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Citizen engagement and trust: A study among citizen panel members in three Dutch municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Citizen engagement is a key component of democracy, especially in local governments. It is seen as a way to generate input and support, and to find creative solutions to problems and challenges governments face. Currently, Western democracies are witnessing a challenge in which citizens have less trust in their government. This explorative study examines if citizen engagement is a valuable strategy based on citizen panels of three Dutch municipalities. Four different direct forms of citizen engagement are studied: (1) attending a council meeting, (2) an information meeting, (3) conversation with an official, and (4) other forms of citizen engagement (e.g. social media or letter). The regression results indicate that the different forms of direct citizen engagement seem not to contribute to the amount of trust citizen panel members have in their own municipality. Attending a council meeting, a conversation with an official and other forms of engagement seem to have no or a negative effect on trust. In addition, the number of times that citizens engage seems not to or even negatively contributes to the amount of trust that they have in their municipality.

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1. Introduction

The amount of trust that citizens have in their government is central to the functioning of both national and local government (Baldassare, 1985). In recent decades trust of citizens in formal institutions like governments has decreased (Lee & Schachter, 2018). A possible explanation is the difference between the actual position of these formal institutions and the expectations and demands that citizens have from them, in which the institutions often continue to operate traditionally and are described as bureaucratic and hierarchical (Callahan, 2007). In so doing, tensions between citizens and institutions have emerged, and citizens' level of trust has changed. Simultaneously,

there has been growing discussion about citizen engagement as a tool for governmental issues like the decrease in trust (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). It is generally held that citizen engagement enhances the quality of democracy and is valuable for generating input and support, and finding solutions for governmental challenges (e.g. health issues, budget cuts or trust issues) (Held, 1987; Horlick-Jones, Rowe, & Walls, 2007; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Furthermore, for effective citizen engagement it is important that citizens believe that their comments and input matter (Pancer, 2015). In particular, local authorities search for (new) ways to engage citizens by means of implementing different engagement methods (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). As a government, it is important to realize that when citizens participate and do not believe that their input matters, this could lead to negative effects of citizen engagement like less trust and frustration. Only emphasizing the positive effects of citizen engagement could constrain the belief of citizens,

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and lead to a limited understanding of citizen engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Nevertheless, the challenge of decreasing trust remains. Most literature argues that giving citizens more opportunities to engage shows promises in tackling this challenge (cf. Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Based on this, this article examines which local characteristics and citizen engagement forms relate to trust in local governments by studying the citizen panels of three Dutch municipalities.

The article begins by describing factors that influence trust in government and different citizen engagement forms at the local level of government. After that the relationship between trust and citizen engagement is discussed, followed by a description of the Dutch context. Next, an empirical analysis of trust within citizen panels of three Dutch municipalities is undertaken, trying to distinguish factors that relate to the amount of trust citizens have in their own municipality. The paper concludes by discussing the main findings and making suggestions for future research.

1.1. Trust in government

In recent years, the trust of citizens in government has declined, and has been a concern for both national and local government in the Netherlands and beyond (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010; Tolbert & Mosserberger, 2006; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Trust is a subjective attitude and can be understood differently. Citizens can have trust in each other individually (*social trust*), but citizens can also have trust in the government as an institution (*political trust*) (James, Schulz, & Van Olphen, 2001; Uslaner, 2018). In particular, the latter seems to be decreasing (cf. Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Political trust means that citizens know the “basic ideas or good of an institution” (Warren, 1999, p. 6). If those ideas make sense, citizens will be motivated to engage with that particular institution (Tolbert & Mosserberger, 2006). Political trust is widely studied in governments and reveals various factors that influence trust (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Jennings & Stoker, 2004). For example, societal developments like a negative perception of the economy, scandals, and concerns about crime lead to a decrease in trust of citizens in their government (Chanley et al., 2000). Alongside these, governmental features like transparency in public decision making, availability of and accessibility to information, and population size also affect citizens' trust in their government. The first three features seem to increase trust, while a large population size results in a declining sense of belonging to the community and can ultimately lead to less trust (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010). Finally, it is revealed that socio-economic factors such as age, gender and education relate to trust and influence citizens' perception of trust in their government (Baldassare, 1985).

