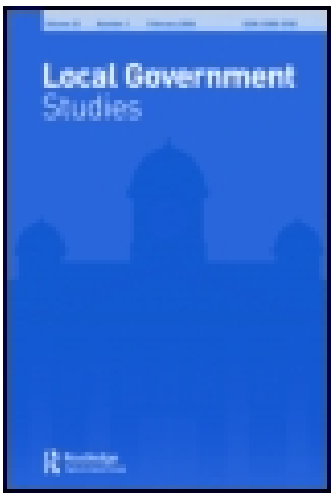

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The Decentralisation of City Government and the Restoration of Political Trust

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ABSTRACT *'Local politics' has specific features that are conducive to the generation of trust, more so than 'centralised politics'. Local politics is characterised by processes that occur on a small scale, within institutions that enjoy a certain autonomy, that are imbedded in a social community with which the citizens can identify, and that offer the possibility of more democratic participation. Where is the threshold between local and central politics? Clearly, if a city grows to the size of almost half a million inhabitants, as was the case in the port city of Antwerp, it becomes too large for local politics. It also becomes vulnerable to the lure of political distrust, as was manifested by the amazing rise of the extreme right in the 1990s. At least this was the theory that prompted the political leaders of the city to introduce a certain degree of decentralisation. To a certain extent they were right. Our evidence shows that the district councils generate more trust than the city council. Moreover they generate trust among sections of the population that were and remain distrustful of central politics. Will this capital of local political trust overflow into the trust in the higher authorities? Some of the data point in that direction but they are far from conclusive. Anyway it is too early to tell. The decentralisation reform in Antwerp is an interesting experiment but a very recent one.*

The Specificity of 'Local Politics'

At first sight, defining 'local politics' may seem an easy task: local politics is politics at the local level, within a small territory and with a limited number of participants. Local political processes are therefore the same as national political processes, only in miniature. The logic of the political processes is identical at every level of policy-making and government, only the size is not.

Jeffrey Stanyer (1976: 17) has called this view 'the myth of uniformity'. Political processes at the local level have peculiarities that influence the way

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political actors act and interact. A first crucial aspect of their interaction is proximity. Local government deals with the problems that are close to home and that the actors find easy to grasp. Local politics is the interaction between actors who happen to be 'the people next door'. The relationship they establish is not an abstract one, between citizens and authorities, but between people who are also neighbours, holders of occupations, in short, people with a social past and future who are members of relationships, networks, and associations.

As a result of these simple social facts, the actors in local politics find it relatively easy to get sufficiently informed and to participate adequately. In contrast to the modal actor in national politics, who knows a little about many things, the actors in local politics know much about a few things. For them it is rather easy to pick up the information they need about the issues on the local political agenda, to get involved in the local debates, to check the information they have and to receive feedback from other actors when their information proves partial. So there is something called 'local politics' and this kind of politics has undeniable merits.

The normative merits of local politics have been the subject of a more or less enlightened discourse with a tradition that spans many centuries. In the golden era of the ancient Greek city states the philosophers could hardly imagine a good 'polis' where the citizens could not all gather in the public square to participate in public life. In modern times the praise of local politics has been inspired mainly by John Stuart Mill and his *Considerations on Representative Government*, originally published in 1861. Mill argued in favour of the creation of a local political level mostly for educational reasons. The local level is where most opportunities are to foster political participation and to 'educate the citizens'. Here, councillors can be responsive to the needs of the community and be held accountable for their decisions. As local problems are less complex, all citizens have the opportunity to collect the necessary information. Local government can be more representative and more effective than central government (Mill, 1977: 534–545). Today, Mill's argument is still regarded as valid and the normative discourse of many recent authors all stem from his basic principles (Pickvance & Preteceille, 1991; Stoker, 1996; Brooks, 1999; De Vries, 2000).

The claims made for the merits of local politics and government can today be substantiated by empirical data. In almost all countries trust in local government is stronger than trust in central (national) government (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Bouckaert *et al*., 2004; Verlet *et al*., 2004). This general rule also applies in the region of Flanders, from which we will draw our case study. In the period 1997–2002 between 35 and 45 per cent of the people of Flanders and Belgium had much or very much trust in the local authorities. Some 20 per cent fewer had much or very much trust in the central authorities on the regional or federal level (VRIND, 2003: 60).

However, to describe this difference in the level of trust is one thing, to explain it is quite another. Is it enough to surmise, with Levi and Stoker

(2000), that personalised relationships generate more trust than abstract relationships, that people tend to trust more those they know than those they do not know? A genuine explanation can and should be more specific.

Size, Legitimacy and Effectiveness

The conventional wisdom about local politics did not have to wait for more empirical substantiation to be put in practice. And here the advocates of local politics met their principal challenge. If small scale politics are likely to generate more trust and legitimacy for the local authorities, it is also likely to entail less effectiveness for the political authorities, local and central alike. As Kersting and Vetter (2003: 16) put it, a choice has to be made between a reform of the local administration, emphasising the output of the local authorities (or effectiveness), and a reform of local politics, emphasising their input (or legitimacy). In order to avoid this dilemma the normative question is how to determine the optimal size for 'local politics', a size that would increase legitimacy without surrendering too much effectiveness. True, local politics is more than a matter of size. Next to size, three other features are characteristic of good local political institutions: a certain degree of autonomy, a subjective sense of community, and a promise of more participation in the political decision-making processes. But size is of paramount importance. It is a characteristic that can be seen as the necessary, if not sufficient condition of the other three.

Dahl and Tufte (1973) were the first to tackle the question of the optimal size scientifically in their classic study *Size and Democracy*. If local politics is to foster political participation, local government should be rather small with respect to territory and population. But the smaller the local government, the more difficult it becomes for it to master its environment and to control disturbing exogenous influences. What is the use of a government that invites a maximum of citizen participation, yet has no power to control the situation in which its citizens have to live their lives? Dahl (1967: 960) described this paradoxical relationship between scale and democracy as follows: 'At the one extreme, then, the people vote but they do not rule; at the other, they rule – but they have nothing to rule over'. Ever since a debate has been going on about the impact of size on democracy on the one hand and on affectivity on the other (e.g. Mouritzen, 1989; Martins, 1995; Denters, 2002; Larsen, 2002). The quest is for the 'perfect scale' that would optimise the levels of both democratic legitimacy and effectiveness.

