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# The Educational Gradient in Trust in Politicians in the Netherlands: A Status-Based Cultural Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

Much of the educational gradient in trust in politicians remains unexplained by prevailing theories on material resources and institutional knowledge. Our novel explanation theorizes that: in its relationship with trust in politicians, education is a status indicator; and the lower trust in politicians among the less educated reflects the latter's opposition to the former's status signaling. Analyses of representative Dutch survey data ( $n = 1,296$ ) demonstrate that indicators of affinity with elite culture do indeed largely underlie the association between the level of education and trust in politicians. We discuss the relevance of our findings for debates on "culture wars."

## KEYWORDS

Trust in politicians; education; cultural capital; cultural liberalism; culture war

## Introduction

Various studies indicate that the less educated trust politics far less than their more educated counterparts in various Western societies (Armington and Guthmann 2014; Van der Meer 2010). This remarkable pattern calls for understanding, as political distrust is considered to be a major challenge to the liberal-democratic order (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Dahlberg and Holmberg 2016). Two explanations are conventionally used to account for the educational gradient in political trust: a materialist and an informational approach.<sup>1</sup> The first states that those with ample economic resources gain influence in public institutions and society at large, breeding political trust (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). As education credentials translate into economic resources in various ways (Hout 2012), the materialist approach thus attributes the greater political trust among the more educated to their privileged economic position. Yet, studies indicate that the disparity in economic resources between the less and more educated hardly accounts for the educational gradient in trust in politics (Easterbrook, Kuppens, and Manstead 2016; Van der Meer 2010; Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2016).

The informational approach proposes that those with less political knowledge have a hard time interpreting the complex and abstract logics of politics (Galston 2001; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). If the less educated do not approve of the actions of politicians or political outcomes, they are consequently more likely to attribute these to ill-will and a flawed personal character (Popkin and Dimock 1999). Although political knowledge is positively associated with trust in politics in general, just like economic resources, it can only partially account for the educational gradient in trust in politics (Armington and Guthmann 2014).

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Consequently, we propose a novel, cultural, explanation for that gradient, and empirically test two necessary conditions for its validity. The focus is on the role of cultural capital – i.e., affinity with elite culture – and is inspired by two considerations. First, distrust in politicians is frequently accompanied by firm accusations of cultural elitism (see, e.g., Golder 2016; Schoo 2008). Second, it is possible that in its relationship with trust in politicians, level of education largely serves as a vessel for cultural capital instead of for economic capital or being politically informed (Van der Waal, De Koster, and Van Noord 2017). Taken together, this suggests that the more educated's greater affinity with culturally elitist repertoires, stemming from prolonged socialization in legitimate institutions such as higher education and public service television and radio (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2015; Surridge 2016), inspires their greater trust in politicians. The less educated, on the other hand, feel symbolically excluded from politics because the culturally elitist standard, i.e. the “superiority signaling” or “status signaling” of establishment politicians, denotes their opposing lifestyle and attitudes as inferior (Lamont and Lareau 1988; cf., Kazin 1998; Oliver and Rahn 2016). We suggest that this motivates their distrust in politicians.

In short, we argue that the educational gradient in trust in politicians signifies a “status-based cultural conflict”: the high-status signals of establishment politicians incite opposition among low-status groups who feel that their lifestyle and attitudes are looked down on. To assess this, we focus on a Western European context with a marked educational gradient in political trust for which the required representative survey data are available: the Netherlands. In so doing, we answer the research question: *Can the educational gradient in trust in politicians be understood as part of a status-based cultural conflict?*

### **A Status-Based Cultural Conflict: Superiority Signaling by Establishment Politicians and the Opposition It Inspires among the Less Educated**

In addition to a strong economic position and possessing ample political knowledge, the more educated also have more cultural capital, which is the main pillar of our explanation. Following Lamont and Lareau (1988: 164), we understand cultural capital as an individual's familiarity with a “widely shared, legitimate culture made up of high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, behaviors and goods) used in direct or indirect social and cultural exclusion.” As a consequence, we will also refer to possessing cultural capital as having affinity with elite culture. For the problem at hand, we stress that, in addition to underlying inequality reproduction via cultural reproduction in educational institutions and the labor market (Jæger and Breen 2016; Rivera 2015), the unequal distribution of cultural capital between the less and more educated also has political ramifications (cf., Achterberg and Houtman 2006; Houtman 2001; Van der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007; Van der Waal et al. 2010; Van der Waal and De Koster 2015). Below, we theorize about how the less educated's low affinity with elite culture inspires disenfranchisement from the contemporary political order in Western societies.

