Local councillors and citizens

An exploratory study of the interaction between councillors and citizens in 4 municipalities in the Meuse-Rhine Euregion

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1. Introduction

1.1 Local democracy in trouble?

Democracy is one of those features that most people value as essential for our western society. It is one of the fundaments on which basically everything we know and need in our society is built. However, many do not seem to realize the value of local democracy. The Dutch database for electoral results shows that only 54% of the Dutch people voted for their municipal council in 2014 ("Databank verkiezingsuitslagen", n.d.). Voting is mandatory in Belgium, but Verhelst, Reynaert and Steyvers (2010) suggest there might be a representational problem in Belgium as well. In Germany, up to the mid-1970s, participation in local elections was very high. Since then however, electoral turnout has declined in most municipalities (Gabriel and Eisenmann, 2005, pp. 133-34). Government initiatives to raise citizen participation in the broad sense have not had the effect that was hoped for (pp. 134-35). These developments raise worries about our democracy and the relationship between local councillors and citizens. The latter do not seem very concerned about electing their local representatives, although local government influences their lives most directly.

The essential concept of this work is democratic representation. Councillors are democratically elected and they are, therefore, supposed to represent their voters (Pitkin, 1972, pp. 38-39). This implies the existence of some form of citizen-representative interaction in which information and opinions are exchanged. Ideally, councillors should be responsive to voters' demands and needs. Located at the lowest and the most accessible level of democracy, local councillors play important roles in the democratic arena. Hence it is absolutely necessary to conduct research within this rather un-explored field.

The topic of this publication is the representative role of local councillors and more specifically their contacts and interaction with citizens of their municipality. Despite the small scale, this publication can hopefully contribute to the existing amount of knowledge in this field. The work is conducted in the framework of Maastricht University Researched Based Learning project (MaRBLe). The idea is that students learn to do academic research in these projects. In the project of 'Inside Local Democracy' students looked into local councillors in the three countries surrounding Maastricht: the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany.

The main goal is to attain insight in the role behaviour of local councillors in the countries in the border region of the Meuse-Rhine Euregion, more specifically in relation to their citizens. Therefore, the following research question was chosen:

> **How do local councillors in four municipalities in Flanders, Wallonia, Germany and the Netherlands fulfil their representative role and what are the significant differences?**

The research is of an explorative nature and has been conducted in four municipalities: Riemst (Belgium – Flanders), Übach-Palenberg (Germany), Valkenburg (the Netherlands) and Visé (Belgium – Wallonia). The aim is to gain knowledge on the role behaviour of local councillors in these municipalities, which are part of different political systems and have a different local government structure. The research question is divided in the following sub questions:

1. What do we know from the literature about the way local councillors in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands receive <u>input</u> from citizens, and the way they interact with citizens about the decisions (<u>output</u>) of their municipality?
2. How do local councillors in the selected municipalities receive <u>input</u> from citizens?
3. How do local councillors in the selected municipalities explain <u>output</u> to citizens?
4. What are the main differences and similarities between the way local councillors receive input and explain output in the selected municipalities?

The concepts in the research questions are derived from David Easton's theoretical model, which will be elaborated in chapter 2. Based on Easton, the concept *input* in the practice of council work is defined as "citizens' demands communicated to the councillors". In other words: *input* is the information councillors receive from citizens to fulfil their representative role. Following Denters and Klok (2013), the Dutch "Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek" (2012) and the introductory meetings with councillors in the four municipalities, *demands* have been operationalized as 'wishes, concerns, complaints, requests and ideas'. Also according to Easton, *output* is defined as the council's decisions. Corresponding to Denters and Klok (2013), the emphasis in this research was placed on the explanation and justification of output to citizens (p. 65).

Unsurprisingly, this work faces some limitations. The findings are by no means generalisable for councillors in any of the three countries. It was decided to leave the citizens' perspective aside. The reason for that is that we know more about them and their opinions already. Additionally, it is simply easier to study councillors than citizens because of the limited number of councillors in a municipality. And finally, in preparing the empirical research in the four municipalities, we decided to leave out the role *perceptions* of local councillors that we in first instance wanted to include in the research project, by comparing them with the actual role behaviour. However, that proved to be too much work in the framework of this student research project. Instead, the focus was placed on the actual role *behaviour*. We expected it to be easier to measure than perceptions, and we hoped to find more differences between the municipalities.