Several developments and factors influence the amount of trust that citizens have in government and can cause an increase or decrease in trust. When we look at trust of citizens in their government, the interaction between those who perceive (citizens) and what is being perceived (national or local government) is central. The interaction between citizens and their government is often referred

to as citizen engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Bos, 2014; Creighton, 2005; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

1.2. Citizen engagement and forms

Scholars and practitioners use a wide variety of terms and definitions related to citizen engagement. The concept can be seen as an umbrella term and concerns many approaches for the same aspect. Examples are: public participation, public engagement, stakeholder involvement, co-creation, political participation, civic engagement, deliberative democracy or participatory democracy (Bos, 2014; Carpinì, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Creighton, 2005; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Some terms focus on citizen behavior and highlight “who” is involved, like the public in public participation which focuses on the broad population, the stakeholders in stakeholder involvement as an invested stakeholder with a personal interest in political or societal issues, the citizens in co-creation as problem solvers for wicked unruly problems or the citizens in political participation as eligible voters or activists. Participation through activism is also called “manifest” participation. It should be mentioned that citizens can also be involved in a less direct or “latent” way. For example, in civic engagement in which the way one engages is not classified as formal (e.g. a volunteer) (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Other terms focus more on the process of engagement and highlight the level of interaction between the relevant organization and citizens: examples of this include engagement focusing on getting individuals together in order to address public issues or administrative decisions, or deliberative or participatory democracy (Bos, 2014, p. 6; Creighton, 2005, p. 7; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Sørensen & Torfing, 2016). Arriving at a synthesis, we see citizen engagement as a process and refer to it as an active form of involvement in the public domain in which citizens are to a greater or lesser degree involved in tasks and services of the government (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). Although the terms vary, the essence of citizen engagement remains the same and emphasizes the interaction between citizens and government (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). The aforementioned differences show that citizen engagement has no clear definition and is a complex phenomenon. As such, citizen engagement can have different manifestations in practice. To differentiate these manifestations, several methods or forms of citizen engagement have been developed in recent years (Arnstein, 1969; Callahan, 2007; Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

A commonly used distinction is that of direct and indirect forms of citizen engagement (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). There seems to be an agreement in the literature that direct forms of citizen engagement lead to more active involvement of citizens compared to indirect citizen engagement (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Citizens in direct citizen engagement forms are involved in public issues by providing input, solving problems or making decisions, whereas citizens in indirect citizen engagement are involved in public issues through representatives (e.g. committees) (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). In this paper we correspond to the

Table 1Overview citizen engagement methods.^a

Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) ^a	Methods according to Rowe and Frewer (2000)	Methods according to Lowndes et al. (2001)
Direct citizen engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public hearings - Public opinion surveys - Consensus conference - Citizens' juries - Focus groups - Referendum (e.g. voting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumerist methods (e.g. satisfaction survey or complaint survey) - Traditional methods (e.g. public meetings, public hearings) - Forums - Consultative methods (e.g. citizens' panel, citizens' jury, interactive website) - Deliberative methods (e.g. focus group, dialogue or conversation)
Indirect citizen engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advisory committees (e.g. working committee) - Negotiated rule making 	

^a Developed based on the literature of Lowndes et al. (2001), Nabatchi & Amsler (2014) and Rowe & Frewer (2000).

direct forms of citizen engagement such as having a conversation with an official, voting, or attending a meeting. An overview of engagement forms is provided in Table 1, which shows that the degree of influence of citizens in these forms differs, ranging from citizens who provide input by expressing their opinions, to citizens who elicit judgments and decisions from which policy can be derived.

Rowe and Frewer (2000) make a distinction between eight different methods of citizen engagement. In relation to direct and indirect citizen engagement, the methods of public hearings, opinion surveys, consensus conferences, citizen juries and focus groups are direct forms of citizen engagement. By providing input and expressing opinions, citizens influence decisions: for example, by filling out a survey, sitting on a citizen jury, attending a focus group or public hearing, or voting via a referendum. Furthermore, through these methods citizens influence decisions by early involvement in particular topics such as safety (e.g. via a consensus conference). Advisory committees and negotiated rule making are forms of indirect citizen engagement. By means of advising or consensus forming, citizens influence decisions via a certain kind of group of representatives (e.g. a working committee).

Lowndes et al. (2001) also distinguish between different methods of citizen engagement. Instead of eight, they describe five different methods. These forms all correspond to the definition of direct citizen engagement. In relation to the degree of influence citizens have, a similar image is visible as in Rowe and Frewer (2000). In consumerist and traditional methods citizens influence governmental decisions by getting information, providing input and expressing their opinions, for example attending an information meeting or filling out a complaint survey. In forums and consultative methods citizens influence particular issues by consulting or advising, for example a citizen panel. Finally, via deliberative methods citizens influence

and deliberate on issues from which policy can be derived by undertaking dialogue or attending focus groups.

Although both Rowe and Frewer (2000) and Lowndes et al. (2001) use different categorization for distinct forms of citizen engagement, it is notable that these categorizations are only a rough indication. A particular method of citizen engagement can easily be divided into another category.