More specifically, we theorize that the less educated's political disenfranchisement reflects frustration and disgust toward those who denote their attitudes and preferences as vulgar and inappropriate, namely those at the summit of the cultural capital distribution, such as establishment politicians. Frustration and disgust among “the culturally inferior” toward the ways of life, censoriousness or finger-wagging of the “culturally

dominant” establishment politicians (Raines, Goodwin, and Cutts 2017) has already been emphasized in the seminal literature on cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Many years later, it is reflected in dissatisfaction toward establishment politicians, as it is voiced with firm accusations of cultural elitism (see, e.g., Golder 2016; Schoo 2008).<sup>2</sup> In other words, perceived superiority or status signaling by establishment politicians is what disenfranchises the average less-educated citizen, indicating a cultural conflict between low- and high-status groups.

For a proper understanding of the education gap in trust in politicians as a status-based cultural conflict, it is vital to address the attributes with which establishment politicians signal superiority in contemporary Northwest European countries. Or, in other words, which attributes of less-educated citizens are considered to be inferior by establishment politicians and their more-educated constituency in those countries? We argue that two differences in preferences are particularly intertwined with notions of superiority and inferiority in the Northwest European context. The first is the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow preferences and consumption – the standard cultural capital indicator used in empirical studies from the 1980s onwards (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Jæger and Breen 2016). The second is often referred to as an “emerging” aspect of cultural capital: cosmopolitanism (Prieur and Savage 2013; Savage, Wright, and Gayo-Gal 2010), or, put differently, being open and reflexive regarding cultural differences (Bryson 1996; Ollivier 2008). We will refer to this as cultural liberalism, which is the shorthand most often used in the study of politics (cf., Currid-Halkett 2017).

Tellingly, highbrow cultural preferences and cultural liberalism figure prominently in accusations concerning politicians’ cultural elitism (Golder 2016; Schoo 2008). The less educated scorn the highbrow preferences of establishment politicians and their adherents (Frank 2004: 16). This indicates that politicians are “people not like them” (Gelman 2009: 15; cf., Spruyt and Kuppens 2015b), and inspires reactions varying from “concealed hostility towards the refined or the ‘posh’” (Bennett et al. 2010: 211), to outright mockery of politicians’ “‘fine’ socio-cultural modes of distinction” (Schoo 2008: 182).

In addition, the average less-educated citizen accuses establishment politicians of “promoting liberal values” (Golder 2016: 479). They experience establishment politicians and their more-educated constituency’s critiques on their cultural conservatism as patronizing and censorious (cf., Gest 2016; Raines, Goodwin, and Cutts 2017). Such a critique on the lifestyles and attitudes of the average less-educated citizen was recently characterized by a prominent Dutch right-wing populist politician as “a punitive expedition and an act of revenge on people considered as *hoi polloi*” by “the cosmopolitan elites of the Netherlands” (Omroep PowNed 2018). In other words, it is suggested that establishment politicians and their more-educated adherents consider many less-educated citizens to be morally and culturally inferior plebs (Schoo 2008), and disqualify their cultural preferences and conservatism as inappropriate and irrational (Sommer 2017; Van der Waal, De Koster, and Van Noord 2017). Recent remarks by two prominent establishment politicians speak volumes in this regard: U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton labeled Donald Trump supporters as “deplorables” (Miller 2016: first paragraph), while Martin Schulz, former President of the European Parliament, openly called for a “revolt of the decent” to battle the political preferences of right-wing populists (Visser 2018: fifth paragraph).

In summary, establishment politicians signal superiority via highbrow taste and cultural liberalism, and consequently frown upon the lowbrow taste and cultural conservatism of

the average less-educated citizen in contemporary Northwest European countries like the Netherlands. As a result, we theorize that the less educated feel symbolically excluded from politics, inciting opposition and distrust. If this is the case, one would expect highbrow cultural consumption (*hypothesis 1a*) and cultural liberalism (*hypothesis 1b*) to be positively associated with trust in politicians. In addition, one would expect the educational gradients in highbrow cultural consumption (*hypothesis 2a*) and cultural liberalism (*hypothesis 2b*) to account for the educational gradient in trust in politicians. In statistical terms, one would anticipate that the positive association of level of education with trust in politicians declines significantly in strength if highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism are added to the model.

If these hypotheses are corroborated, two necessary conditions for the validity of our explanation are met: a) affinity with elite culture is positively associated with trust in politicians; and b) the less (more) educated's low (high) affinity with elite culture is what accounts for their low (high) trust in politicians. Given that the required measures are only available in cross-sectional survey data (see below), this is the best test of our explanation that we can offer. In the concluding section, we discuss how future research using new data collections and advanced methods could provide more in-depth empirical scrutiny of the underlying mechanisms.