We cannot hope to settle this debate here. Suffice it to state that beyond a certain threshold so-called local governments expand to such an extent that they are no longer local and no longer felt to be 'local' by their citizenry. Some city governments, though still called 'local government', clearly exceed the local scale. Therefore they can no longer credibly promise full participation and maintain a sense of community. Obviously a village such as Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises is of a different order than a megalopolis

such as Paris. The former is simply too small to enjoy some policy-making autonomy, the latter is too big to promise full political participation and to enjoy the support of a genuine community.

It is hardly possible to pinpoint the precise threshold where the size of the institutions becomes too big for local government. It may well be that there is a grey zone in which a government can still operate as 'local' in certain policy areas but no longer in other areas. It is easier to act as a local government in the area of athletic facilities than in that of transportation. Anyway, beyond a certain threshold the city government has to admit that it can no longer be defined as local. The reasons for this admission may vary. In the case of Antwerp they were rather clear. The political authorities of the city suffered a loss of legitimacy and many of them felt that this problem had to be attributed to the increase in size and the accompanying weakness of local politics. To put it more clearly, the rise of an extremist right-wing party with a populist message made many traditional politicians look for ways to restore legitimacy, if necessary at the expense of some effectiveness.

How to Make a City Government Local Again

The thinking of political elites and commentators is marked by two main trends, one of them favouring centralisation for reasons of effectiveness, the other favouring decentralisation for reasons of legitimacy. Several decades ago the advocates of consolidation still had the upper hand, invoking the advantages of economies of scale and policy-making expertise. Antwerp too was under the spell of the idea of centralisation in the 1980s and aspired to become a true metropolis. In the 1990s a reaction set in to restore 'local government' within the metropolitan setting. Now the main problem on the agenda was the growing divide between the citizens and their city government. However, the advocates of this new agenda had to make a choice between two traditional strategies of decentralisation.

The most common one goes under the heading of 'deliberative democracy'. Many techniques can be distinguished that aim at bridging the distance between the citizens and the authorities in a large city. Pratchett (1999) discusses five of these and Loughlin (1999) no less than 14. We will return to this strategy as it was applied in Antwerp, when we come across the initiative to institutionalise 'neighbourhood councils'.[1]

We have to pay more attention, though, to the strategy of institutional decentralisation as it was (re-)introduced in Antwerp more recently. In its most extreme version this strategy would split up the city into several completely autonomous municipalities. Less drastic and more cautious is the subdivision of the city into several city districts with a certain (as yet modest) level of autonomy. This creates a multilevel city government with competences divided between a central city level and a local district level, according to the principle of subsidiarity.

In Belgium the strategy of city decentralisation was a novelty at a time when it was already widespread throughout Europe. For example, the Dutch city of Rotterdam and the Italian city of Bologna had been experimenting with this strategy for more than half a century. A more recent reform was introduced in Amsterdam where more competences were allocated to the local governments. Much has been learned from these precedents.[2] However, decentralisation in Antwerp occurred in a specific context that makes it particularly interesting for political scientists and that turned it into almost a scientific experiment.

Why should one decide to decentralise a city government? Expert observers tend to mention four major advantages of the decentralisation strategy (in a metropolitan context and therefore in its multilevel governance form). Firstly, decentralisation can provide a better solution to the optimal scale problem. The city council would keep all competences in areas where economics of scale can be expected, while the district councils would deal with all the issues that require close contact with the citizens. Secondly, the introduction of a new 'local' level of government would enhance the possibilities for democratic participation. Thirdly, the district limits can be drawn so as to coincide with existing social communities, sometimes even with municipalities that existed for a long time before being consolidated with the city. The advantage here is that a policy with a strong sense of community tends to be more legitimate (Derksen, 1992; Gosschalk & Hatter, 1996). Finally, district councils could at times also be more effective as they are likely to be more responsive than the city council to a number of problems, especially small local problems. At the same time they might alleviate the agenda of the city elites, discharging them from local matters and enabling them to focus more on highly aggregated and long-term issues. An extra advantage might be that political control over the city administration would be strengthened. In large cities decisions on local matters are more often than not left to civil servants (Van Brunschot *et al.*, 2002). This weakening of political control is less likely to occur in small city districts.

Those opposed to the decentralisation project marshalled quite a few arguments of their own. They argued that the deterioration of the relationship between the city authorities and the citizens was due in the first place to the former's lack of effectiveness, i.e. to the inferior quality of the services one had come to expect from the city administration. Who would care about the lack of 'localness' of city politics if the quality of its services became satisfactory? If effectiveness indeed creates legitimacy, decentralisation cannot solve the problem as it is likely to lead to ineffectiveness, dispersing policy-making over more decision-making bodies and making it longer, more complex, and less transparent. The consistency of policy-making could no longer be guaranteed and citizens would have trouble finding out who is responsible for what (Coolsaet, 1999).

A second, frequently heard counter-argument questioned whether the new level of policy-making would be able to bridge the gap between citizens

and political elites. District councils are indeed more local than the city council,[3] but they are nevertheless the result of a representation process in which the elected are not likely to be viewed as representative of the voters. Participation in this process does not enhance the quality of participation if it is limited to the simple act of voting.

Here, then, was an academic debate that, to a certain extent, can be settled by the empirical data we gathered for our research project. However, this was first of all a political debate in which the ideologies of the political parties and their power mattered a good deal. Some ideologies, e.g. that of the Christian Democrats, who tend to favour communitarianism, had more affinity with the decentralisation option, while there was more hesitation among the Liberals and Socialists, who tend to favour individualism. On the whole, however, the need to decentralise was felt by most to be pressing. In 1983 the city of Antwerp had incorporated several suburban communes and, as a result, had become a city with approximately 450,000 inhabitants. From then politicians pointed out that the city had grown too large to connect with its citizens. The sensitivity to this problem increased when a party of the extreme right, 'het Vlaams Blok' (now 'het Vlaams Belang') began to gain ground in the local elections. Decentralisation became generally accepted as the remedy to restore the trust between the city elites and its citizens.