1.2 Structure of this publication
The second chapter will discuss some of the existing knowledge about local councillors. First, it will draw a picture of how local politics work correspondingly to Easton's input-output model. Furthermore, the chapter will pay attention to the role of councillors in the four regions of this research. In chapter 3 the research design of this work is discussed. From the fourth chapter onwards the collected data for Riemst, Übach-Palenberg, Visé and Valkenburg are presented in separate sections. In the final chapter an attempt is made to compare the results of the four municipalities, to draw conclusions and to formulate an answer to the research question.

2. Councillors in the political system at local level

This chapter explores the literature on how local politics function and how representatives fit in this system of local politics. Next, the role of representatives in the political system is discussed. Furthermore, some of the MAELG survey data are presented. Finally, the institutional features of local democracy in the three countries are addressed.

2.1 The political system and representation

In his theory the American political scientist David Easton first argues that political life can be considered as a system of behaviour (Miller, 1971, p. 195). Interactions are the basic units of all social systems and therefore they are also the basic units of analysis (p. 197). In short, the political system can be understood as a 'black box' or the 'political machinery', which contains all activities of political nature. All other activities and interactions are part of the environment (pp. 197-98). As shown in Figure 1.1, the political system is distinguishable from the environment in which it exists. It is open to influences coming from this environment, but it can also affect the environment (pp. 197-98). Therefore, Easton argued, the political system and the environment are connected through an input-output relationship (p. 198).

Figure 1.1 Easton's input-output model of politics
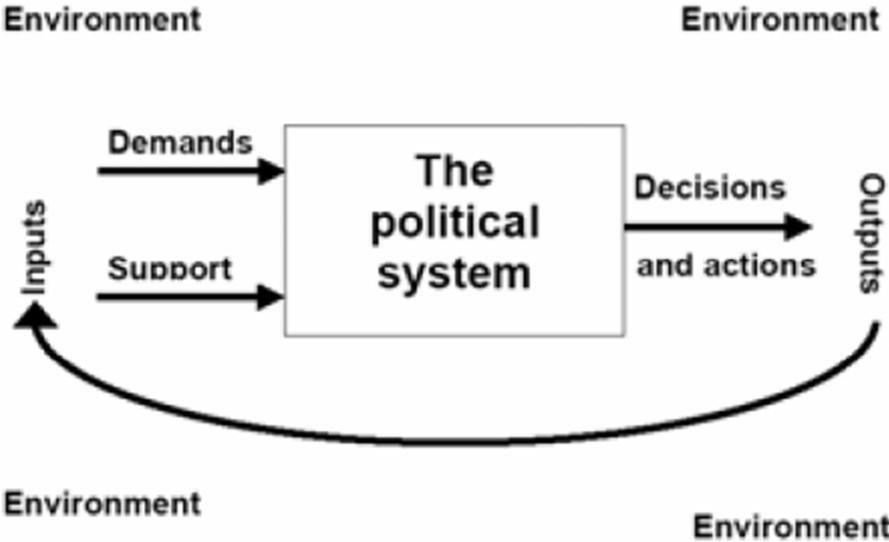
Source: Easton, D. (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley, p. 32.

Easton compares the political system with a factory: it takes in the raw materials and transforms them into finished products (Miller, 1971, p. 199). The raw materials would symbolize the equivalent of input, which is divided in two main types: demands and support (p. 199). The demands are simply defined as what people want. The support permits the political system to perform and satisfy the demands in order to survive (p. 199). The political system works towards the maintenance of a

steady flow of support in order to keep the engine running. Hence, output is meant to meet the demands of the members of the community and generate support for the political system. Easton defines output as the actual outcome of the political system or the results coming from the decision-making process (p. 199). The political system is responsive and adaptive to disturbances that threaten to change or destroy the political system, e.g. too heavy demands or erosion of support (p. 200).