## Data and Operationalization

### Data

To test our hypotheses, we analyzed survey data on lifestyles, political attitudes and behavior, and institutional trust that were collected as part of a larger research project in the Netherlands (Achterberg et al. 2012). CentERdata, which carefully maintains a representative panel of the Dutch population, fielded a survey in 2012. Of the 1,707 potential respondents sampled, 1,302 completed the questionnaire. The response rate of 76.3 percent is somewhat higher than in the 2012 wave of the Cultural Change in the Netherlands survey (Coumans and Knops 2012), and is comparable to the 2012 wave of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (Oudejans 2013).

Excluding six respondents who completed the survey in 10 minutes or less, which is the minimum time reasonably required to provide valid responses, left us with 1,296 respondents. Table A1 in the Appendix contains details on items, coding, and factor analyses for the multi-item measures discussed below.

### Operationalization of the Main Variables

Our dependent variable, *trust in politicians*, is measured by asking how much a respondent trusts politicians, with response categories ranging from 1 (absolutely no trust) to 5 (certainly a lot of trust). A higher score thus indicates more trust in politicians.

*Education* is measured using the number of years needed to attain the reported level of education. This ranges from 8 (primary education) to 18 (university degree).

The dataset includes four items for *highbrow cultural consumption*, which are conventionally used as an indicator for cultural capital (cf., DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; DiMaggio

and Mukhtar 2004; Ten Kate, De Koster, and Van der Waal 2017; Van der Waal and De Koster 2015). These items combine in a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.800$ ), with a higher score denoting more highbrow cultural consumption. Appendix A2 reports the exact wording and scale characteristics of *highbrow cultural consumption* and all the other multi-item scales used in this study.

*Cultural liberalism* is measured by means of a short version of Adorno et al.'s (1950) F-scale, a widely used indicator for a dislike of difference and diversity (cf., Achterberg and Houtman 2009; Cornelis and Alain 2014; Van der Waal and De Koster 2015). We constructed a reliable 7-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.764$ ). Higher scores indicate more culturally liberal attitudes. Note that a robustness check (see below) assesses whether our conclusions are affected if we use an alternative measure of cultural liberalism.

### Control Variables

We include *income* as a measure for the economic position of the respondents, enabling us to account for the materialist approach. Net monthly household income is measured in thousands of Euros. Higher scores indicate higher incomes.

We include *institutional knowledge* to account for the informational approach, utilizing a measure previously used in the Dutch context (Van der Waal and De Koster 2015). Each respondent had to answer a randomly selected subset of seven out of 21 questions on the political and legal aspects of the European Union. The respondents answered each question incorrectly (0) or correctly (1), and we created an index by calculating the sum score. Although items specifically directed at national politics were not available, Ackerman (2000: 78–79) has demonstrated that scales measuring knowledge on a wide range of domains correlate substantially with one another, and with diverse measurements of cognitive ability.

We also control for: *religious denomination*, which is recoded to 1 (no religious denomination), 2 (Protestant), 3 (Catholic), and 4 (Other); and *attendance at religious services*, coded as 1 (no attendance), 2 (occasional attendance), and 3 (frequent attendance). We control for *non-native* using a variable indicating whether a respondent is a native (both parents born in the Netherlands) or non-native Dutch citizen (at least one parent born outside the Netherlands). This is in line with the commonly used definitions of *Statistics Netherlands*.

We also control for the *urban character* of the area where the respondents live. We use a measure with response categories ranging from 1 (not urban) to 5 (very strongly urban). We control for *gender* by asking whether a respondent was male (0) or female (1); and *age*, measured in years. We also control for whether a respondent has a *partner* (1) or not (0), and for whether (1) or not (0) s/he has *children* living at home.

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for the variables discussed above.

### Results

We aim to assess empirically whether two necessary conditions for the validity of our explanation are met. If the educational gradient in political trust does indeed reflect a status-based cultural conflict: (1) trust in politicians needs to be positively related to highbrow cultural consumption (*hypothesis 1a*) and cultural liberalism (*hypothesis 1b*); and (2) the educational gradients in highbrow cultural consumption (*hypothesis 2a*) and cultural

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Trust in politicians	1,263	2.867	1.033	1	5
Cultural liberalism	1,263	3.010	0.633	1.286	5
Income	1,295	2.652	1.394	0	13.729
Highbrow cultural consumption	1,271	2.236	0.940	1	5
Institutional knowledge	1,242	4.396	1.315	1	7
Education	1,295	14.544	2.749	8	18
Female	1,296	0.444		0	1
Age	1,296	56.633	15.242	16	90
Non-native	1,274	0.080		0	1
Religious denomination (no religious denomination)	1,296	0.458		0	1
Religious denomination (Protestant)	1,296	0.208		0	1
Religious denomination (Catholic)	1,296	0.275		0	1
Religious denomination (other religious denomination)	1,296	0.058		0	1
Attendance at religious services (no attendance)	1,280	0.549		0	1
Attendance at religious services (occasional attendance)	1,280	0.318		0	1
Attendance at religious services (frequent attendance)	1,280	0.133		0	1
Partner	1,296	0.676		0	1
Urban character	1,288	3.045	1.327	1	5
Children	1,296	0.277		0	1