Officially the project had three equivalent objectives:

1. the restoration of local political debate;
2. the enhancement of political participation by the individual citizens;
3. increased policy effectiveness.[4]

In fact the 2001 reform gave a higher priority to democratic legitimacy than to policy effectiveness, though its advocates of course expected that the effectiveness of the district councils would contribute to their legitimacy. As a result the reform focused more on the generation of trust than on the strengthening of governmental effectiveness. The district councils were to be elected directly but were provided with only a small budget, with few personnel of their own, and with competences that many deemed marginal.

Eventually, after much bickering in the federal parliament, in 1999 the city council decided to create nine districts within the city in 2001. The nine districts of Antwerp are very different in area and population (Table 1). In terms of size of population, we can distinguish three groups of districts: the small ones with fewer than 30,000 inhabitants (Berendrecht-Zandvliet-Lillo and Ekeren), the intermediate ones with between 30,000 and 60,000 inhabitants (Berchem, Borgerhout, Hoboken, Merksem and Wilrijk), and the large ones with more than 60,000 inhabitants (Antwerp district and Deurne). The latter are especially unlikely to remain below the threshold of 'local politics'. Indeed, districts that vary from 9,645 to 157,567 inhabitants and with population densities from 280 inhabitants/km^2 to 10,084 inhabitants/km^2

Table 1. The nine districts of the city of Antwerp

	Surface (in km^2)	Population (in 2001)	Population density (inh./km^2)
Antwerp district	104.66[1]	157,567	8,122
Berchem	5.81	39,482	6,795
Bezali	34.49	9,645	280
Borgerhout	3.93	39,631	10,084
Deurne	13.06	67,773	5,189
Ekeren	9.23	22,150	2,400
Hoboken	10.6	33,370	3,148
Merksem	8.28	40,456	4,586
Wilrijk	13.67	38,138	2,790

[1]In the area of the district of Antwerp the port area (ca. 19.4 km^2) is not counted.
Source: Statistisch Jaarboek 2000–01, Stad Antwerpen, 2004.

are clearly not all equally 'local'. The disparity in the size of the districts was the result of the decision to return to the old municipal borders of the pre-consolidation municipalities of 1983. To the credit of this decision one should remember that, as a result, districts are more than just administrative entities. They have a past as autonomous municipalities and possibly as social communities. The reformers believed that if they could not reduce the size of all the districts to a level below the threshold of 'local politics', they could at least try to appeal to a sense of community that might have continued to exist in the districts and that would support the legitimacy of the elected district councils.

Political Trust in a Multilevel Governance System

So far we have distinguished four essential aspects of local politics. Two of these, 'size' and 'social community', are likely to be facilitating factors for the other two, 'democratic participation' and 'legitimacy'. Actually, what the recent reform in Antwerp was principally about was the restoration of legitimacy or, more ambitiously, of trust in the political authorities. Our central research question is near to that of the reformers. Has decentralisation led to (an increased) trust in the political authorities at the city and the district levels? And if so, has the success something to do with the size of the districts, with their sense of community, with the opportunities for participation as sought by the citizens and as provided by the policy-makers?

As we do not have longitudinal data at our disposal, it is impossible to compare the levels of trust before and after the decentralisation. We can, however, compare the degrees of trust in the different levels of government. In autumn 2003 we organised a mail survey among 1,200 adult Belgian inhabitants of three districts of the city of Antwerp (Deurne, Berchem, and Ekeren). The response rate was 41 per cent and more or less the same across

the three districts.[5] One of our questions was intended to gauge the degree of trust in different levels of political authority: in political authorities in general, the city council, the district council, and the (actual or potential) neighbourhood council.[6]

We chose explicitly not to give the concept of 'trust' a specific, preconceived content. It was left to the respondents to fill in what they meant and to the researchers to interpret *a posteriori* what they had actually meant to say. This is what also Denters (2002) did in his research on the relation between trust and the scale of municipalities. He tested three dimensions of trust and discovered that the results were identical. A second reason why we left it mainly to the respondents to define the concept (see also Levi & Stoker, 2000) is that we were primarily interested not in the essence of trust but in the differences between the levels of trust in different political authorities. A third reason was that we would be able to discover the more precise meaning of 'trust' in a subsequent series of face-to-face interviews with local expert witnesses. There it turned out that the trust in both the city and the district governments, as expressed in the written questionnaires, was more than likely to be very close to the 'external political efficacy' dimension familiar to the students of political trust and alienation.[7] Trust in the regional and national authorities, as probed by the referent 'politics in general', would naturally be of a more diffuse variety and be akin to distrust of the output performance, the moral integrity and the intellectual capacities of the politicians. But, we repeat, the distinction between these dimensions of trust has proven too subtle not to warrant the use of a one-dimensional variable of 'political trust' (Thijssen, 1999).

First we will have a brief look at our dependent variable, i.e. the degrees of trust at different political levels. To the respondents we submitted questions about four political levels, the main ones being of course the city and the district. To these we added 'politics in general' and 'the neighbourhood council'. 'Politics in general' stood, we assumed, for more distant, more encompassing national politics.[8] But as the respondents might react differently to Belgian and Flemish (regional) politics, we wanted to avoid this specification and leave it to the respondent to express a more general attitude. Neighbourhood councils are sometimes still virtual rather than real institutions. Asking questions about them would, again, leave it open to the respondents to welcome them, either from appreciation of their factual performance or from wishful thinking. One thing should have been clear to all: 'politics in general' has to do with larger institutions, neighbourhood councils with smaller institutions than either city or district councils.