Systems regulate their behaviour through monitoring feedback on their outputs for the environment (Miller, 1971, p. 202). For instance, a speed regulator on a motor adjusts its output on the basis of information feedback. Politics work in a similar way. Feedback provides the political system with the information it needs, i.e. the general state of mind of the members concerning support and the extent to which outputs fulfilled the demands (pp. 202-03). All actions that result from the effort to take advantage of the feedback are part of the feedback loop, meaning that the input-output relation is an unbroken cycle. First, outputs are produced (p. 203). What follows is a response in the environment. Then, the response is communicated to the political system as information feedback. The 'political machinery' might react to this response by follow-up outputs and this can be considered the start of a new cycle in the feedback loop (p. 203).

In this system of politics at the local level the role of local councillors is to represent their voters. Everyone wants to be governed by representatives, every political group wants representation and every government claims to represent (Pitkin, 1972, p. 2). As a concept political representation is rather simple, yet a specific definition does not exist. Pitkin delivered the most straightforward definition (Divo, 2006). According to her, political representation "consists of the activity of making citizen's various opinions and perspectives present in the public policy-making processes". The political actors speak on behalf of others in the political arena (Divo, 2006).

Additionally, Pitkin developed the concept of responsiveness. This implies that the essence of representing "consists in promoting the interest of the represented" (Denters & Klok, 2013, p. 665). The representative should be well informed about people's needs and preferences. Councillors should be aware of the wishes of their constituents and willing to express these in the debates and decision-making of the council. Secondly, they should be willing to engage in public debates to explain and justify the council's decisions (p. 665). Councillors are thus crucial in local representative democracy because they connect citizens to the local decision-making process (Egner, Sweeting & Klok, 2013, p. 12). They have a position of formal authority and they are the core instruments through which residents of a specific geographical area have expressed their preferences for policies, service standards, and tax levels (p. 12).

According to experts, the context of local democracy in Western Europe changed since the end of World War II. Urbanization, globalization and Europeanization emerged and caused a decline in the role of local councillors as the cornerstone of local democracy (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 22). Also citizens modernized politically: they became more demanding and wanted a louder voice in politics directly or indirectly through advisory boards (p. 23).

2.2 The MAELG survey

The Municipal Assemblies in European Local Government (MAELG) survey of approximately twelve thousand councillors from all over Europe provides a good fundament to investigate country differences. The data of this survey were collected between 2007 and 2009. In 2013, Egner, Sweeting

and Klok (2013) edited a volume called *Local councillors in Europe*, which was entirely based on the MAELG data. In the Netherlands, Denters and Klok (2013) published a MAELG survey-based analysis of role perceptions of councillors (the importance councillors attribute to their tasks) and their role behaviour (the actual contribution of councillors). This report often refers to the MAELG survey, because most of the existing European studies in the field are built on this survey. Therefore, it is an important source for this research.

2.3 Local councillors in the Netherlands

Page and Goldsmith presented in 1987 an intergovernmental typology for local governance in Western Europe (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 15). They described the Netherlands institutionally as an example of the North European model – 'legal localism' – because these local governments have a strong legal basis and are, contrary to for example Belgium, less based upon delivering public services (p. 16).

Consultation and co-operation have had a long and important tradition in Dutch government (Hendriks & Schaap, 2010, p. 86). Therefore, when explaining the behaviour and role perception of local councillors, one has to take Dutch political culture into account. The Netherlands is a decentralised, unitary democracy headed by a monarchy – the Oranje Nassau House – and possesses the corporatist and organic character of the Germanic tradition of Continental European political organisation (pp. 86-88). Typical for this form of governing is the incorporation of civil society groups into the policy-making processes of the state itself, which gives the polity integrative and consensus-oriented features (pp. 88-89).