liberalism (*hypothesis 2b*) need to account for the educational gradient in trust in politicians. Before testing our hypotheses, we address the bivariate relationships between our variables of interest presented in [Table 2](#). This indicates that, in line with our theorizing, trust in politicians is positively correlated not only with level of education, but also with highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism. A proper test of our hypotheses does, however, call for multivariate regression analyses in which the competing claims of the materialist and informational approaches, as well as other control variables, are accounted for.

[Table 3](#) contains the linear (OLS) regression analyses. It should be noted that our first robustness check (discussed below) assesses whether logistic regression analyses of a dichotomized version of our dependent variable lead to the same conclusions. Model 1 shows how education relates to trust in politicians after controlling for variables that account for the materialist (income) and informational (institutional knowledge) approaches, as well as all the conventional control variables in the study of political trust discussed above. [Figure 1](#) visualizes that relationship, indicating that educational differences in trust in politicians are substantial: 0.435 points on a range of 1–5. Clearly, an additional approach to the materialist and informational ones is needed to explain these differences.

Model 2 adds highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism as a first step to discovering whether our theory is a likely candidate for such an additional approach. As both are positively related to trust in politicians, hypotheses 1a and 1b are corroborated. A second step is required for a strict test of hypotheses 2a and 2b. Model 2 of [Table 3](#) indicates that entering highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism results in a strongly declined and insignificant effect of education. Additional analyses are, however, required to determine

**Table 2.** Bivariate correlations of main variables with trust in politicians.

Education	0.140***
Highbrow cultural consumption	0.173***
Cultural liberalism	0.246***

Calculations on Achterberg et al. (2012); \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Table 3.** Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis for trust in politicians.

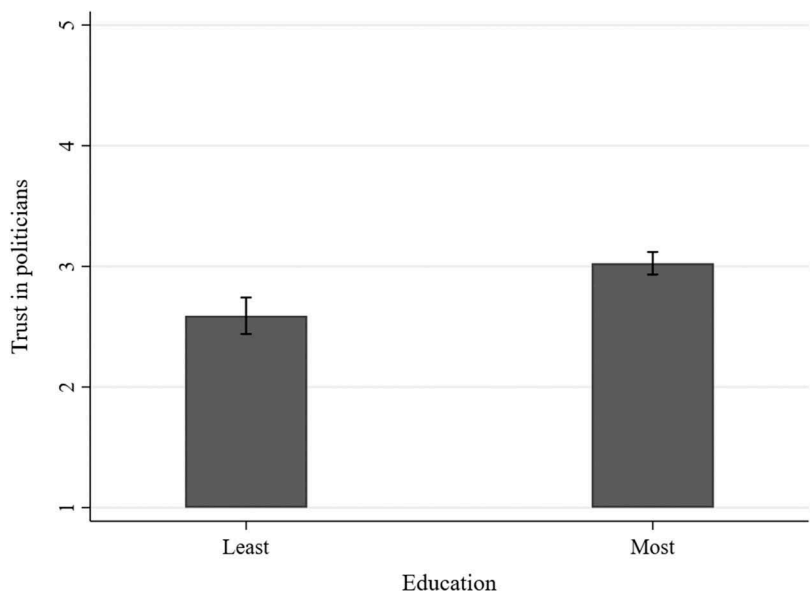
	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Independents</i>		
Education	0.043*** (0.011)	0.013 (0.011)
Highbrow cultural consumption		0.124*** (0.036)
Cultural liberalism		0.291*** (0.050)
<i>Controls</i>		
Income	0.063** (0.024)	0.045 (0.023)
Institutional knowledge	0.076*** (0.022)	0.066** (0.022)
Female	0.167** (0.060)	0.139* (0.058)
Age	−0.009*** (0.002)	−0.008** (0.002)
Non-native	−0.289** (0.107)	−0.259* (0.105)
Religious denomination		
No religious denomination (ref.)		
Protestant	−0.045 (0.089)	0.013 (0.087)
Catholic	0.008 (0.080)	0.092 (0.079)
Other religious denomination	−0.054 (0.135)	−0.048 (0.131)
Attendance at religious services		
No attendance (ref.)		
Occasional attendance	0.207** (0.074)	0.176* (0.072)
Frequent attendance	0.514*** (0.103)	0.489*** (0.101)
Partner	−0.099 (0.072)	−0.036 (0.071)
Urban character	−0.009 (0.022)	−0.022 (0.022)
Children	−0.140 (0.078)	−0.108 (0.077)
Constant	2.184*** (0.251)	1.495*** (0.276)
$R^2$	0.080	0.126
$n$	1,206	1,206

Calculations on Achterberg et al. (2012); unstandardized coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

whether adding these variables *significantly* contributes to a decline in the association between education and trust in politicians. Table 4 sets out the results of these decomposition analyses, which use the KHB method (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013).