1.3. Trust and citizen engagement

Previous sections showed that several factors contribute to citizens' trust in government. We also discuss different forms of citizen engagement in association with direct and indirect citizen engagement. In this section we focus on the relationship between trust and citizen engagement.

Several studies have explored this relationship and describe it as ambiguous (Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Mizrahi & Vigoda-Gadot, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Uslander & Brown, 2005). It is said that citizen engagement "exists in a virtuous circle," meaning citizens who have more trust engage more, but also citizens who engage more have more trust (Jennings & Stoker, 2004, p. 39). Some studies support the first assumption and perceive trust as explanatory for citizen engagement, like Uslander and Brown (2005), who show that trust positively affects the use of different citizen engagement forms like political meetings, petitions, volunteering and charitable giving. The study of Tsang, Burnett, Hills, and Welford (2009) agrees and points out that trust helps to establish an effective dialogue between citizens and governments, which is a specific form of citizen engagement.

Other studies support the second assumption and suggest that citizen engagement affects trust. These studies often focus on when or why citizen engagement leads to more or less trust of citizens in government. For

example, the study by Kim and Lee (2012) revealed the positive contribution of newer forms of engagement like e-participation or e-government on citizens' trust. They show that certain dimensions of e-participation have a positive effect on citizens' trust in their local government, especially satisfaction, perceived influence on decision making, and governmental transparency. The study by Tolbert and Mosserberger (2006) agrees, and shows that the use of e-government, such as governmental websites, increases trust by enhancing and improving the interaction between citizens and government through responsiveness. Furthermore, it is revealed that citizen engagement leads to more trust (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). Citizen engagement may also negatively affect citizens' attitude. It can lead to less empowerment, less belief in the government, the feeling of not being heard or unrealistic expectations, which in turn might lead to less trust (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Halvorsen, 2003; Lowndes et al., 2001; Sant & Davies, 2018). Alongside the explanation of why citizen engagement affects trust, the study by Quintelier and Van Deth (2014) explores the causal relationship between citizen engagement and political attitudes. They reveal that engagement by citizens leads to greater support of political attitudes. As citizens' trust is also an attitude it is more likely that citizen engagement can also strengthen citizens' trust, which is in line with the second assumption.

In addition, to stimulate citizen engagement citizens must think that they are capable of participating and believe that they can understand and influence government decisions (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). This is also called *citizen efficacy* or *political efficacy* (Anderson, 2010; Pancer, 2015). Citizen efficacy affects the amount of trust that citizens have in government and explains citizens' behavior (e.g. why they engage in a particular method like attending a meeting). The underlying logic is that when citizens believe that their influence in governmental issues matters, they trust the actions of government more, which therefore also impacts whether they engage (Almond & Verba, 2015; Anderson, 2010). There is a distinction between *internal efficacy* and *external efficacy*. In internal efficacy, citizens have confidence in themselves and their ability to understand and influence the process. If this is high, citizens are more willing to engage with and trust their government compared to when this is low. In external efficacy, on the other hand, citizens have the confidence and belief that governments are responsive to their engagement. This impacts citizens' willingness to engage and trust. Citizens with high external efficacy engage more because they have more trust in their government. Citizens with low external efficacy engage less because they have less trust in their government (Anderson, 2010; Corrigan-Brown & Wilkes, 2014; Pancer, 2015). Both internal and external efficacy relate to citizen engagement and in turn to possible outcomes like governmental trust. However, it is suggested that external efficacy is a greater predictor of citizen engagement than internal efficacy. A reason for this is that external efficacy focuses directly on political sentiments and possibly also on engagement and trust, whereas internal efficacy focuses more on the individual (e.g. a person's self-esteem), which does not necessarily

lead to more engagement and more trust (Corrigan-Brown & Wilkes, 2014).

The studies described above endorse the relationship between (different forms of) citizen engagement and trust. Our interest is not to describe the circular reasoning between trust and citizen engagement, but rather to describe the role of citizen engagement in citizens' trust in local government. The reason for this lies in the possible benefits of citizen engagement, in which citizen engagement can (re-)establish citizens' trust in governments if implemented wisely by governments (cf. Rowe & Frewer, 2000). However, in general there is no indication of this. We therefore want to explore if citizen engagement in a citizen panel affects trust in local government. In general, the expectation is that citizen engagement can affect trust positively or negatively, and only under certain conditions can be seen as a viable strategy for tackling the general decrease in political trust of government.