Dutch society has been historically diverse, united under a decentralised form of governance. From 1588 until 1795, the Netherlands existed as the Seven United Provinces (Holland, Zeeland, Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel, Utrecht and Gelderland) from which representatives "would regularly meet in The Hague to give account to the States-General and contribute to policy" (Figee & Eigeman & Hilterman, 2007, p. 15). Consequently, much political autonomy rested with the provinces. When the Dutch nation-state was officially established with the writing of a constitution in 1814, the provincial and local level maintained a certain degree of autonomy, remaining responsible for developing and implementing policies like housing, public transport or general security. These policy fields sometimes constitute 'grey areas' that do not fall within the exclusive competences of one level of governance, but require the local, provincial and national level to act in a complementary manner and to create work agreements (Figee & Eigeman & Hilterman, 2007, p. 20). In this process of operating a decentralised state, such as the Netherlands, Figee, Eigeman and Hilterman (2007) claim that it is crucial to "listen to and then act on what is happening in the heart of society, also when it regards national issues" (p. 16). Thus, the in total 393[1] Dutch municipalities are considered to play an essential role in the policy-making process, as they hold a unique position close to the population, which allows for a reciprocal communication between political institutions and the citizens (Keuning, 2013; De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010, p. 413).

Another important characteristic of Dutch politics that is relevant for this study is the clear separation of powers. The *gemeenteraad* (city council) represents the legislative power, the *college van Burgemeester & Wethouders* (Body of Mayor and Aldermen or BMA) is the executive power, and the judicial powers are independent (Denters & Klok, 2005, p. 69). The traditional model of local

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[1] On January 1st 2015.

democracy in Dutch municipalities remained mainly untouched since it was first implemented in 1852 (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010, p. 406). The composition of the council is determined through elections in the form of proportional representation every four years – similar to the neighbouring countries (p. 406).

Yet, contrastingly to many other European local electoral systems, the position of the mayor in Dutch municipalities is rather unique: the mayor is appointed by the central government and, therefore, does not hold a direct democratic basis of legitimacy. He chairs the BMA of which he and the aldermen are members (Denters & Klok, 2005, pp. 69-70). The latter are elected by the council and would, until 2002, remain members of the council and party group after their election. This resulted in an advantageous balance of power for the BMA due to their 'omnipresence' in the council, despite the fact that the council held certain control functions over the BMA, such as the authority to dismiss individual aldermen (p. 70). In this way strong party discipline was enforced and decisions were regularly taken before being discussed in the council (p. 70).

Consequently, this traditional model came under pressure and was replaced in 2002, when a new Local Government Act (*Wet dualisering gemeentebestuur*) was legislated (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010, p. 406). In this reform the Dutch government took some initiatives to strengthen the position of the council (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 26). The LGA of 2002 changed the institutional structures of local governance in the Netherlands, based on two major objectives: the increase of power of the council against the BMA to define main goals and control (accountability) and to support individual councillors' interaction with the citizenry, by creating more time for representing and explaining (responsiveness) (Denters & Klok, 2005, p. 67). This was implemented by structural changes for both the aldermen and the council: most importantly, the aldermen could no longer be part of the council, in order to avoid conflicts of interest and attain a higher separation of powers ('dualisation') (De Groot & Denters & Klok, 2010, pp. 402-03). Moreover, all executive tasks were clearly assigned to the BMA. Simultaneously, the council members were given instruments (such as local audit office or courts of audit) to scrutinise the work of the BMA and were equipped with a secretariat in order to allow the councillors to spend more time outside the city hall and in contact with the citizenry (pp. 402-03).

With the reform the government wanted the directly elected municipal council to become the core of local government (Denters & Klok, 2005, p. 69). However, the mayor and the Body of Mayor and Aldermen became two additional independent powers. Councillors elect the aldermen and can also dismiss them (p. 69). The mayor is still appointed by the central government and has several powers concerning public order and safety attributed by national law. Nonetheless, the formal primacy in local decision-making rests with the council (p. 69).

De Groot, Denters and Klok (2010) conclude that the LGA accomplished its initial goal to increase the responsiveness and the accountability of councillors, the latter activity having gained substantial importance according to a survey on local councillors (p. 404). The introduction of the dualistic system separated the legislative and executive powers, allowing the council to fulfil its three main tasks – policy-making, controlling and representing – independently and efficiently (p. 405). The new law changed the institutional structure in several ways, aiming at two major goals: the increase of power of the council to define main goals, control (accountability) and support individual councillors' interaction with the citizenry through creating more time for representing and explaining

(responsiveness) (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010, pp. 406-08).