The first row in Table 4 shows the initial effect of education on trust in politicians if all the control variables are included (thus reflecting Model 1 of Table 3). The second row reports how much of the education effect remains after adding highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism to the model (thus reflecting Model 2 of Table 3), while the third row reports the difference between rows 1 and 2 and whether this difference is significant. Below that, the coefficients indicate whether highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism significantly contribute to the decline in strength of the effect of education – which they both do: 30.04 percent and 40.91 percent, respectively. In other





**Figure 1.** Predicted levels of trust in politicians for the least and most educated (bars), based on model 1 of Table 3. The difference between the least and most educated is 0.435 ( $p < .001$ ).

**Table 4.** Decomposition of total effect of education on trust in politicians into direct and indirect effects via highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism.

Total effect education	0.043*** (0.011)		
Direct effect education	0.013 (0.011)		
Indirect effect education	0.031*** (0.005)	Explained percentage of initial effect education	
Indirect effects of education via...		Per separate indicator	Total
Highbrow cultural consumption	0.013*** (0.004)	30.04%	70.95%
Cultural liberalism	0.018*** (0.004)	40.91%	
n		1,206	

Calculations on Achterberg et al. (2012); unstandardized coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; controlling for all control variables.

words, the education gap in trust in politicians, as illustrated in Figure 1, is largely (70.95 percent in total) explained by the educational gradients in highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism, thus corroborating hypotheses 2a and 2b.

**Robustness Checks**

In order to assess the robustness of our findings, we conducted three series of additional analyses.

First, our main analyses include a single 5-point item as the dependent variable in the linear (OLS) regression analyses. This produces results that are easy to interpret, but one could argue that this violates the assumption of OLS regression that the dependent variable should be at least of an interval level. We therefore replicated our main analyses with logistic

regression analyses on a dichotomized version of our dependent variable. Answer categories 1 and 2 were coded as 0 (37.85 percent of the respondents with valid answers) and the others as 1 (62.15 percent of the respondents with valid answers). Just as in our main analyses, education was significantly and positively associated with trust in politicians in a model that included all the control variables ( $p = .011$ ). Furthermore, both highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism were also significantly associated with trust in politicians ( $p < .0005$  in both cases), corroborating hypotheses 1a and 1b. After adding these variables to the model, the effect of education is no longer significant ( $p = .936$ ), and a decomposition analysis developed for logistic regression analyses (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013) indicates that highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism contribute significantly to the decline in the effect of education: 54.01 percent and 42.75 percent, respectively ( $p < .001$  in both cases). This corroborates hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Second, our main analyses use the well-established F-scale for authoritarianism as a measure for cultural liberalism. As this captures a dislike of difference and diversity in a broad sense, it is well suited to the aim of this paper. One could, however, argue that contemporary public debates in Northwest European countries focus on a specific aspect of diversity, i.e., ethnic diversity. We have therefore conducted alternative analyses in which cultural liberalism was measured with a reverse-coded reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.868$ ) 6-item scale for ethnocentrism, which was recently used in the Dutch context (e.g., Van Bohemen, De Koster, and Van der Waal 2018). Again, in a model including all the control variables, we found a significant positive association between education and trust in politicians ( $p < .0005$ ). We also identified significant positive associations of trust in politicians with both highbrow cultural consumption and this alternative measure for cultural liberalism ( $p = .001$  and  $p < .0005$ , respectively). This corroborates hypotheses 1a and 1b. In addition, we found that the effect of education is no longer significant ( $p = .192$ ) once highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism are included in the model. A decomposition analysis shows that the latter variables significantly underlie the decline in the strength of the education effect: 25.58 percent ( $p < .01$ ) and 41.62 percent ( $p < .001$ ), respectively. This corroborates hypotheses 2a and 2b.

Third, our findings strongly suggest that the educational gradient in trust in politicians is part of a status-based cultural conflict, in which the less educated oppose the superiority signaling of politicians via highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism. Our theorizing suggests that there are also substantial educational gradients in trust in other professionals who are at the summit of the cultural capital distribution, and that these can be explained by opposition to superiority signaling. Our survey includes measures for trust in two types of professional: scientists and judges. Assessing the explanatory value of our theorizing for the educational gradients in trust in judges and scientists provides a robustness check for our central findings.

