinguishing between in- and outgroups. Honesty and trustworthiness are assigned to the groups individuals relate to the most, while other groups are seen as untrustworthy (Kramer, 2017). The political context matters for this in- and outgroup distinction. According to Miller (1974), the main explanation for varying levels of political trust is political distance. This is the distance between the position of the government and the issues the individual experiences. When political distance is large, governmental policy does not align with personal views. In this situation, it is likely that the governmental institution is viewed as an outgroup, and therefore evaluated as not trustworthy. Qualitative research by the Verwey-Jonker institute confirm this. Participants indicated that when they experienced political distance, their trust in politics would decrease (Peeters et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that citizens who voted for parties that won the election, showed higher political trust than those who voted for parties on the losing side of the election (Anderson, 2009).

To decrease political distance, the political context needs to change. With citizen participation, the individual becomes part of the policy making process. They have become part of the political sphere. This change is enough to positively influence the evaluation of governmental processes, and thus increase political trust. Simon-Kumar (2018) shows that even if actors disagree with the outcomes, having participated is enough to result in high levels of political trust. Similar to this, there are findings that citizens who participate in decision-making tend to feel better about the policy outcome, and are thus more likely to positively evaluate the quality and the performance of the (local) government (He & Ma, 2021; Kramer, 2017; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Based on the Rational Choice Theory and Social Categorization Theory, the following hypothesis was derived:

*H1: Citizens who take part in citizen participation meetings will have higher levels of political trust.*



### **How income influences the effect of citizen participation on political trust**

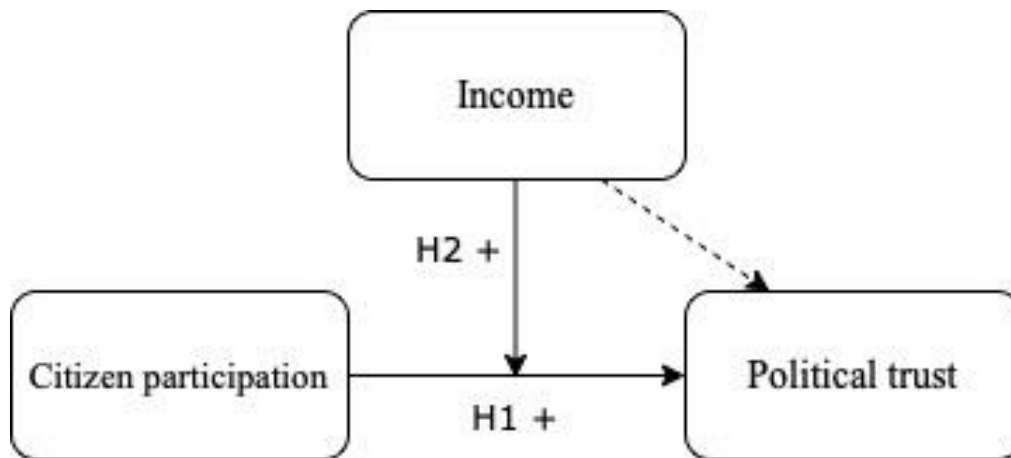
According to Van der Meer (2017), there are a lot of factors that influence the relationship between citizen participation and political trust that are currently overlooked. It does not only matter what influences the evaluation of political processes, but also who is evaluating the political context (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). For instance, previous research shows that macro-level political performance or outcomes matter most for those groups who are sensitive to this particular outcome (Anderson & Singer, 2008). As an example, when US governments installed new policies tackling poverty, the political trust of lower income groups increased more than the political trust of the highest income groups (Anderson & Singer, 2008). This means that, while citizen participation is expected to increase political trust, it is likely that this effect will not be as strong for every social group.