The most vital change was that aldermen could no longer hold positions in the council and meanwhile council members received the means to scrutinize the work of the Body of Mayor and Aldermen (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 29). Apart from strengthening the position of the municipal council, the LGA also aimed at improving the communication with the public (De Groot, Denters & Klok, 2010, p. 408). In addition, the Dutch government attempted to educate local councillors with guidebooks, advice and research results (p. 408).

Table 2.1 The importance of publicising the debate on local issues in the Netherlands

		In your experience as a councillor, how would you define your contribution regarding publicising the debate on local issues before decisions are taken?					
		None	Little	Moderate	Great	Very great	Total
Netherlands	Count	6	124	474	480	114	1198
	% of Total	0,5%	10,4%	39,6%	40,1%	9,5%	100,0%

Source: MAELG data set

Apart from institutional changes, the LGA intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Dutch municipalities by introducing measures that aimed to improve the communication with the public and by influencing the process of socialisation and selection of local parties. The former was reached with participatory measures intending to involve citizens from an early state in the policy-making process onwards by, for instance, launching local newsletters to inform them about upcoming decisions or pressing issues. According to table 2.1, in the year of 2008 a total of 40.1% of Dutch councillors believed that it is of great importance to publicise the debate on local issues before decisions are taken, reflecting the emphasis on inclusive and participatory politics.

Next to improving the communication with the citizenry, the central government attempted to inform and educate local councillors by providing them with guidebooks, advise, research projects and organizing conferences. Moreover, local parties were given optional guidelines for the selection of councillors, influencing the patterns of socialisation and recruitment to make party members who decide to run for election prioritise their representative and scrutiny functions (De Groot & Denters & Klok, 2010, p. 407).

Table 2.2 The present occupation of Dutch councillors

	In your present occupation are you			
	An employee	Self-employed	Unemployed/ student/retire	Total
Netherlands	640	242	284	1166
Percentage	54.9%	20.8%	24.4%	100%

Source: MAELG data set

Another important effect of the LGA is that the structural changes facilitate the combination of a seat in the council with a regular profession. Subsequently, there is no professionalisation of the office of a councillor. In the year of 2008, 54.9% of the Dutch councillors who participated in the MAELG survey indicated that they were employed, 20.8% were self-employed and a total of 24.4% fell under the category "unemployed, student or retired" (table 2.2). These numbers point out that there is indeed no professionalisation of councillors. However, one could interpret that the work of a councillor requires flexible working hours, as most self-employed people do. In that case, one might fuse "self-employed" and "unemployed, student or retired" into one category and claim that the percentage of 55.1% is significant and indicates the struggle to combine a seat in the council with a regular job.

Table 2.3 How frequent do Dutch councillors have contact with individual citizens?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	(Almost) never	5	0,4	0,4	0,4
	A few times a year	96	7,9	7,9	8,3
	A few times a month	541	44,3	44,7	53,1
	A few times a week	568	46,5	46,9	100,0
	Total	1210	99,0	100,0	
Missing	System	12	1,0		
Total		1222	100,0		

Source: MAELG data set

The government apparently succeeded in strengthening the councillor's contacts with citizens. Table 2.3 shows that almost half of the 1210 Dutch councillors have contact with citizens at least a few times a week. Another 45% of the Dutch councillors confirm interacting with individual citizens at least a few times a month within their role as a councillor. The amount of councillors that have very little contact with citizens is limited.

Table 2.4 indicates what the councillors' actual contributions are regarding output or explaining council decisions to the citizens. It becomes clear that 45% of the 1196 Dutch councillors think that their contribution in explaining council decision towards citizens is "moderate". Another 20% actually does little explaining, while roughly 27% explain rather a lot. Hence, these numbers indicate that, when interaction between councillors and citizens takes place, the councillors are to a lesser extent explaining decisions of the council. These figures thus point out that Dutch councillors are quite active in their community, even though explaining council decisions seems to be a less vital aspect of a councillor's role compared to getting input.