A first indication of its explanatory value in those cases is that previous research demonstrates that the educational gradients in trust in judges and scientists are also substantial. Such studies also show that the materialist and informational approaches only partly account for those gradients (Achterberg, De Koster, and Van der Waal 2017; Benesh 2006; Bolton and Gardner 2014; Gauchat 2012) – just as in the case of the educational gradient in trust in politicians. The second indication that our theory has explanatory value for the educational gradients in trust in judges and scientists is that such professionals are generally more culturally liberal than the less educated (De Keijser, Van

**Table 5.** Decomposition of total effect of education on trust in judges and scientists into direct and indirect effects via highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism. The total effect of education is estimated while controlling for all control variables also used in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#).

Trust in judges				Trust in scientists		
Total effect education	0.056*** (0.009)	Explained percentage of initial effect education		0.061*** (0.008)	Explained percentage of initial effect education	
Direct effect education	0.022* (0.010)			0.037*** (0.009)		
Indirect effect education	0.034*** (0.005)	<i>Per separate indicator</i>	<i>Total</i>	0.024*** (0.004)	<i>Per separate indicator</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Indirect effects of education via...</i>						
Highbrow cultural consumption	0.010** (0.003)	18.20%	61.56%	0.014*** (0.003)	23.28%	38,94%
Cultural liberalism	0.024*** (0.004)	43.36%		0.010*** (0.003)	15.66%	
<i>n</i>		1,205			1,204	

Calculations on [Achterberg et al. \(2012\)](#); unstandardized coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Koppen, and Elffers [2007](#); Gross and Fosse [2012](#)). In line with these well-established patterns, they are also accused of having a “liberal bias” (Gross and Fosse [2012](#): 128) and being culturally elitist (Gauchat [2012](#); Golder [2016](#)).

The litmus test of the relevance of our theorizing for explaining educational gradients in trust in judges and scientists is provided in [Table 5](#). This contains the same type of decomposition analysis as reported in [Table 4](#), and generally supports our expectations. The effect of education on both trust in judges and scientists (controlling for the same variables as in our main analyses) declines significantly in strength if highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism are added to the model. The latter variables both contribute significantly to the decline in these effects of education. This indicates that the educational gradient in trust in politicians is part of a more encompassing educational gradient in trust in institutional professionals, reflecting a status-based cultural conflict. In this conflict, the average less-educated citizen resists the superiority or status signaling via highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism of those professionals.

### Conclusion and Discussion

Inspired by the finding that conventional materialist and informational approaches do not suffice when it comes to explaining the well-established educational gradient in trust in politicians, we formulated an additional approach and scrutinized two necessary conditions for its empirical tenability, focusing on the Dutch case. We suggest that level of education serves as an indicator for cultural capital – in short: affinity with elite culture – in that gradient. Our theory is therefore that the superiority signaling of establishment politicians disenfranchises the less educated, as it denotes their opposing lifestyles and attitudes as inferior.

Tellingly, and in line with our approach, the conflict between establishment politicians and their typically more-educated constituency on the one hand, and average, less-educated citizens and the anti-establishment politicians who represent them on the other, is riddled with superiority signaling and opposition. The former implicitly qualify the latter as indecent because of their lifestyles and attitudes (Martin Schulz quoted in

Visser 2018), or do so explicitly by describing them as “deplorables” (Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential elections; see Miller 2016) or “white trash (...) with retarded ideas (...), coarse, boorish, brute, vulgar, and unmannered” (Dutch public intellectual Anil Ramdas 2010: 14th paragraph). Less-educated citizens and their political representatives in turn mock the cultural elitism of establishment politicians and their constituencies (e.g., Golder 2016; Schoo 2008), which they refer to as “cosmopolitan elites” (Omroep PowNed 2018).

Our analyses suggest that the quotes above reflect a status-based cultural conflict that underlies the educational gradient in trust in politicians and other professionals at the pinnacle of the cultural capital distribution, such as judges and scientists. More specifically, we demonstrate that it is the low (high) affinity with two crucial superiority signaling attributes – highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism – of the less (more) educated that underlies their low (high) trust in politicians. Before discussing the wider implications of these findings, it first needs to be stressed that they merely provide an initial indication of the empirical tenability of our theorizing. Due to data limitations, we were only able to test two necessary conditions, but there are at least four ways in which future research could test our theory more systematically.