Research by Rockers et al. (2012) shows that lower income groups are less trusting of governmental institutions. This is because lower income groups often experience inequality in their daily life, and tend to blame governmental institutions (Van der Meer, 2017). Based on these findings, it is very likely that for lower income groups, citizen participation will only increase political trust when citizen participation meetings are about decreasing (economic) inequality. Furthermore, citizen participation is not equally divided across different social groups. For instance, in the Netherlands higher income groups are more likely to participate than lower income groups (VNG, 2016). This can actually result in more inequality, since power and resources are then unevenly distributed among citizens (Yang & Pandey, 2011). The benefits of citizen participation are expected to be the largest for the income groups that participate the most. In fact, previous research has found that the more unrepresentative the group of citizens that partake in a citizen participation initiative, the less likely change will occur in government policy (Yang & Pandey, 2010). This is called the Mattheus-Effect: those who already benefit from current policy, will gain even more benefit from citizen participation, while others will benefit even less than before (Snel et al., 2015). When citizens of lower income groups are underrepresented in citizen participation meetings, it is likely that the policy outcome will not be satisfactory for them. This results in lower levels of political trust after citizen participation, compared to high income groups.

Following Rational Choice Theory, when the outcome of the interaction with governmental institutions was not in the best interest of the individual they will decrease their political trust for future interactions. This is the opposite of the desired outcome of the citizen participation meetings. However, results by Hong & Cho (2018) show opposite results, where the outcomes of citizen participation are actually more beneficial to lower income groups

compared to middle and high income groups. This is due to the so called Social Pressure Effect, which posits that social pressure during public-forum discussions can influence participating citizens to make redistributive decisions. Still, following the reasoning of Rational Choice Theory, it is likely that the outcome of citizen participation is less satisfactory for lower income groups. The low income group will then evaluate the political context as being unfair, and lower their trust in political institutions.

*H2: the positive effect of citizen participation on political trust is lower for lower income groups, compared to high income groups.*



**Fig. 1** The conceptual model of this study, with the constructs in rectangles and hypotheses (H#) on arrows, plus or minus indicates the expected direction of the relationship

## Method

### Data

I tested the effect of citizen participation on political trust using a quantitative research design with open source data of the LLIS Core Study from the Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel, administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands). The core study of the LLIS panel is designed to follow changes in the life course of the panel members, and is repeated yearly since October 2007. To collect the LISS panel data, questionnaires are sent to panel members each month, containing multiple subjects including work and schooling, politics and values, and economic situation. The questionnaires are filled in online, using a computer, and take 15 to 30 minutes to complete (LISS panel,

n.d.). For this study, I used variables from the questionnaires *Background variables*, *Health* and *Politics and Values* to analyse the research question. Multiple waves of these questionnaires will be used. The first wave was excluded due to missing variables. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to influence the results of the study, I also excluded the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> waves of the LISS study. For these waves, data was collected in the years 2019 (for which data is partly collected in 2020) to 2022. This means that I only used the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> waves of the LLIS Core Study, for which data was collected in the years 2009 to 2019.

The total sample of the LLIS panel is a true probability sample, drawn from the population register of Statistics Netherlands (CBS). From this register households is randomly selected using a stratified sampling method to represent the Dutch population. One member of the household is selected to fill in the questionnaires, for which they receive payment once the questionnaire is completed. People without a computer or internet connection were provided with one in order to ensure representation of difficult-to-reach groups as well (LISS panel, n.d.). This way, LLIS can ensure that the sample is an accurate representation of the Dutch population. Refreshment samples are drawn every two years, to account for households that dropped out.

This procedure has resulted in a sample that consists of 5000 randomly selected households living in the Netherlands, which are approximately 7500 respondents. The respondents are equally male or female, and with ages ranging from 16 to 98 years old. For this study, I only included respondents that participated in the surveys about politics and values. Following procedure of Young & Johnson (2015), I excluded respondents that participated in less than half of the waves (so less than 6 questionnaires) from analyses to account for attrition bias. This has resulted in a final sample of 2730 respondents. Descriptive statistics of the sample can be seen in Table 1.