1.4. Dutch municipalities

In the Netherlands there are three layers of government (central, provincial and local). Subnational governments consist of 12 provinces and (in 2017) 388 municipalities. Local governments are seen as the most important and visible level of decentralized government and they have considerable autonomy regarding public service provision (Gradus & Budding, 2018). Due to mergers, the number of municipalities has decreased from 538 in 1999 to 388 in 2017. Within the Netherlands, local government has a more citizen-oriented focus compared to national or provincial government. In recent decades, various public responsibilities such as home care for the elderly and disabled have been transferred from central to local government level. As a result, the importance of local social services has increased significantly. Currently, municipalities have a budget of about 7% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 20% of government spending. With over 40,000 inhabitants on average, Dutch municipalities are relatively large if compared with other European countries such as Spain. The center of local government consists of the municipal council, the executive board of mayor and aldermen, and the bureaucracy. The municipal council consists of political parties that are elected every four years by citizens, and decides on the budget. The most important parties in the Netherlands are the Christian democrats, social democrats and conservative liberals (cf. Gradus & Budding, 2018).

The mayor and aldermen form a board, which has an executive function and manages daily operations. The aldermen play an important role in the execution of local policies. Next to the aldermen, the mayor within the municipality has limited executive powers and has certain statutory and representative duties. In addition, the mayor acts as an independent chairperson of the municipal council. The municipal council appoints the aldermen. In the Netherlands there is a dualistic system. As a result the mayor and aldermen are not official members of the municipal council. Furthermore, the executive board of the mayor and aldermen gives orders to the civil servants in the bureaucracy and can be seen as the link between the political bodies and the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy executes

these orders and is also linked to the civil society. Although Dutch municipalities are autonomous in their functioning and organizational management, the national government still has a facilitating and stimulating role (Van Hengel, Budding, & Groot, 2014). When it comes to engagement, the effects of citizen engagement are also acknowledged in the Netherlands. In recent years the Dutch government has addressed engagement, trust and the role of local government in it (ROB, 2012; WRR, 2012). Local governments emphasize the concern of the decreasing trust of citizens and promote citizen engagement. As a result, municipalities search for ways to organize citizen engagement to tackle challenges like decreasing trust.

1.5. Relevance of trust in practice

Citizen engagement is particularly relevant to municipalities as they interact with citizens on a daily basis and therefore could effectively engage citizens to find solutions to the challenges they face. Public administrators and scholars acknowledge this and suggest that citizen engagement leads to positive outcomes including more citizen trust in governments. Nevertheless, little research has been carried out on the effects of citizen engagement, and it is not evident in what ways (positive or negative) citizen engagement links to trust in Dutch local government. Most studies are conducted in the USA and Asia (Kim & Lee, 2012; Mizrahi & Vigoda-Gadot, 2009; Tolbert & Mosserberger, 2006; Uslaner & Brown, 2005).

In the Netherlands citizens' trust in government seems to vary. With the growing attention in Dutch local governments on citizen engagement as a strategy for governmental challenges it is interesting to see if citizen engagement indeed helps. For this reason the following research question is examined: what role does citizen engagement play in the trust that citizens have in their municipality?

This study aims to examine the relationship between the ways citizens engage in their own municipality, and trust. The study focuses in particular on direct forms of citizen engagement in association to trust, in which we presume that more engagement of citizens leads to more trust. We therefore correspond to the studies that focus on the contribution of citizen engagement to trust, and examine if citizen engagement leads to other trust levels (cf. Jennings & Stoker, 2004). By means of a cross-sectional study we examine if and how this variation in trust is related to different forms of engagement among citizen panel members. This study is part of broader research in which the implementation and organization of citizen engagement in Dutch, Danish and South African municipalities is examined. Municipalities search for *how* to organize citizen engagement. As a result, different forms of citizen engagement emerge in practice. Examining the contribution of direct forms of citizen engagement to the challenges local governments face (in this case, declining trust) gives us insight into the possible effects of citizen engagement, and reveals if, how and which methods of citizen engagement might contribute to solving these challenges.

2. Citizen panel and data collection

To analyze further the relationship between citizen engagement and trust in local governments among citizen panel members, we used data from three Dutch municipalities: IJsselstein, Zeist and Ermelo. The municipality of IJsselstein (34,114 inhabitants) and Zeist (62,313 inhabitants) are mid-sized municipalities located in Utrecht. This is an urban area of the Netherlands. The municipality of Ermelo is also a mid-sized municipality (26,461 inhabitants), but is located in a less densely populated area of the Netherlands, the north of Gelderland. The municipalities of Zeist and IJsselstein seem politically representative of the Netherlands. However, in Ermelo orthodox Protestant parties and church attendees seem to play a more important role. Notably, the monthly church attendance in Ermelo (41.4%) is substantially higher than in Zeist (14.8%) and IJsselstein (9.6%), and the old-age dependency ratio (i.e., the ratio of people older than 65 to those between the ages of 15 and 65) for the municipalities of Zeist (37) and Ermelo (41) are substantially higher than for IJsselstein (29), compared to the Netherlands as a whole (32). From this demographic and societal perspective, the subset of the three municipalities contains an interesting variance.

