

Twenty Years of Generosity in the Netherlands

Abstract

We analyze all the data from the Giving in the Netherlands survey among households ($n = 17,033$) to answer the research question: how can trends in generosity in the Netherlands in the past 20 years be explained? We find that secularization and a loss of prosocial values explain the decline in generosity. Our findings illustrate the need to develop distinctive theories on generosity, because generosity as a proportion of income has a distinctive set of predictors. For the practice of fundraising, our research suggests that the strategies and propositions of charitable causes need modification.

Extended summary

In the past two decades, philanthropy in the Netherlands has gained significant attention, from the general public, from policy makers, as well as from academics (Schuyt, 2010). Research on philanthropy in the Netherlands has documented a substantial increase in amounts donated to charitable causes since data on giving in the Netherlands have become available in the mid-1990s (Bekkers, Gouwenberg & Schuyt, 2017). What has remained unclear, however, is how philanthropy has developed in relation to the growth of the economy at large and the growth of consumer expenditure. For the first time, this paper brings together all the data on philanthropy available from eleven editions of the Giving in the Netherlands survey among households ($n = 17,033$) to answer the research question: how can trends in generosity in the Netherlands in the past 20 years be explained?

One of the strengths of the GINPS is the availability of data on prosocial values and attitudes towards charitable causes. In 2002, the Giving in the Netherlands survey among households was transformed from a cross-sectional to a longitudinal design (Bekkers, Boonstoppel & De Wit, 2017). The GIN Panel Survey has been used primarily to answer questions on the development of these values and attitudes in relation to changes in volunteering activities (Bekkers, 2012; Van Ingen & Bekkers, 2015; Bowman & Bekkers, 2009). In the current paper, we use the GINPS in a different way. First we describe trends in generosity, i.e. amounts donated as a proportion of income. Then we seek to explain these trends, focusing on prosocial values and attitudes towards charitable causes.

Vis-à-vis the rich history of charity and philanthropy in the Netherlands (Van Leeuwen, 2012), the current state of giving is rather poor. On average, charitable donations per household in 2015 amounted to €180 per year or 0,4% of household income. The median gift is €50 (De Wit & Bekkers, 2017). In the past fifteen years, the trend in generosity is downward: the proportion of income has declined slowly but steadily since 1999 (Bekkers, De Wit & Wiepking, 2017). In 2015, giving as a proportion of income has declined by one-fifth of its peak in 1999.

In the current paper, we test three complementary explanations for the decline in generosity. The first explanation is declining religiosity. Because giving is encouraged by religious communities, the decline of church affiliation and practice may have reduced charitable giving (Wilhelm, Rooney & Tempel, 2007). The second explanation is that prosocial values have declined. Because generosity depends on empathic concern and moral values such as the principle of care (Bekkers & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2016), a loss of such prosocial values may have reduced generosity.

The third explanation is that attitudes towards charitable causes have become less positive. Donations to charitable causes rely on a foundation of charitable confidence. If trust in charities has declined, generosity is likely to have declined as well (O'Neill, 2009).

Our analyses support two of the three explanations, but in surprisingly complex ways. First, the disappearance of religiosity from Dutch society has reduced charitable giving because the non-religious have become more numerous, but at the same time those who are still religious have become much more generous. Second, we find that indeed prosocial values have lost support, and that the loss of prosociality explains about 40% of the decline in generosity. The loss of prosocial values itself, however, is closely connected to the disappearance of religion. About two thirds of the decline in empathic concern and three quarters of the decline in altruistic values is explained by the reduction of religiosity. Third, we find that the decline in generosity is not directly related to the decline in charitable confidence once changes in religiosity and prosocial values are taken into account.

We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for theories and research on philanthropy and for the practice of fundraising. Our research clearly demonstrates the utility of including questions on prosocial values in surveys on philanthropy, as they have predictive power not only for generosity and changes therein over time, but also explain relations of religiosity with generosity. Our findings illustrate the need to develop distinctive theories on generosity. Predictors of levels of giving measured in euros can be quite different from predictors of generosity as a proportion of income. For the practice of fundraising, our research suggests that the strategies and propositions of charitable causes need modification.

Traditionally, fundraising organizations have appealed to empathic concern for recipients and prosocial values such as duty. As these have become less prevalent, propositions appealing to social impact with modest returns on investment may prove more effective. Also fundraising campaigns in the past have been targeted primarily at loyal donors. This strategy has proven effective and religious donors have shown resilience in their increasing financial commitment to charitable causes. But this is not a feasible long term strategy as the size of this group is getting smaller. A new strategy is required to commit new generations of donors.

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