## **Measurements**

### ***Political trust***

The dependent variable of this research is political trust. Political trust is the positive evaluation of multiple political institutions (Newton et al., 2017). To measure political trust, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 0 “Not at all” to 10 “Completely”, how much they trusted the Dutch government, the Dutch parliament, the legal system, the police, politicians, political parties, the European Parliament, the United nations and the media. This question was asked during all eleven waves in the *Politics and Values* questionnaire. I did a

exploratory factor analysis with oblimin rotation to see which institutions should be included in the political trust scale. Results showed three different factors, for Dutch politics, World politics and law-enforcement. I decided to measure political trust using the items for trust in Dutch politics, which are the scales on the Dutch government, the Dutch parliament, Dutch politicians and Dutch political parties ( $\alpha = .930$ ). Afterwards, I calculated the average score over as an indication of overall political trust. When respondents that did not report a score on three or four of these institutions, the average score was set to missing. A higher score indicates a higher level of political trust.

### ***Citizen participation***

The independent variable of this research was citizen participation. This research is about direct political citizen participation, which is the participation in the preparation, implementation or evaluation of governmental policy by local citizens (Rijksoverheid, 2020). In the LISS *Politics and Values* survey, direct citizen participation was measured using one question. This question was asked during all of the used waves of the survey. Respondents were asked whether they “*Participated in a government-organized public hearing, discussion or citizen participation meeting*”. There were two answers possible, 0) No or 1) Yes. I therefore operationalized citizen participation as a dummy variable, where 0 = did not take part in citizen participation meeting, and 1 = did take part in citizen participation meeting.

### ***Income group***

Income group was a moderating variable for the relationship between political trust and citizen participation in this study. In the LISS questionnaire *Background Variables*, income was measured in multiple ways. First, respondents were asked to fill in their personal gross monthly income and net monthly income in Euros. When net income was not entered, an estimate was made based on the gross income. Afterwards, net income was standardized to account for household composition, using guidelines from CBS (2020). However, it is more relevant to make the distinction between income groups, instead of personal net monthly income, because governmental policy is most often based on income groups, not personal income (van Essen et al., 2022). That is why I created a new variable that assigned each respondent to either 0= low income group, 2= middle income group or 3= high income group, based on their standardized income. I based the limit of the low income group on the 40% households with the lowest income in the Netherlands, and the the high income group on the

20% households with the highest income in the Netherlands. The middle income group consists of the other 40% of households (CBS, 2020).

### ***Control variables***

#### **Age**

The first variable that I controlled for is age. Age changes over time, and is previously shown to have a positive influence on political trust. As age increases, political trust does too (Schoon et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has also been found that age has an effect on citizen participation; most people that participate are middle aged or older (Snel et al., 2015). Age was directly measured during each LISS survey and could therefore be preloaded in the dataset of this study. Age was measured in years, and ranged from 16 to 97 years old. Age was not equally divided across the sample. However, I decided to leave young respondents (aged 16 to 21) in the dataset. This is because a range of Dutch municipalities have installed citizen participation initiatives specifically targeted at young people in order to decrease political distance and increase political interest and trust (Gemeentepeiler, 2019).

#### **Health**

Another control variable in this study is individual mental and physical health. Bad health is shown to have a negative effect on income (Burgard & Lin, 2013), especially when someone experiences health issues for a longer period of time. Furthermore, it is likely that someone would not participate in citizen participation meetings when experiencing poor health (Fröding et al., 2012; Mattila, 2020). Lastly, multiple researchers have found a link between personal health and political trust. Lindström (2009) has found that the sense that one's health is weak, is related to low levels of trust in the Swedish parliament. This is because people tend to hold governmental institutions responsible for their (bad) health (Mattila & Rapeli, 2018).

Within the *Health* questionnaire of the LISS panel, health is operationalized as the amount of experienced hindrance in your work- or personal life due to physical or mental problems. However, it was unclear which items in the dataset measured this. That is why I selected 15 similar looking items, and performed an exploratory factor analysis with oblimin rotation. Based on this I selected five items to construct the health scale ( $\alpha = .876$ ). For example, one question was “To what extent did your physical health or emotional problems hinder your daily activities over the past month, for instance in going for a walk, walking up stairs, dressing yourself?”. Answer options varied from 1 “not at all” to 5 “very much”. After recoding some items, I made a scale for health based on the mean score of the five items.