A Multivariate Analysis of Political Trust in Antwerp

The general observation has been that local political institutions generate more trust than central ones. This is also the case in Antwerp. Although the

district is brand new and the neighbourhood council often a hypothetical institution, they enjoy more trust from the public than the city council or politics in general. Of the respondents 18 per cent have faith in politics in general (Politics), 24 per cent in the Antwerp city council (CityC), 54 per cent in their own district council (DistrictC), and 55 per cent in the neighbourhood council (NBC). Only 7 per cent has no trust in the district council (Figure 1).

Moreover, Figure 1 suggests that trust in politics in general is associated with trust in the city council, while trust in the district council goes together with trust in a neighbourhood council. Table 2 confirms this suggestion.[9] There is indeed a strong association between politics in general and the city council on the one hand, and between the district council and a neighbourhood council on the other. A certain association between these two pairs is also noticeable but is much weaker than the association within both pairs. This conclusion can be confirmed by factor analysis. A principal components analysis with Varian rotation recognises two factors. Politics in general (0.883) and the city council (0.887) load very strongly on the first one, the district council (0.811) and the neighbourhood association (0.905) on the second.

The simple cross-tabulation of Table 3 highlights the relationship between trust in the city council and in the district council in a slightly different way. The first row shows that many of the respondents with a high trust in the district council have less trust in the city council. Some 31 per cent

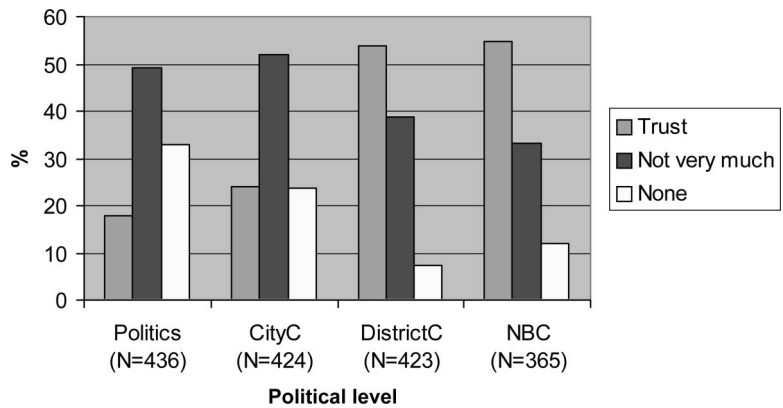

Figure 1. Political trust

Table 2. Trust in political authorities (tau c)

	City council	District council	Neighbourhood council
Politics (in general)	0.49	0.24	0.12
City council		0.29	0.12
District council			0.36

Table 3. Trust in district and city council (%)

	Trust in city council:	Much	Some	None
Trust in district council:	Much	20.6	22.6	8.8
	Some	4.3	28.1	8.0
	None	0.5	1.0	6.0

(N = 398)

(22.6 + 8.8 per cent) of these respondents trust the district council more than the city council, while only 20.6 per cent are equally trustful of both councils. The reverse is not true: of those who are well disposed towards the city council (25.4 per cent of the sample) only one in five (4.3 + 0.5 per cent) has some doubts about the district council. Clearly, it is easier to like the district council than the city council. The reformers must have been aware of this. The question is what will happen after this initial honeymoon period for the districts: will the sympathy for the district spread to the city council (and to politics in general) after a while?

For the moment we can conclude that the citizens have more trust in the district council than in the city council and, moreover, that they tend to associate the city council with politics in general, while the district council is considered a local actor, almost on a par with a neighbourhood council. Size seems to matter to some extent. To this we might add the observation that trust in the district council is by far the highest in Ekeren, the smallest of our three districts. But that is just a conclusion from a perfunctory and provisional bivariate analysis. The next step is to find out, with the help of a multivariate analysis, which factors are behind the levels of trust on the different political levels. We will therefore present the research frame and then elaborate the analysis and discuss the results.

Political science literature proposes many independent variables to explain political trust. Trust can be the consequence of factors endogenous to the political subsystem, e.g. the approval of a pursued policy (e.g. Miller & Borelli, 1991; Chanley *et al*., 2000), a politician, a party, or an institution (e.g. Citron, 1974; Verlet *et al*., 2004). In addition to these endogenous variables, scholars often propose exogenous variables such as social trust (or 'trust in people'), general satisfaction (Verlet *et al*., 2004), and economic confidence (Torney-Putra *et al*., 2004).

Some also include variables that have to do with the ability to participate and that are partly endogenous, partly exogenous, depending on whether the constraints on citizens should be blamed on the citizens themselves or on others, on political actors or on natural or social circumstances. Among these one should mention 'political powerlessness', elsewhere frequently mentioned as 'internal political efficacy' (e.g. Thijssen, 1999; Verlet *et al*., 2004), and the intake of political information (e.g. Brewer & Sigelman, 2002).[10] And, of course, the usual socio-demographic variables are often seen as important since they tend to be somehow related to the variables mentioned above.

From earlier studies it appears that there is a strong relationship between the lack of information about political matters and several dimensions of political distrust/alienation. The level of education has been a long-time favourite of students of political distrust but this demographical variable might be cancelled out by the use of a scale concerning objective political information. To a degree this expectation proved correct. In this analysis much was expected from the level of 'political information' as indicated by the use of news media. However, the political information scale was in turn cancelled out by the powerlessness scale. In the latter scale two items ('political understanding' and 'political information') were meant to tap the feelings of 'subjective cognitive deprivation' which are important aspects of 'internal political efficacy' (or 'political powerlessness') (see Table 4). Clearly, 'subjective cognitive deprivation' is closer and more essential to what we have to explain here than 'objective cognitive deprivation' as measured by the lack of use of information media. The inconvenience of ignorance is not frustrating until you are made aware of it by others and/or by personal failure.