First, in order to scrutinize our theory empirically, we focused on behaviors and attitudes that are undeniably riddled with notions of superiority and inferiority in the Dutch context: highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism. Nevertheless, when it comes to the latter, the survey data available do not allow us to systematically disentangle the effect of superiority signaling or finger-wagging from so-called ideological incongruence, i.e., a mismatch in policy preferences between establishment politicians and the average less-educated citizen, which is especially salient concerning cultural liberalism (Schakel and Hakhverdian 2018; Van Ditmars and De Lange 2018). The fact that our findings for highbrow cultural consumption and cultural liberalism are very similar already suggests that there is more to the latter than simple ideological incongruence. However, population-based survey experiments (Mutz 2011) could be used to rigorously assess whether the effects of cultural liberalism should indeed be interpreted as pertaining to superiority signaling. In these experiments, attitudinal attributes (e.g., pro versus contra lenient immigration policies) are systematically varied with superiority signaling attributes (e.g., presenting lenient positions on immigration policies in a censorious way or not). A study by Legault and colleagues (2011) already hints that superiority signaling in itself incites opposition: the racial prejudice of respondents who were primed with finger-wagging anti-racism messages increased. Population-based survey experiments could also be used to strictly test the causal direction in our theorizing, which assumes that the superiority signaling of politicians inspires distrust among less-educated citizens.

Second, the attitudinal aspect of superiority signaling is likely to be more encompassing than cultural liberalism. Bones of contention other than issues of cultural diversity, such as environmental issues (tellingly also referred to as “the postmaterialist green movement of the educated classes”; Ivarsflaten 2008: 8), also seem to have a superiority signaling aspect (Achterberg 2015; Frank 2004) that is challenged by the less educated (Kvaløy, Finseraas, and Listhaug 2012; McCright, Dunlap, and Marquart-Pyatt 2015). The attitudinal aspect of the status-based cultural conflict consequently seems to be broader than accounted for in our analyses. Additionally, there is likely to be cross-national variation in the type of attitudinal oppositions that are riddled with notions of superiority and inferiority. Future

studies could uncover which ones are present and play a role in the educational gradient in trust in politicians that is reported in many Western countries.

Third, we focused on an educational gradient, while other social fault lines might also reflect a status-based cultural conflict. An example is the geographic fault line, where hints and accusations of the cultural backwardness of those living outside culturally dominant locations abound (Dionne Jr. 2012; Hayes 2012), inspiring the mockery of “sophisticated urban liberals” (Kazin 1998: 173) in return. Disenfranchisement from the institutional order by those living in culturally peripheral regions might very well be a response to superiority signaling by those living in cultural capitals like Amsterdam, London, Paris, and New York. If so, then the status-based cultural conflict would encompass both educational and geographic fault lines. This is for future research to analyze.

Fourth, the rise and contextual salience of the status-based cultural conflict calls for further scrutiny. It seems likely that this conflict arose when those socialized in post-1960s counterculture academia, especially in the social sciences and humanities, started to populate the rank and file of political institutions. They are the most culturally liberal social category discerned (Gross and Fosse 2012), and the legitimization of their attitudes and preferences as “superior” by their societal positions likely disenfranchises those holding opposing views. Accordingly, we believe that the status-based cultural conflict rose in salience in the 1970s/1980s. Tellingly, the educational gradient in trust in politicians also increased in importance from that period onward in Northwest Europe; before that, the less and more educated often barely differed in this respect (Aarts, Van Ham, and Thomassen 2017; Bovens and Wille 2017). This seems to be a further indication that this educational gradient reflects a status-based cultural conflict. Turning to its contextual salience, this conflict is likely to be most pertinent in countries and periods in which the attitudes of the cultural elite diverge most strongly from those with limited cultural capital, *and* are most strongly riddled with superiority claims. One would expect the most marked educational gaps in trust in politicians in such contexts. Studies using cross-national and longitudinal surveys could shed light on the rise and contextual salience of the status-based cultural conflict.

This brings us to the implications of our findings on a Northwest European country for scholarly debates on the American culture wars. To typify the latter’s central fault line between cultural liberals and conservatives, Frank (2004: 16-17) has already noted the type of accusation that he referred to as “the *latte libel*: the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism” (cf., Hunter 1992; Nunberg 2006). Consequently, the opposition it inspires among, especially, the less educated and those in rural areas or the “heartland” might not just be driven by opposing attitudes, but also by opposition to the superiority signaling of liberal elites. In short, the American culture wars might also reflect a status-based cultural conflict, which future research could uncover.

Finally, a key question concerns why an educational gradient in trust in politicians is relevant. Although seminal studies on political trust have already stressed that a certain level of distrust can be very healthy for the functioning of democracy (cf., Easton 1975; Hart 1978), it seems to be less healthy if it reflects the disenfranchisement of people who feel looked down on by politicians. Our analyses imply that it is not (only) their policy preferences on, for instance, immigration (De Koster et al. 2014) and free trade (Van der

Waal and De Koster 2015, 2018) that *per se* inspire the less educated to vote for anti-establishment parties and politicians, but a political climate denoting their lifestyle and preferences as illegitimate. If so, then other types of accommodation of the less-educated's preferences than a turn to illiberal democracy are viable. More empathy and respect for non-elitist tastes and preferences (cf., Hochschild 2016) could already alleviate the status-based cultural conflict indicated by our analyses.