**Table 1***Descriptive statistics*

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Political trust	0	10	5.08	1.90
Citizen participation	0	1	.03	-
Income group	0	2	1.46	.61
Age	16	97	53.38	16.61
Health	1	5	3.39	.83
Gender	0	1	1.52	-

When respondents that did not report a score on four or five of the items, the average score was set to missing. A higher score indicates a better personal mental or physical health.

**Method**

I analysed the effect of citizen participation on political trust using a multilevel linear regression design. Linear regression assumes there is a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables, where the values of the outcome variable for each level of the predictors are plotted along a straight line (Field, 2017). Multilevel linear regression is a type of linear regression model that is often used when there is correlation between the observations (Field, 2017). This is the case when there are multiple observations of the same individuals. Multilevel models are also known as hierarchical models, as observations or measures are nested within different groups. More specifically, this study is based on a two-level model, where observations of the dependent and independent variables are nested within individuals. This makes it possible to investigate the change of political trust over time within individuals, as well as differences in political trust between individuals.

Based on previous research, it is assumed that the base level of political trust varies between individuals (Noordzij et al., 2021; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; van der Meer, 2017). This means that the initial level of political trust is allowed to vary between individuals, when all of the predictor variables in the model are equal to zero (Field, 2017). That is why I included a random intercept in this model. Based on the research discussed in the theory section, I expected that citizen participation and income had fixed effects on the dependent variable. This means that the effect sizes of these variables on the dependent variable are the same across individuals. To conclude, the intercept is calculated for each individual, but the slope is

calculated for the entire sample.

When using multilevel regression analysis, certain variables that remain relatively stable over time are controlled for by the study design. This is because the same respondents are measured over a longer period of time, so any changes that are found on the dependent variable can be assigned to factors that have changed over time. Still, there could be effects that do change over time and are not conceptualized in the model of this study. I controlled for some of these variables during analysis. This has resulted in the following model:

$$\text{Political trust}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Citizen participation}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{MiddleIncome}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{HighIncome}_{it} + \beta_4 \text{Citizen participation} * \text{Middle income}_{it} + \beta_5 \text{Citizen participation} * \text{High income}_{it} + \beta_4 \text{Age}_{it} + \beta_5 \text{Health}_{it}$$

$$\beta_{0i} = \beta_0 + U_{0i}$$

$$\beta_x = \text{effect size}$$

$i$  = individual

$t$  = time point

### Statistical analyses

First, I analysed the descriptive statistics of each variable to gain a thorough understanding of the sample and data. Afterwards, the data was restructured to long format, which is needed for the multilevel analyses.

I then performed a mixed model analysis. First, I added none of the variables to the model, and only set the intercept to random and political trust as the dependent variable. This is a “null” model, which makes it possible to compare the model fit for the next analyses. I set the covariance structure to be autoregressive. This covariance structure has constant variances, where the correlation between two measurement times gets smaller as time points are further apart. This structure is most commonly used when testing repeated measure designs (Duke, 2020). I defended the degrees of freedom with the maximum likelihood (ML) method (which is needed to test the model fit; Field, 2017), using the Satterthwaite approximation. This is a specific formula that calculates a range of “effective” degrees of freedom across tests. This approximation is used because the model has changing (estimated) covariances, so changing the degrees of freedom would result in a better fit (IMB, 2022). I then added citizen participation as a fixed variable to the second model, with political trust as the dependent variable and a random intercept.

To test the first hypothesis, *citizen participation is positively related to political trust, where someone who participates has higher political trust than someone who does not participate*, I performed a third mixed model analysis using the same method, with the control variables age and health added to the model as fixed effects.