Our data derive from a citizen panel within the three municipalities.¹ A citizen panel is a (digital) forum in which citizens of the municipality are approached by means of a questionnaire on several local issues. A questionnaire offers the possibility to test a specific research question (in this case, the role of citizen engagement and trust in local government), and simultaneously allows the possibility of collecting a large amount of data in a short period of time (Jick, 1979). The questionnaires were developed in cooperation with the different municipalities. To be able to compare the data, similar questionnaires have been considered. Afterwards, the results of the different questionnaires were reported back to each municipality. Within all three municipalities, the objective of the questionnaire was to portray the different perceptions that citizens in the panel have of the municipality in which they live, and which forms of citizen engagement they use.

However, the survey design was different between these three municipalities. In the municipalities of IJsselstein and Zeist a citizen panel already had been present for some years. In Zeist the panel had been active from 2009, and in IJsselstein from 2011. In 2016, these panels comprised 1117 citizens in IJsselstein and 771 citizens in Zeist. Similar to Ermelo, these members were selected randomly by a call or an email. In Zeist the interest for this panel was raised by an advertisement in a newspaper. From January to February 2016, members of the citizen panel of the municipality of IJsselstein received an email from the municipality containing a link to the questionnaire. Of those questionnaires, 515 were received back, making the response rate

¹ This study examines whether the level of trust in municipalities is affected by various forms of citizen engagement among citizen panel members. This study therefore differs from existing studies that measure trust or citizen engagement in (local) governments in general (cf. Van Houwelingen, Boele, & Dekker, 2014; WRR, 2012).

Table 2
Descriptive statistics.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Amount of trust	1,337	1	5	3.24	0.80
Gender (female = 1)	1,337	0	1	0.36	0.48
Age dummy young	1,314	0	1	0.04	0.20
Age dummy average	1,314	0	1	0.61	0.49
Age dummy old	1,314	0	1	0.35	0.48
Higher education	1,337	0	1	0.60	0.49
Dummies citizen engagement					
Council meeting	1,337	0	1	0.11	0.31
Information meeting	1,337	0	1	0.50	0.50
Conversation with official ^a	1,337	0	1	0.29	0.45
Other forms of engagement	1,337	0	1	0.11	0.31

^a Conversation with a council member, mayor, alderman or administrator in the bureaucracy.

44%.² For Zeist a similar approach was used. From March to April 2016, 771 citizens were approached to engage in a questionnaire. A total of 271 questionnaires were returned, indicating a response rate of 38%.³ In the municipality of Ermelo such a citizen panel did not exist. Therefore, from February to March 2017, 8,357 households in Ermelo were randomly selected to be approached by mail. This mailing contained a link and personal password to gain access to the questionnaire.⁴ As no citizen panel was available, the response rate was substantially lower, at 7.3%.

Ultimately, the total sample comprises 1,400 observations. After preliminary analyses, it was decided to remove respondents who did not fill in the question about the amount of trust they have in their municipality. Our final sample consists of 1,337 respondents. Of those respondents, 849 are male (63.5%) and 488 are female (36.5%). Concerning gender, the preliminary analyses reveal that in all three municipalities males filled out the questionnaire more often. Regarding age,⁵ the majority of respondents fall into the average category (30–64) (61%). Furthermore, the majority reported having a higher vocational education or university degree (60%). For the descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

2.1. Variation in trust

In order to examine trust, our first question relates to the amount of trust citizens have in the way their munic-

Fig. 1. The amount of trust citizens have in their municipality (N = 1,337).

Table 3
Variation in the amount of trust citizens have in their municipality.

	N	Mean	SD
Municipality			
IJsselstein	496	3.22	0.76
Zeist	256	3.13	0.77
Ermelo	585	3.30	0.85
Total trust	1,337	3.24	0.80

ipality is governed. To answer this question the following was asked:

How much trust do you have in the way the municipality is governed by the municipal council, executive board of mayor and aldermen, and bureaucracy?

The citizens in the panel are asked to rate the amount of trust in their municipality on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Very little*, 5 = *Very much*). It is shown that a variety in the perception of trust is present (see Fig. 1). This variation in trust is also present when the different municipalities are analyzed separately. For the municipality of Ermelo the mean is the highest and therefore also the trust among citizens (Table 3).

Next to the variable trust, several variables representing different citizen engagement forms are included to examine the relationship between trust and the extent to which citizens engage. Direct citizen engagement is displayed in different forms. These forms are divided into: attending a council meeting; attending an information meeting; having a conversation with the mayor, a council member, an alderman or a public administrator; and other forms of engagement. Within this last category, respondents are asked for an explanation. These explanations are diverse: letters, emails, platforms, interactive decision making, questionnaires, dialogue, and digital forms (websites, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp).