## Notes

1. What we refer to as the “informational approach”, as suggested by one of our reviewers, is often referred to as the “rationalist approach” (cf., Galston 2001; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017).
2. What might account for the under-utilization of insights on cultural capital for understanding educational gradients in political attitudes and behaviors is that, according to Bourdieu, those with a low affinity with elite culture demonstrate docility: being aware of the value bestowed upon elitist cultural expressions, “declarations of indifference are exceptional, and hostile rejection even rarer” (Bourdieu 1984: 319). On the one hand, this seems to be at odds with the current mocking of cultural elites, which was less prominent during Bourdieu's study of France in the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, those with a low affinity with elite culture still feel less entitled to state an opinion in political matters (Myles 2008; Ten Kate, De Koster, and Van der Waal 2017). As a result, determining which aspects of superiority signaling are accepted as legitimate, and which inspire outright hostile rejection, is an empirical question (cf., Spruyt and Kuppens 2015a).

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Details on multi-item measures.

Item	Questions and response categories	Factor loadings
<i>Highbrow cultural consumption</i> <sup>a</sup>		
How many books do you own? [Range answer categories recoded from (1) to (6) to (1) <i>less than 50 to (5) 1,000 or more</i> ]		0.675
How often do you attend an art exhibition? [Range answer categories recoded from (1) to (4) to (1) <i>never, or almost never to (5) more than six times a year</i> ]		0.826
How often do you discuss art and culture? [Range answer categories recoded from (1) to (4) to (1) <i>almost never to (5) almost always</i> ]		0.843
Do you consider yourself a lover of the arts and culture? [Range answer categories recoded from (1) to (3) to (1) <i>definitely not to (5) absolutely</i> ]		0.840
Eigenvalue		2.554
$R^2$		0.638
Cronbach's $\alpha$		0.800
<i>Cultural liberalism</i> <sup>c</sup> Range: (1) <i>strongly disagree</i> to (5) <i>strongly agree</i> . <sup>b</sup>		
There are two sorts of people: the strong and the weak		0.648
Most people are disappointing when you get to know them better		0.624
Young people often revolt against social institutions that they find unjust; however, when they get older they ought to become resigned to reality		0.639
Our social problems would be largely solved if we could only somehow remove criminal and antisocial elements from society		0.707
What we need are fewer laws and institutions and more courageous, tireless and devoted leaders whom people can trust		0.613
People with bad manners, habits, and upbringing can hardly be expected to know how to associate with decent people		0.615
Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn		0.664
Eigenvalue		2.911
$R^2$		0.416
Cronbach's $\alpha$		0.764
<i>Institutional knowledge</i> <sup>d</sup> [Correct/Incorrect]		
During the eighty years preceding the European Union, Germany and France were at war three times [Correct]		
Norway was a member of the European Union, but has withdrawn [Incorrect]		
Sweden is a member of the European Union [Correct]		
Sweden also uses the Euro [Incorrect]		
The European Union has more powers than any other international organization [Correct]		
If member states agree, they can decrease the powers of the European Union [Correct]		
The European Parliament can veto all European legislation [Incorrect]		
If a member state does not live up to the rules of the internal market, the European Court of Justice can impose a sanction [Correct]		
The European Commission employs between 30,000 and 35,000 civil servants [Correct]		
The European Commission employs hardly more civil servants than the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam do together [Correct]		
Van Rompuy is the chairman of the European Commission [Incorrect]		
In the Netherlands, twice as many people went to the ballots during the Parliamentary Elections of 2010 as during the elections for the European Parliament [Correct]		
The European Parliament always assembles in Brussels [Incorrect]		
The European Union has its own taxes [Incorrect]		
The European Union roughly spends between 100 and 150 billion Euros per year [Correct]		
Most decisions concerning the home mortgage interest deduction are made in Brussels and not in The Hague [Incorrect]		
If there are negotiations at international organizations about the climate problem, the European Commission takes part [Correct]		
Together, the member states of the European Union constitute the market with the world's highest turnover [Correct]		
A Euro is worth less than a dollar [Incorrect]		
The Netherlands have already given the European Rescue Fund a guarantee worth of 40 billion Euros [Correct]		
The Dutch National Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis has calculated that every Dutchman earns between 1,500 and 2,200 Euros a year because of the internal free market of the 27 EU countries [Correct]		

<sup>a</sup> Scale scores calculated for respondents with not more than 1 missing value.

<sup>b</sup> Item reverse coded.

<sup>c</sup> Scale scores calculated for respondents with not more than 2 missing values.

<sup>d</sup> Each respondent answered a randomly selected subset of 7 of these 21 items. We created an index by counting the number of correct answers.