I tested the second hypothesis, *the positive effect of citizen participation on political trust is lower for lower income groups, compared to high income groups*, using the same mixed method analysis. However, I first made dummy variables for the moderating variable income group. The lowest income group was kept as reference group, while middle income group and high income group both were transformed into a dummy variable. I added these variables as fixed factors a fourth Mixed Model analysis, with all variables from the previous steps added in the model as well. Then, I made two variables for the interaction between the dummy variable of the income group and the dummy variable for citizen participation (*moderation = income group\*citizen participation*) to test the moderation effect with. I added the dummy variables as fixed factors to the model. This fifth model will be used to evaluate the second hypothesis. All analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics, version 28.0.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows that the amount of people that participated in government-organised citizen participation meetings was low compared to those that did not partake in those meetings: more than 87% of the respondents did not participate. The levels of political trust were normally distributed across the sample, with a mean of 5. This indicates that on average, people have a moderate amount of trust in the government. However, the standard deviation of the political trust variable is quite high, which suggests that there are a lot of differences in the level of political trust between the respondents ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). The respondents are not equally divided across income groups, 56.1% belonged to the lowest income group, 32.2% to the middle income group and 6.1% belonged to the highest income group.

### The effect of citizen participation on political trust

The first hypothesis, *citizen participation is positively related to political trust, where someone who participates has higher political trust than someone who does not participate*, was tested using mixed model analysis. In line with the hypothesis, citizen participation was found to have a significant positive effect on political trust. As can be seen in Table 2, the effect size was .060 ( $p < .001$ ). This effect remained significant when controlled for the



effects of age, health and political interest, but the effect size decreased ( $B = .038, p = .025$ ). This means that respondents who took part in citizen participation meetings had .038 higher political trust than respondents who did not, when age and health are held constant. Based on this finding, the null-hypothesis, which states that there is no relationship between citizen participation and political trust, can be rejected. The difference between citizen participation and non-citizen participation is small, as a difference of .038 is relatively small on a scale from 1 to 10.

The effect of citizen participation on political trust is fixed, which indicates that the positive effect of citizen participation on political trust is the same for all individuals. The random intercept was significant as well (*Variance Estimate* = 2.324, *SD* = .071,  $p < .001$ ). This means that each individual has a different intercept. In other words, each respondent has a different mean level of political trust, but the positive relationship of citizen participation on political trust is the same across all respondents. The overall fit of the models is tested using a chi-square likelihood ratio test. For model 2 (compared to model 1), Chi-square change is 515.374 ( $df_{change} = 1$ ). This is bigger than the critical values for the chi-square statistics (Field, 2017), meaning that adding citizen participation significantly increased the model fit. The same can be said for model 3, when compared to model 2 ( $\chi^2_{change} = 13044.932, df_{change} = 2$ ). This means that citizen participation explains the variance in levels of political trust better than the baseline model with no predictors.

### **The effect of citizen participation on political trust for different income groups**

The second hypothesis, *the positive effect of citizen participation on political trust is lower for lower income groups, compared to high income groups*, was tested by two steps. First, the dummy variables for middle and high income groups, were added to the multilevel model. Interestingly, income group showed a strong positive effect on political trust ( $B_{middle\ income} = .143, p < .001; B_{high\ income} = .305, p < .001$ ). This indicates that respondents from the middle income group had .143 higher political trust than respondents from the low income group, and respondents from the high income group had .305 higher political trust than respondents from the low income group. Participation remained a significant predictor for political trust, and the effect size remained the same ( $B = .038, p = .029$ ).

For the second step the interaction variables between income group and citizen participation were added to the model. The interaction variables between participation and income group were not significant; not for the middle income group ( $B = -.060, p = .094$ ), or

**Table 2**

*Results of mixed model analyses with political trust as the dependent variable*

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>		<u>Model 3</u>		<u>Model 4</u>		<u>Model 5</u>	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	5.092**	.030	5.090**	.030	5.652**	.093	5.614**	.093	5.612**	.093
Citizen participation			.060**	.015	.038*	.017	.038**	.017	.058**	.022
Middle income							.143**	.028	.144**	.028
High income							.305**	.052	.301**	.052
Citizen participation * Middle income									-.060	.036
Citizen participation * High income									.065	.094
Age					-.010**	.002	-.011**	.002	-.011**	.002
Health					.037**	.013	.035**	.013	.035**	.013
2-LL	88748.4128		88234.0385		75189.1069		73706.3739		73702.6455	
AIC	88756.4128		88244.0385		75203.1069		73724.3739		73724.6455	
BIC	88789.2608		88285.0694		75259.3638		73796.5209		73812.8251	