Finally, the amount of trust that citizens have can also be explained by municipal differences. This means that there could be a difference in the amount of trust citizens perceive in relation to which municipality they live in. Hence, we also include a municipality fixed effect in our analyses. We hereby use Ermelo as a benchmark.

² After some while those who did not fill in the questionnaire received a reminder two times. A similar approach was used for Zeist.

³ In Zeist 52 emails had a hard bounce, so the email address was incorrect or no longer working. The citizen panel of the municipality of Zeist was latent, which is a possible explanation for the low response rate.

⁴ After one and a half weeks, citizens between the age of 18 and 39 received a reminder. The reason for this was that this group was not well represented at that point.

⁵ The age categories are in accordance with the municipal person registration system that is used in Dutch local governments. Not every municipality handles the same age categories. To compare the different age categories, we therefore divided the age variable into dummies to examine the influence of age on trust. Dummy 1 involves citizens aged between 18 and 29 years old, called dummy young. Dummy 2 involves citizens above 65 years, called dummy old. Dummy 3 involves citizens between 30 and 64 years old, called dummy average. The majority of the respondents fell into this last category and this is therefore our reference category.

Table 4

Estimations results: ordinal regressions with different citizen engagement forms.

Dependent variable: trust		
	Estimate	SE
Council meeting	−0.46***	0.18
Information meeting	−0.10	0.11
Conversation with official	−0.31**	0.13
Other forms of citizen engagement	−0.37**	0.17
Age young (ref. average)	−0.17	0.27
Age old (ref. average)	0.21*	0.11
Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)	−0.16	0.11
Education (0 = low, 1 = high)	0.11	0.11
Zeist (ref. Ermelo)	−0.47***	0.15
IJsselstein (ref. Ermelo)	−0.30***	0.12
Prob. (LR. statistic)	0.00	

Note. All coefficients are insignificant except for the coefficients with */**/* which denote significance at the 90%/95%/99% levels.

3. Results

In the next section we explore the effect of citizen engagement on trust.⁶ An ordinal or an ordered logit regression based on a pooled dataset is conducted to analyze the effects of citizen engagement forms and socio-economic factors on the amount of trust citizens in the panel have in their municipality. We use list-wise deletion if there is a missing value; we ended up having 1,314 observations. Table 4 presents the results. A likelihood ratio test shows that this model is highly significant. In the first and second columns the coefficients and standard errors are presented.

In Table 4, the variables attending a council meeting, having a conversation with an official, using other forms of citizen engagement, the socio-economic factor age and the dummy for the municipality of Zeist and IJsselstein have a significant relationship to the amount of trust citizens have in their municipality. The results show that with regard to the different forms of citizen engagement, the form attending a council meeting turns out to be negative and significant at 1%. This suggests that citizens who attend a council meeting have less trust in their municipality compared to citizens who do not attend a council meeting. The same result is also perceptible for having a conversation with an official (significant at 5%). Citizens who report having a conversation with an official have less trust in their municipality compared to citizens who do not. Finally, citizens who use other forms of citizen engagement have less trust in their municipality compared to citizens who do not report using other forms of engagement (significant at 5%). Of the socio-economic factors the results reveal that only citizens who belong to the category “old” have a positive significant relation with trust (significant at 10%). Citizens who belong to this category have more trust in their government compared to citizens who belong to the category “average.” Of the other socio-economic factors the results

⁶ We also checked for correlations of explaining variables and they were below 0.7. These Pearson correlations can be obtained from the authors upon request. We also applied normal OLS-regressions but they give in term of significance and sign similar results to ordinal regression. These results are available upon request.

Table 5

The number of times citizens use a particular method of engagement.

Number of times engaged	Frequency	Percent
0	474	35.5%
1	501	37.5%
2	255	19.1%
3	90	6.7%
4	17	1.3%
Total	1,337	100%

Table 6

Estimations results: ordinal regressions with number of times citizen engagement.

Dependent variable: trust		
	Estimate	SE
Citizen engagement 1 (ref. 0 engagement)	−0.34***	0.13
Citizen engagement 2 (ref. 0 engagement)	−0.55***	0.15
Citizen engagement 3 (ref. 0 engagement)	−0.87***	0.21
Age young (ref. average)	−0.20	0.27
Age old (ref. average)	0.20*	0.11
Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)	−0.17	0.11
Education (0 = low, 1 = high)	0.11	0.11
Zeist (ref. Ermelo)	−0.48***	0.15
IJsselstein (ref. Ermelo)	−0.30***	0.12
Prob. (LR. statistic)	0.00	

Note. All coefficients are insignificant except for the coefficients with */**/* which denote significance at the 90%/95%/99% levels.

show that of age, the category “young,” gender and higher education did not have a significant effect on the amount of trust citizens have in their own municipality. Furthermore, both the estimates for the dummy of the municipalities of Zeist and IJsselstein are negatively significant at 1% (compared with the reference of Ermelo). Citizens who live in the municipality of Zeist or IJsselstein have less trust in their municipality compared to citizens who live in the municipality of Ermelo. The drivers behind these differences are an important topic for future research (see also Section 4).