A variable that is seldom taken into account, but that is essential to our theory, is the bond citizens might have with their community and its political authorities. Are they proud to be a citizen of this community? Are they involved in the local community? Do they ever consider moving to another community? As stated before, we view a bond with the local community as one of the four pillars of local politics. In this research, for comparative purposes, we introduce into our model variables that measure the bond with communities of different sizes. We distinguish the bond with the neighbourhood from the bond with the district and with the city.[11]

Table 4 gives an overview of 27 variables we used in our model to explain political trust. Most of them are measured as ordinal data. In principle this makes it impossible to use linear regression techniques. A more appropriate method of analysis of ordinal data would have been logistic regression. But for logistic regression we would have had to dichotomise the dependent variable. This would have meant a major loss of information. Moreover, we would have had to dummify the independent variables. Doing this for more than 20 independent variables would have meant a severe additional loss of information.

For these reasons we prefer to apply linear regression analysis regardless. Actually it is not uncommon to use non-interval variables in a linear regression. Moreover, we transform as many of these variables into scales or 'factors'. Most of these variables can indeed be used as an item in a scale together with corresponding variables.[12] Factor scores are interval and can be introduced into a regression analysis without major methodological objections. The resulting regression coefficients is less ambiguous to interpret than the results of non-linear multivariate analysis methods. Finally we check the results of the regression by means of a bivariate analysis (i.e. triangulation).

Table 4. Independent variables

Variables	Loadings	Alpha
Age		
Education		
District seniority (years of living in the district)		
Political information (scale)		0.78
- Radio news	.806	
- Television news	.774	
- Newspaper news	.681	
- 'De Antwerpenaar' (1)	.756	
- Discussions with friends	.633	
Political powerlessness (scale)		0.86
- Political ability (2.1)	.891	
- Political understanding (2.2)	.767	
- Political office (2.3)	.855	
- Political information (2.4)	.823	
Social commitment (3)		
Social trust		
District bond (scale)		0.77
- Satisfaction with living in the district	.865	
- Identification with district (4)	.848	
- Pride to be citizen of the district	.805	
City bond (scale)		0.63
- Identification with city and district (5.1)	.852	
- In favour of more district autonomy (5.2)	−.728	
- Proud to be a citizen of Antwerp	.693	
District performance (scale)		0.58
- Evaluation of district performance (6.1)	.808	
- Level of information about district (6.2)	.772	
- Satisfaction with information about district (6.3)	.627	
Voting preference (city)		
Voting preference (district)		
Bond with neighbourhood (7)		

(1) The official city news magazine
(2.1) 'I am able to participate in politics'
(2.2) 'I understand what it's all about in politics'
(2.3) 'I am able to take up a political office'
(2.4) 'I am better informed about politics than most other people'
(3) A composite variable covering active, passive, past or no participation in civil society
(4) 'Is the district your real home or can you imagine living elsewhere?'
(5.1) 'Do you consider yourself as a citizen of Antwerp or as a citizen of district . . .' (answers ranging from exclusively Antwerp to exclusively district)
(5.2) Answers ranging from restoration of an autonomous municipality to the abolishment of decentralisation
(6.1) 'Has there been more sensitivity to the problems in your neighbourhood since the decentralisation?'
(6.2) 'Do you hear from your district council?'
(6.3) 'Do you receive enough information about/from the district council?'
(7) 'Do you feel related to your (street or) neighborhood or to the district in general?'

Thus we reduce the number of variables by the application of a principal components analysis (with varimax rotation). We take the following steps: selection of the variables to be submitted to the factor

analysis,[13] determination of the initial factors, refinement by using a varimax rotation, all this resulting in the construction of one-dimensional scales (De Vaus, 1993: 258). Using this method we can discover five scales:[14] political information, political powerlessness, district bond, city bond, district performance. We discuss the meaning of these scales in more detail below. Note that some of these scales are not new. They have been used and validated in earlier research. This applies certainly to the scale of (internal) political powerlessness that has been carefully validated and contrasted to other dimensions of 'political alienation' by Thijssen (1999).

We try to explain the variance of political trust in the four different political authorities by means of a model of maximum five factors and six variables – the three socio-demographic variables and three variables that did not load on a wider factor (social commitment, social trust, neighbourhood bond). We relied mainly on a 'stepwise procedure' to test the model: SPSS adds the variable explaining the most to the model until no variable is left that makes a significant contribution ($p < 0.05$). Note that some of the variables do not appear as factors in the final step of the regression analysis. This does not mean that they were irrelevant, but that they were swallowed up by other factors. To give an example, 'education' was swallowed up by 'political information' which was then swallowed up by 'political powerlessness'. We should also point out that using the 'enter procedure' yielded basically the same results. To make this point the coefficients produced by both procedures are displayed in Table 4.

Politics in General

The model explains 31.1 per cent of the variance of trust in politics in general. Table 5 shows that four variables are significant. In order of explanatory power: political powerlessness, social trust in people, city bond, and district performance.

Table 5. Explanatory factors of political trust (beta)*

	General	City	District	Neighbourhood
Political powerlessness*	.353/.341	.168/.242	/	/
Social trust	.249/.230	.244/.242	/	/
City bond*	.209/.180	.337/.391	/	/
District performance*	.125/	/	.438/.449	.295/.282
District bond*	/	/	.177/.188	.178/.182
Neighbourhood bond	/	/	/	.232/.239
Education	/	/	/	.191/.210
District seniority	/	/−.175	/	.206/.218
(N=)	(195)	(194)	(196)	(172)

*The beta before the slash is obtained with the stepwise procedure, the one after the slash with the enter procedure. Non-significant betas have been omitted.

Trust in politics in general can be explained in the first place by whether a citizen feels politically powerless. This factor appears to have swallowed not only 'education' but also, as we mentioned before, the scale regarding the intake of political information. The more someone considers himself able to participate in politics, to understand the political game, to perform in political office, and – especially – to be better informed about politics than most other people, the more trust he has in politics in general. How to interpret this? Probably it is easier to like the (political) game in which you feel able to participate.

Social trust seems to overflow into political trust. Citizens who are convinced that people are trustworthy also tend to have trust in politics in general. Here is another contribution to the cultural capital debate. Putnam might be correct after all: horizontal social trust contributes to vertical political trust.