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

the high income group ( $B = .065, p = .494$ ). This indicates that the effect of citizen participation on political trust is not lower for the lower income group, when compared to the middle income group or high income group. This means that we cannot reject the null hypothesis. There is no moderating effect of income on the effect of citizen participation on political trust, the main effect is the same for all three income groups ( $B = .058, p = .010$ ). All people (regardless of which income group they belong to) who take part in citizen participation meetings have .058 higher political trust than people who do not, when the effects of income, age and health on political trust are held constant.

I performed a robustness check by including net monthly income as a continuous variable, and an interaction term between net monthly income and citizen participation instead of the variable income group and the interaction terms. Results of this test can be seen in Appendix B. Based on the robustness check, similar conclusions about the hypothesis can be made. The overall fit of the models was again tested using a chi-square likelihood ratio test. For model 4, Chi-square change is 1482.733 ( $df_{change} = 2$ ). This means that adding income group to the model significantly increased the model fit. However, when adding the interaction terms to model 5, the model fit actually decreased ( $\chi^2_{change} = -3.728, df_{change} = 2$ ). Adding moderation to the conceptual model did thus not improve the model. The fourth model, with citizen participation and dummy variables for income group as independent variables and age and health as control variables, had the best model.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The Dutch government has been implementing citizen participation meetings in order to increase political trust (Rijksoverheid, 2020). Reason for this is that political trust is found to be essential for democratic societies to run smoothly. While citizen participation is a widely accepted and used method to increase political trust, empirical research has shown very mixed results on the effectiveness of this method (i.e. He & Ma, 2020; Holum, 2022; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). To add to this discussion, I analysed the effect of citizen participation on political trust, and how this effect differs for different income groups, using 11 waves of data from the LLIS panel.

The first conclusion of this study is that citizen participation increased political trust. The answer to the research question of this paper would thus be yes, citizen participation has a positive effect on political trust. This is in line with findings of He & Ma (2021), who found that participating in citizen-participation-initiatives by the government resulted in an increase in political trust. It contradicts Michels & De Graaf (2010) who stated that citizen

participation led to increased expectations, which lowered political trust. However, one critical note is that the effect size was very small. It could be that citizen participation meetings alone are not enough to greatly influence the level of political trust of individuals, as political trust is often based on multiple experiences or interactions that influence the evaluation political institutions (Cook & Santana, 2017). This would suggest that participating in multiple citizen participation meetings would generate more effect on political trust than a single citizen participation meeting. However, more research is needed to confirm this assumption.

The second conclusion, based on the results of this study, is that the effect of citizen participation on political trust did not differ between low, middle and high income groups. This means that the answer to the research question is that belonging to a certain income group does not influence the positive effect of citizen participation on political trust. This is contrary to what I expected. While there was no previous research done on this specifically, research has shown that the outcomes of citizen participation meetings are often less beneficial for low income groups. Based on these findings, citizen participation would likely have a smaller effect on political trust for low income groups. However, the results of this study do not confirm this argument. This could be because, in line with findings of Hong & Cho (2018), it could be possible that the outcomes of citizen participation meetings are not more beneficial for higher income groups due to the Social Pressure Effect. Secondly, it is also possible that the differences between income groups in the Netherlands are not as big as in other countries, like China where a lot of research on citizen participation has been done (Hong & Cho, 2018; Yang & Pandey, 2010). This could explain why we did not find significant results while other countries like China did.