To conclude, the above-described analyses indicate that different forms of direct citizen engagement are negatively associated with trust and seem to decrease the amount of trust that citizen panel members have in their own local government. Next, we examined if the number of times that citizens report using a particular engagement form influences the amount of trust that citizens have in their government, and developed a second model. An overview of the number of times citizens report using a particular citizen engagement form is given in Table 5.⁷

Once again an ordinal regression is conducted to measure the influence of the number of times citizens engage on the amount of trust citizens have in their own municipality (see Table 6). Also now a likelihood ratio test shows that the model is highly significant. In the first and second columns the coefficients and standard errors are presented.

⁷ Dummy variables were developed to examine the influence of the number of times citizens engage on trust. The reference category is 0 times engaged. Dummy 1 = respondents reported engagement once; dummy 2 = respondents reported engagement twice. Table 5 shows that only 17 citizens reported engaging four times; for that reason this variable is added to the category three times engaged and forms dummy 3.

All dummies with the different number of times that citizens report engaging turn out to be negative and significant at 1%. This suggests that the number of times citizens engage is negatively related to the amount of trust citizens have in their municipality.⁸ The coefficient makes clear that if the number of times one engages increases from two to three or four, a negative effect on trust still exists. Furthermore, of the socio-economic factors, only citizens who belong to the category “old” have a positive significant relation with trust (significant at 10%), revealing that citizens who belong to this category have more trust in their municipality compared to the reference category “average.” In addition, of the other socio-economic factors the category age “young,” gender and education did not have a significant effect on trust. Finally, just like in the first model, the municipality fixed effect for Zeist and IJsselstein is negative and significant. Citizens from both Zeist and IJsselstein have less trust in their municipality compared to citizens who live in the municipality of Ermelo (significant at 1%).

3.1. Robustness of results⁹

We also apply different regressions for these forms of engagement or the number of times of engagement including the socio-economic variables for each municipality individually. In terms of significance, the results for the municipality of Ermelo are similar to [Tables 4 and 6](#). However, for the municipalities of Zeist and IJsselstein there are no significant results. It seems that the results in [Tables 4 and 6](#) are fully driven by the municipality of Ermelo.

We also add an extra control variable, as the neighborhood is important. For Zeist these data were not available, but for Ermelo and for IJsselstein four neighborhoods could be distinguished. Only for the neighborhood south of IJsselstein do we have a positive and significant result (at the 10% level). A possible explanation could be that this particular neighborhood is relatively new and consists of young couples. In addition, as most discussion will be on the endogeneity of different forms of citizen engagement, we carry out four regressions leaving one of these variables out. The results for other variables are very similar to those presented in [Table 4](#).

To conclude, the regressions with all data suggest a negative relationship between citizen engagement and trust among citizen panel members. Only for the municipality of Ermelo does the negative significant relationship still exist when we analyze the municipalities separately. We therefore conclude that there is no or a negative relationship between citizen engagement and trust within the citizen panels.

⁸ It should be noted that the number of observations for four times is relatively small (see [Table 5](#)). Therefore, we also run a regression with three and four times separately. In that case, for three times we found similar results in terms of significance and for four times we found significance at the 10 percent level.

⁹ The results in this paragraph can be obtained upon request.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study explored the relationship between citizen engagement and trust within Dutch municipalities. With the development of complex challenges that municipalities face, citizen engagement in both practice and science is often presented as a solution. One of these challenges is the declining trust of citizens in their government. Over recent years the debate on citizen trust in local government has intensified. To gain more insight into the contribution of citizen engagement to citizen trust, this study examined this relationship through a cross-sectional study among citizen panels within three Dutch municipalities. In addition, we examined if the number of times citizens engage affects the amount of trust citizens have. For the municipalities Zeist and IJsselstein there was an existing citizen panel to which a questionnaire was sent, while for the municipality Ermelo such a citizen panel was set up. Based on this, a sample consisting of 1,337 observations was set up with trust as the ordinal variable. Notably, the average trust in Ermelo is higher than in the other two municipalities.