It is remarkable that some variables that are essentially indicators of local circumstances contribute to explain trust in politics in general. This is certainly the case with the district performance scale: the more one thinks that the district has performed well for one's neighbourhood and that one is well informed about it, the more one is trusting of politics in general. What should we make of this? This possibly means that the perception of the district performance is a matter of diffuse affection rather than of specific evaluation. A positive perception of the district possibly takes its cue from a positive attitude towards politics in general rather than the other way around. It is somewhat hard to believe that the perception of the performance of a new and still largely unknown district would determine the attitude to the political game in society at large. But it is not entirely impossible and this is certainly what the reformers were hoping for.

The bond felt with the city, or call it connectedness, is a third determinant of trust in politics in general. Some citizens feel more at ease in large scale institutions, feel more member of the city than of the district and do not feel the need for more powers for the district councils. These respondents are more supportive of politics in general, even when the question is asked in rather abstract terms.

To cut a long story short: a citizen who trusts his fellow citizens, who considers himself politically capable, and who has no problem with large scale institutions tends to think that politics in general are trustworthy. That he also tends to have a positive preconception of the performance of this district may well be a consequence rather than a cause.

The City Council of Antwerp

Not unexpectedly the explanatory power of the model for the level of trust in the city council is somewhat weaker than that for politics in general (adjusted $R^2 = .245$). City politics are less salient to most and opinion

formation therefore weaker. Three variables contribute significantly: the bond with the city, political powerlessness, and social trust (Table 5). Not surprisingly the same factors also figure in the explanation of trust in politics in general. More remarkable is the finding that not a single district-related variable contributes significantly to the model.

The most important cause of trust in the city council is the bond one has with the city. The more one is opposed to increased autonomy for the districts, the more proud one is to be an Antwerpian, and the more one feels affectively connected with the city (rather than with the district), the more trusted is the city government.

Political powerlessness and trust in people again play an important role. The more one feels able to participate in politics and the more one has a positive view on relations with other people, the more trust one has in the city council.

So it is the citizen prideful of being an Antwerpian and with enough social and political capital who trusts his city government most. The similarity with the explanation of trust in politics in general suggests that we have here a type of citizen whom we might call 'metropolitan' and who prefers to live and feels at ease in a larger scale polity. Whether such citizens feel at home in their district is of no consequence for their appreciation of the city council.

The District Council

When we move from the level of the city council to that of the district council quite another series of explanatory factors suddenly comes to the fore. There are only two variables that score significantly: the district bond and the evaluation of district performance (Table 5). True, our model explains only 22.5 per cent of the variance of trust in the district council. But this may be due to the fact that there is less variance to explain.

Those who are convinced that more attention has been paid to the problems of his neighbourhood since the city was decentralised and who hear from the district council regularly (and are satisfied with the information they get), trust the district council more than others. The only other significant variable is the bond with the district as a community. The more one is satisfied with living in the district and the less one can imagine moving to another place, the more trust one has in the district council. Those who are proud to be a citizen of the district are also those who trust the district. This is clear evidence for the community hypothesis: the more affinity there is with a polity, the more one trusts it. One can observe it most clearly in Ekeren, the smallest district with the strongest community identity and the highest level of trust in the district council.[15]

So those who think that the district council is a trustworthy institution are people who like to live there and feel proud of it. They want the district to be as autonomous as possible and are convinced of the positive effect of district

policies on their neighbourhood. Whether this perception is based on effective performance or on diffuse affection cannot be derived from the data used thus far. Other data seem to indicate, however, that the effectiveness of the local district is not a strict prerequisite for legitimacy. More factual information about and more contact with the district council need not lead to the evaporation of the initial diffuse trust. That much we learned from our interviews with privileged witnesses who had repeated contacts with policy-makers at the district level. To paraphrase an old saying: 'the people of the district council may be mediocrities from a managerial perspective, but they are our mediocrities'.

The most important conclusion here is that trust in the district council is determined by other factors than trust in politics in general and in the city council in particular. Political powerlessness or social trust is of no importance on this local level. Trust in the district council is determined by local factors. Does one feel at home? Is one happy to live where one lives? Is it important to have a kind of self-rule? Are the local authorities responsive to the local problems instead of indulging in 'grand politics'? Is there a certain dislike of large scale, complex institutions? These are the relevant questions to explain trust in the district council. It is very clear that we speak here of another type of citizens than those who favour city-wide politics. We could call them 'locals' in contrast to the 'metropolitans'.

The Neighbourhood Council

Below the lowest institutional level we discover a layer of discursive, weakly institutionalised political processes. There is a growing belief that neighbourhood initiatives, let us call them 'councils', will play a central role in local politics (Mulgan & Six, 1996; De Rynck & Kalk, 2003). Therefore we also want to know what explains the trust of people in this kind of council. Not surprisingly the explained variance is the smallest of the four levels we included in our research (adjusted $R^2 = .207$). Many respondents are not familiar with actual neighbourhood councils. In spite of this some are more welcoming to this kind of initiative than others. Five variables are significant in the model: district performance, neighbourhood bond, education, district seniority and district bond (Table 5).

Here the most important factor is the perceived performance of the district council. The more one is persuaded that more attention has been paid to local problems since the decentralisation reform and the more one hears about it, the more one trusts in sub-local initiatives. However, why should one become trusting of neighbourhood councils as a result of satisfaction with district performance? The reverse explanation might be equally plausible: a diffuse positive attitude towards small scale politics – either at the district or at the neighbourhood level – leads to a positive perception of the district policy performance.

For the first time the bond with the neighbourhood scores significantly. This is a variable that was not associated with other variables and therefore was not absorbed by a scale. It appears to be a very specific variable that opposes the bond with the neighbourhood to the bond with the district at large. A strong neighbourhood bond leads – not surprisingly – to a higher trust in sub-local initiatives and 'authorities'.

The bond with the district is also significant for the explanation of sub-local trust. This is not as paradoxical as it may seem. The bond with the district is a reflection of the satisfaction with local living, of feeling at home, and of the pride one has in one's local community. Thus the neighbourhood bond is not opposed to the district bond. Those who have trust in neighbourhood councils also appear to have a special bond with the district and are convinced that the district takes care of the problems in the neighbourhood. Localism might be the correct term to express the close relationship between trust in the neighbourhood and in the district.