There are some limitations to this study that should be addressed. The first limitation is the operationalization of citizen participation. Citizen participation is interpreted and implemented in many different ways. During research, I only looked at government-organised citizen participation meetings. Furthermore, there were no items in the dataset that measured to how these meetings are organized, or how often they take place. These aspects can all influence the effectiveness of citizen participation meetings on political trust. It was also not asked how often the respondent would participate in a citizen meeting, which is likely to be relevant for the effect of citizen participation on political trust. Future research is needed to compare the differences in effectiveness of different types of citizen participation, or different formats of citizen participation meetings, on political trust. The second limitation is that political trust was simply measured by asking respondents to indicate how much they trusted

certain political institutions, on a scale from 1 to 10. However, this operationalization of political trust is very much open to interpretation of the respondent. This research used a more specific explanation of political trust: the individual belief that political institutions will stick to their obligations and do anything to try and fulfil them. It is likely that the interpretation of respondents and the explanation used in this study do not completely match, which can have a negative effect on the validity of this study. A third limitation is the lack of context variables. While the micro-macro evaluation approach was used to explain the effect of citizen participation on political trust, only individual-level variables were used for the analyses of this study. However, the approach clearly states that individuals react to the context they live in. A three-level model would have been a better theoretical fit with the micro-macro evaluation approach, and perhaps resulted in a better model fit as well.

Based on the findings of this study, some points for future research can be made. Firstly, van der Meer (2017) states that not enough attention has been paid to moderating factors that influence relationships with political trust. While income group was not a significant moderator, other demographic variables, which are more likely to have a moderating effect, could have been included into the analysis as well. Examples are gender, ethnicity or age (van der Meer, 2017). Future research should include other or more moderators to gain a better understanding of the relationship between citizen participation and political trust. Secondly, the model of the research was very simple. Only the direct relationship between citizen participation and political trust was analysed, while most theories and empirical studies that were discussed use an intermediate variable, like experience or increased knowledge (Peeters et al., 2020; He & Ma, 2021). This could have been included in the model of this research as well, too gain a more thorough understanding of what the relationship between citizen participation and political trust is. Next to moderating variables, future research should thus include mediating variables as well to better understand how citizen participation influences political trust.

### **Policy recommendations**

Another aim of this research was to find out how municipalities can improve citizen participation methods in order to increase political trust. Based on the findings of this research it can be said that citizen participation is an effective way to increase political trust. However, the differences in political trust between citizen participants and non-citizen participants was small. Therefore, citizen participation meetings alone will probably not yield a satisfactory amount of increased political trust for municipalities. Additional measures are needed.

Research by the Verwey-Jonker institute suggest that decreasing the political distance by increasing the visibility of municipalities would increase political trust. This would mean that real time citizen participation meetings are preferred over online citizen participation platforms. It is also necessary that the inclusion of citizens has a clear policy-related goal (rather than citizen participation being the goal itself; ProDemos, 2021). Furthermore, something that is imperative to the success of citizen participation initiatives, is that politicians must be open to the input of citizens and trust in their capabilities (Liao & Ma, 2019). When politicians are not trusting of the input of citizens, they are less likely to draw upon this input or knowledge. As a result, the initiative is likely to fail in its desired goals (Liao & Ma, 2019).

On top of that, based on theory about the Mattheus-effect it is advisable to pay special attention to the inclusion of minority groups in citizen participation initiatives. Feeling neglected or disadvantaged was named as a great source for political distrust in the Netherlands (Peeters et al., 2020). Furthermore, including minority groups can result in more equal outcomes of citizen participation meetings, which in turn increases political trust for these minority groups (Hong & Cho, 2018). However, results of this study show that it is not needed to select citizens based on income. This is positive for municipalities, as it is often difficult for municipalities to select people based on their income, because citizens often prefer to keep their income private (Ham & van der Meer, 2012).