Our ordinal regressions indicate that the use of different direct forms of citizen engagement is negatively associated with citizen panel members' trust and therefore does not seem to contribute to the amount of trust that citizens have in their municipality. In particular, the forms of attending a council meeting, having a conversation with an official and using other forms of citizen engagement are significant and negative. For the form information meeting no relation was found. A possible explanation has to do with external efficacy ([Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2014; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006](#)). It is possible that those who were active in citizen engagement have a low external efficacy and do not believe that their engagement in decisions matters, which in turn leads to lower levels of trust ([Anderson, 2010](#)). Another explanation could have to do with officials' response to citizens' demands. When citizens are in contact with the municipality or officials, they tend to consider that their voice is not heard and this leads to less trust ([Sant & Davies, 2018, p. 381](#)). This also relates to citizen efficacy, when external efficacy increases citizens' belief that the municipality responds correctly to their input and voice, which leads to more engagement, and in turn to a higher level of trust ([Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2014](#)). For future research it is important to explore this further and to distinguish between external and internal efficacy. It should be noted that this result is mainly driven by the municipality of Ermelo. Based on separate estimations, for Ermelo a strong relation between citizen engagement and trust was found. Interestingly, the establishment of the citizen panel in Ermelo was recent, in 2017, while those of Zeist and IJsselstein were set up in 2009 and 2011, respectively. The establishment of this citizen panel and increasing use of the internet (and therefore the decreasing threshold for being active in such a panel) should be investigated in further research.

Regarding the socio-economic factors, our results are partially in line with [Baldassare \(1985\)](#), who states that individual characteristics like age relate to trust. Citizens

who belong to the category “old” have a positive significant relation with trust. However, the socio-economic factors gender and education did not relate to citizens' trust. Finally, the findings suggest that the number of times citizens engage leads to less trust of citizens in their municipality. Consequently, our findings indicate that citizen engagement has a negative effect on citizens' trust in their municipality. Thus, this study seems to question the positive effects of citizen engagement and offers space for reflection on citizen engagement as a solution for the declining trust of citizens. Citizen engagement is often portrayed as a strategy for challenges that governments face, but our study presents some doubt of this in the context of the citizen panel. Although the causes for this have to be explored, building a panel and more citizen engagement seems not to be sufficient to increase (political) trust. Local government must therefore continue to review and reflect on the application of citizen engagement in the challenges that they face.

In future research there are many avenues to explore. First, regarding age, we only have information about whether citizens belong to the young, average or old age group; the exact age could be added. Other socio-economic variables such as ethnicity are not available for the current database. If we add neighborhood as an extra control variable, results are similar, although one of eight neighborhoods has a positive and significant result on trust. In future research we therefore encourage having more detailed information on neighborhoods.

Second, this study only examines citizen panels of three Dutch municipalities based on a different survey set-up. As no other municipalities were available, this makes it hard to generalize the findings. Therefore, it would be worthwhile extending the questionnaire to other municipalities.

Third, even for and between these three Dutch municipalities we see some interesting results and differences. The municipality of Ermelo, which has a more religious population and a more active civil society, has a higher level of trust, although citizen engagement here is linked negatively to trust. Therefore, it would be interesting to further analyze the interrelation between trust, civil society and citizen engagement.

Fourth and finally, exploration has to do with the contribution of citizen engagement via an in-depth analysis. Nowadays, new forms of citizen engagement are emerging. Examples are engagement through WhatsApp, digital forums, e-participation or citizen initiatives (e.g. joint purchase of solar panels or setting up a care cooperative). The chosen citizen engagement forms in this study are often defined as traditional forms. Although this explorative study suggests that these forms have a negative effect on citizens' trust, it would be interesting to examine the influence of newer forms of engagement on the amount of trust that citizens have in their municipality. This might help to identify the effects of particular engagement forms. Thus, this research provides a next step in understanding the impact of citizen engagement on the local level, and therefore also the potential effects of citizen engagement in local government.

Declarations of interest

The role of citizen engagement was commissioned by the examined municipalities to the first author as research. As part of this commissioning also the view of the citizens was examined in which their opinion and trust in the municipality was measured by questionnaires (citizens panels). These questionnaires were developed by the researcher after consulting the municipalities and are available upon request. The final questionnaires were set out by a bureau that is specialized in citizen panels as this bureau has the right tools to gather the necessary information that is needed to address every resident in the relevant municipality. After closing the questionnaires, the raw data was given to the researcher and analyzed independently which resulted in current study. From the start the studied municipalities were informed and knew that the findings were also going to be used for scientific purposes. They agreed to use the findings for scientific analyses after the report was completed. Finally, the third author has, in addition of being a lecturer at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, also the position of loco municipal manager in the municipality of Zeist.

Statement

We hereby declare that this article has not been published before, nor is it in consideration for another journal.

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