Here, for the first time, two socio-demographic variables come to the surface. Trust in neighbourhood councils is an attitude for the weakly schooled and for the aged (who also tend to have lived longest in the district, to have more 'district seniority'). So it is the weakly qualified citizen, strongly affiliated with his neighbourhood, and happy to live where he lives, who has the most trust in neighbourhood councils.

So we discover almost the same explanation for the trust in neighbourhood councils as in the district council. These locals prefer small scale politics where political powerlessness or the lack of the trust in ('foreign') people is irrelevant. Many people who feel powerless in large scale politics tend to feel at ease and more or less in control in small scale politics.

Political Partisanship

Thus far we have argued that trust in 'local' politics is based on other considerations than trust in 'metropolitan' politics. To the evidence presented thus far we can now add another element: partisanship proves to be less relevant for trust in local politics than in metropolitan politics.[16] For technical reasons we left this nominal variable out of our multivariate regressions. Here, however, we can link partisanship to political trust in a bivariate analysis that will be a major test of our underlying theory. If local politics is better suited for the 'weaker' citizens and metropolitan politics for the 'stronger', then it is natural to assume that partisan preferences will be less relevant for trust in local than in metropolitan politics. Indeed, political parties operate more on the supra-local than on the local level.

Figure 2 displays the relationship between (electoral) partisanship and political trust in the four levels of political authority. As expected, trust increases among the supporters of all the parties as the political level becomes more local.[17] Then the 'weaker' citizens, the locals, can join the 'stronger' citizens, the metropolitans. The same phenomenon reappears

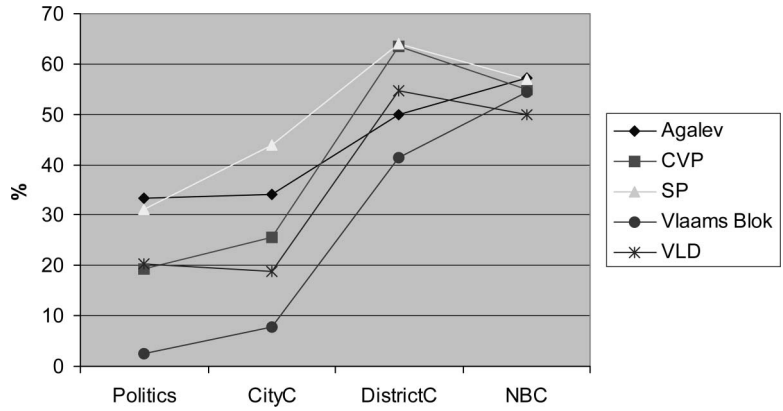

Figure 2. Trust by party and by political level

within each party. Distrust of supra-local politics is dominant among the voters of every party, while trust in local and sub-local politics is dominant among the voters of every party, except among those of the Vlaams Blok, only 41.4 per cent of the latter displaying trust in the district council.

More remarkable for our argument is that the variance between the parties decreases as we descend from the supra- to the sub-local levels of political institutions. Trust in politics in general shows the largest variance between the party electorates, trust in sub-local politics the smallest. The ranking of the party electorates with respect to political trust remains almost the same, but the differences tend to fade away.

At the level of politics in general the voters of the socialists (SP in the figure) and the Greens (AGALEV) proved to be the most trusting (30 per cent of them), followed by the Liberals (VLD) and the Christian Democrats (CVP) (about 20 per cent). Among the voters of the populist Vlaams Blok almost nobody expressed trust in politics in general. Contrasts actually increased somewhat when it came to trust in the city council and its politics (CityC). The voters of the SP, the perennial majority party in the city of Antwerp, were apparently more trustful than those of the other parties. Among the Greens, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals one-third, one-quarter and less than one-fifth, respectively, were trustful. Not surprisingly among the voters of the Vlaams Blok only 7.9 per cent admitted that they trusted the city authorities.[18]

These contrasts weaken and almost vanish when we descend to the local levels. A majority of the voters has a lot of trust in the district council (DistrictC). Even among the Vlaams Blok voters there is a large minority of 41.4 per cent. Socialists and Christian Democrats are a little more trusting than Liberals and Greens, but the differences are reduced to less than 15 per cent. Finally on the level of the neighbourhood councils (NBC) hardly any

difference remains between the parties: in each party between 50 and 60 per cent of the voters would trust a neighbourhood council.

So it appears to be easier to trust political authorities at the local than at the supra-local level, leaving aside partisan preconceptions. The latter are relevant at the supra-local but much less so at the local level. This is something we return to it in the conclusion.

Conclusion: 'Locals' and 'Metropolitans'

Could we summarise our findings by stating that we have discovered two types of citizens in Antwerp, the weaker and the stronger, the locals and the metropolitans? And could we add that the metropolitans are the only ones to feel at ease in the large scale political institutions of the city and, more generally, at the supra-local level, while the locals (and most of the metropolitans) feel at ease in the political institutions at the local and sub-local levels? We think we can. We should keep in mind, though, that these are ideal types that should not imply a clear polarisation. Quite a few of our respondents are rather distant lovers of both city and district councils and others, more strikingly, appear to trust the city council without distrusting the district council. The relationship is to some extent scalar rather than polarised. Many metropolitans are also locals but most locals are not metropolitans.

This having been said, who are these locals? We have called them weaker citizens because they enjoy less social and political capital. This shortcoming seems to be related to some of their demographic and social characteristics. They are clearly overrepresented among the aged and the poorly schooled. They are less trustful of their fellow human beings. Probably as a result of these characteristics they are vulnerable to feelings of political powerlessness and less inclined to participate in the processes of political communication and information. On the other hand they frequently enjoy a rather strong sense of identification with the local community. They feel at home in their district and do not think about leaving there. They are proud to be a member of their local community and polity. In this respect size indeed matters: the inhabitants of the smaller district of Ekeren tend to be more attached to their community and their district than the inhabitants of the larger districts of Berchem and Deurne. Admittedly, with a 'sample' of three districts the results can be suggestive but hardly conclusive.