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## Appendix A

### Literature review on explanations for levels of political trust

There are multiple explanations for variations of political trust between individuals. Most recent developments in research on political trust, pay close attention to the interaction between individuals and the context they live in. This is called the micro-macro interactive approach, or the trust as evaluation approach. Citizens evaluate the political context they operate in, the political procedures and outcomes, and adapt their level of political trust accordingly (Noordzij et al., 2021; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; van der Meer, 2017). According to Miller (1974), the main explanation for varying levels of political trust is political distance. This is the distance between the position of the government and the issues the individual experiences. When political distance is large, governmental policy does not align with personal views. This will result in low levels of political trust. Similar patterns have been found in the Netherlands: almost 25% of the voters felt inadequately heard or represented by local politics and became cynical towards local politics (Driessen & Kanne, 2018). Qualitative research by the Verwey-Jonker institute showed similar conclusions, where participants indicated an increased experience of political distance, which in turn has negatively affected their political trust (Peeters et al., 2020). To decrease political distance, representation is important. Research shows that citizens tend to display higher levels of political trust when they feel that they are represented well in the political context they live in (McLaren, 2017). Another important influence on political trust, is political performance. Political trust is shown to increase when the government delivers results and outcomes that are in demand by citizens (Kumagi & Iorio, 2020). Empirical research of He & Ma (2021) reveals that citizens who believed that their opinions were adapted by the government, were more satisfied about governmental performance, which, in turn, led to higher political trust.

There are also individual factors that influence the macro-level evaluation of individuals. First, it is often assumed that general trust (which is the belief that most people and groups can be trusted) is a determinant for political trust (Newton and Zmerli, 2011). Someone who scores high on general trust, will probably have higher levels of political trust than someone who is not very trusting in general. However, empirical results on this are mixed. While some find that general trust, social trust and political trust are indeed related (Freitag and Bühlmann, 2009), others have found opposite results (Uslaner, 2017). Interestingly, Newton and Zmerli (2011) found that citizens with high political trust also showed high levels of general trust, but the opposite was not always true. Besides general

trust, knowledge is found to be an important determinant of political trust. The ability to understand political processes well, results in more confidence in governmental institutions, which has a positive effect on political trust (Agger, 2012; Pagliara et al., 2021). Poor knowledge, on the other hand, may cause unfavorable bias towards governments, which undermines political trust (Pagliara et al., 2021). Grimmelikhuijsen (2012) found in his experiment, that knowledge about what the government does and how policy processes work is positively related to political trust in the Netherlands. Lastly, previous experience with political institutions is an important determinant for political trust. When previous experiences with a specific political institution are positive, people become more trusting towards political institutions in general. For instance, immigrant groups were shown to be more trusting in governments than natives, as the local government has provided them support and benefits (Uslaner, 2018; Wilkes & Wu, 2017). This also works the other way around: political trust of black Americans was lower than that of white Americans, as they have often experienced racism within the political system (Wilkes & Wu, 2017). Furthermore, when people experience economic inequality or poverty, their political trust goes down as well. This is because most people hold the government and related institutions responsible for their economic well-being, and thus blame their situation on governmental malfunctioning (van der Meer, 2017). Kriekhaus et al. (2014) have found that wealthier citizens are more likely to trust and support the government than the poor. De Vroome et al. (2013) found that economic position and experiences of discrimination explain variations in political trust in the Netherlands as well.



**Appendix B**  
**Robustness check with income as numerical variable**

**Table 1**

*Results of mixed model analyses with political trust as the dependent variable and income as moderating variable*

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>		<u>Model 3</u>		<u>Model 4</u>		<u>Model 5</u>	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	5.092**	.030	5.090**	.030	5.652**	.093	5.614**	.093	5.475**	.096
Citizen participation			.060**	.015	.038*	.017	.039*	.017	.055*	.045
Net income							.003**	.002	.003**	.002
Citizen participation * Net income									-.000	.036
Age					-.010**	.002	-.011**	.002	-.011**	.002
Health					.037**	.013	.035**	.013	.035**	.013
2-LL	88748.4128		88234.0385		75189.1069		73709.3133		73709.1654	
AIC	88756.4128		88244.0385		75203.1069		73725.3133		73727.1654	
BIC	88789.2608		88285.0694		75259.3638		73789.4439		73799.3123	

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01