What do our findings tell us about the success of the decentralisation reform in 1999? The success has been real but modest. Real, because the new districts have been welcomed warmly. They certainly enjoy more trust than the city council and its political elite. And they have been able to elicit feelings of trust from citizens who had been estranged from city politics. One might object that theirs is a very volatile, very diffuse trust and that this trust will wear down rather quickly when the district councils are evaluated on

their performance rather than on their promises. This objection is not substantiated, however, by other data that have not been used here. We also interviewed a good number of representatives of local associations who have to deal with the districts in a more tangible way and on an almost daily basis. These privileged witnesses are most positive about their experience with the new districts. They may at times deplore the lack of political power and the mediocrity of some of the district politicians. But they certainly appreciate their accessibility and their sensitivity to local problems. Similar comments can be heard from individual citizens who happened to have communicated with the district. If we can rely on their evaluation we should conclude that the districts are there to stay.

The final objective of the reform, however, was not the creation of trust in the new districts but the restoration of trust in the city authorities. Here our assessment of the conventional thesis about the transfer of legitimacy from the local to the higher levels of political authority cannot be very optimistic. Our micro-data do not allow us to agree fully with the conclusion reached by Vetter (2002: 193 ff.) on the basis of macro-data that local politics are indeed a school of democracy. True, our data pertain only to the case of Antwerp and to the attitude of trust in politics, which is close to but not the same as satisfaction with the democratic process. Still, our essential finding is that trust in the districts is greater than but also very different from trust in the city. It can be found more among the 'weaker' categories of the population than among the 'stronger'. This suggests that the distinction between both is not overly dependent on contextual variables.

Data not shown here indicate, very tentatively, that there might be a limited transfer of trust in the district to trust in the city. The fact that a favourable assessment of actual district performance appears to contribute to trust in politics in general may well point in the same direction. However, the causal relationship is weak and may as easily go the other way. Trust in politics in general would then contribute to granting the benefit of the doubt to the districts. In any case, the success of civic education and the restoration of political trust are not to be expected solely from the strategy of intra-city decentralisation, at least not in the short run. The reformers could expect more positive results in the years to come but in the meantime they can only wait and see. Upgrading the intra-city decentralisation by giving more competences to the districts might be good for the latter's effectiveness and legitimacy but might make the city and politics in general look even worse than before.

Notes

1 True, this initiative has not yet been fully implemented, but is has already been much talked about. Opinions about these councils are certainly more than non-opinions.

2 A panel of experts evaluated the Amsterdam reform favourably with respect to the effectiveness and the efficiency of the new local governments, though it deplored some

weaknesses in the co-ordination between the local governments and between the local governments and the city government. Unfortunately, the report had few data about the legitimacy and the trust the reform generated among the local citizens (Tops, 1997).

3 This was a hesitation expressed in the Tops (1997) report about the Amsterdam reform: citizens with foreign origin were strongly underrepresented among the new local politicians.

4 There were fewer official objectives as well. Besides the need to push back the electoral advances of the Vlaams Blok, there was the wish to restore the control of the politicians over their civil servants and to create a safety net for politicians who had failed to get elected to the city council.

5 This is an excellent response rate for this kind of survey. There is no reason to believe that the respondents were not sufficiently representative of the population at large.

6 The question was: 'Can you say how much confidence you have in each of the following institutions?' The response possibilities were: 'a great deal', 'quite a lot', 'not very much', 'none'.

7 We could rely on a careful analysis of the multidimensionality of political trust and alienation by Thijssen (1999).

8 The trust (or lack thereof) enjoyed by these higher levels of government might well be of a more diffuse variety than the external political efficacy which is central to the trust in the more local authorities. However, from earlier studies we know that there is a strong relationship between 'external political efficacy' and the more diffuse varieties of political trust/alienation such as throughput and output alienation. The main distinction is between 'internal political efficacy' (here termed 'political powerlessness'), an aspect of input alienation, and the other dimensions of political trust/alienation.

9 Because the variables are of an ordinal level we use Kendall's tau c. This is a symmetrical measure, normalised from –1 to 1, recommended for associations between ordinal variables that have equal importance. The use of the gamma coefficient yields similar results.

10 Vetter (2002) uses the variable *Kompetenzgefühlen* but this one is based on a single item of the Eurobarometer studies.

11 Vetter (2002) uses a similar variable but we use it explicitly as an independent variable.

12 Discovering these scales was more than a matter of inductive 'good luck'. The 'political powerlessness' scale is very close to the frequently used 'internal political efficacy' scale. The items on the 'political information' scale suggest very similar levels of information media consumption. And the scales regarding the bond with district and city are derived from a central assumption of our theory.

13 We had to exclude the nominal variable 'political preference' (we will use it later in a bivariate analysis) and the socio-demographic variables.

14 Table 4 shows that the scalability of the items with this kind of data was quite satisfactory according to the Crombach's alphas. We must admit that the alpha of the district performance scale is somewhat weaker.

15 On a bivariate basis we can also state that those who want more autonomy for the districts (or even a secession from the city) are more trustful of the district council.

16 Here we use the respondents that have 'a great deal' and 'quite a lot' trust. As the indicator of political partisanship we take the behaviour of our respondents when voting for the city council. The results are almost identical if we take the voting behaviour for the district councils. N is respectively 317, 313, 313 and 271 for the four levels. N is limited by the missing data on this politically sensitive question (35 per cent) and by the number of those, e.g. youngsters (7 per cent), who were not allowed to vote in 2000.

17 We display only the data regarding the five largest parties in the city council: Vlaams Blok (extreme right, 33 per cent), SP (socialist, 19.5 per cent), VLD (liberal, 17 per cent), CVP (Christian democrat, 11.1 per cent), Agalev (green, 11.1 per cent).

18 The Vlaams Blok is, as mentioned before, a populist party. Moreover it is the only opposition party in the city council. All other parties united in a grand coalition against this party of the extreme right.

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