Table 2.4 The Dutch councillors' contribution to explaining council decisions to citizens

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	12	1,0	1,0	1,0
	Little	238	19,5	19,9	20,9
	Moderate	555	45,4	46,4	67,3
	Great	327	26,8	27,3	94,6
	Very great	64	5,2	5,4	100,0
	Total	1196	97,9	100,0	
Missing	System	26	2,1		
Total		1222	100,0		

Source: MAELG data set

Table 2.5 provides a comparison between the frequency of contact between councillors and citizens in three countries (Netherlands, Germany, Belgium). The question was: "How often do you have contact with the following individuals or groups: individual citizens in your role as councillor?" The numbers reflect that Dutch councillors spend a considerable amount of time on representative tasks in comparison to their counterparts in the neighbouring countries.

Table 2.5 How frequent do German, Dutch and Belgian councillors have contact with individual citizens?

	Germany	Netherlands	Belgium[2]
Almost never	3 %	0,4 %	2,4 %
Few times a year	30,9 %	7,9 %	15,6 %
Few times a month	48,1 %	44,7 %	43,0 %
Few times a week	17,9 %	46,9 %	39,0 %

Source: MAELG data set

With the enactment of the LGA in 2002, the Dutch central government openly moved in the direction of more participatory local politics. The government wanted to emphasize citizens' participation. Some municipalities actively developed the concept of *zelfsturing* (self-steering/organizing). One of the first municipalities who did that was Peel en Maas (Limburg) (Custers & Schmitz, 2012, p. 16). At present more and more municipalities start to experiment with this concept. Valkenburg, the Dutch municipality in our research project, is one of the first municipalities to test this way of organizing the relationship between the council and citizens ("Zelfsturing", n.d., para. 1). *Zelfsturing* is based on the principle that the government and its political representatives only act if citizens can't achieve things on their own and without help of the government. Therefore, local government sticks with its basic functions and "leaves space for initiatives to the citizens who are then responsible" ("Zelfsturing", n.d., para. 2-3). The aim is to create a shared responsibility between the local government and the citizens regarding policy outcomes (Figee, Eigeman & Hilterman, 2008, pp. 31-32).

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[2] The MAELG data set does not make a distinction between Flemish and Wallonian councillors. Hence we refer to Belgian councillors.

Taking into account the developments explained above, a picture of the way councillors interact with citizens could be sketched. As the importance of citizens' involvement in the policy-making process increased and forms an essential part of councillors' work today, one might expect to find active councillors that keenly offer citizens a contact point where they can express their desires, ideas and criticism. Where the concept of zelfsturing – which certainly fits within the picture of an active Dutch citizenry – is positioned within the process of local policy-making and what impact it has on the work of a councillor is difficult to estimate.

2.4 Local councillors in Flanders

First of all, the background and specificities of Flemish and Walloon local democracy are illuminated. Belgium is a showcase for what Lipset & Rokkan (1967) called "cleavages", referring to a society that is arguably among the most divided ones in Europe. As Wayenberg et al. (2012) highlight, since its formation as a nation-state, "three cleavages divided the small nation" (p. 72). First, there was an ideological conflict between urban liberals and rural Catholics, the latter effectively governing society. Furthermore, Belgium witnessed economic disparities between a mass labour force and a small group of capitalists leading the country. The third, but possibly the most pertinent division concerns the linguistic communities in the country (Wayenberg et al, 2012, p. 72).

In terms of the latter, notwithstanding the accepted German minority in the Southeast of the country, the two major linguistic communities are the Flemish (Flanders) and French-speaking inhabitants (Wallonia) (Wayenberg et al, 2012, p. 73). Before illustrating some particularities of the municipalities in those two regions, a few general remarks about local democracy in Belgium are to be made which are valid for the whole country.

First, Belgium is a federal state and owing to its complex divisions, a considerable amount of powers have been delegated from state level to the linguistic communities and regions respectively. While the former communities mainly deal with language-related affairs, the latter are in charge with issues such as urban and rural development planning, including for instance infrastructural projects (Plees, 2005, p. 49). Without going too much into detail regarding this complex division of tasks, suffice it to say that "in their areas of competency, the regions and language communities constitute a form of central government [and] they cannot be overruled by federal government" (p. 50). Accordingly, the subnational level has significant powers to legislate in their specific domains of competency (p. 50).

Second, and going to the main level of interest of this chapter, Belgium has 589 municipalities, 262 of which are situated in the Walloon part of the country and 308 in Flanders ("Tabel van Belgische gemeenten", 2015). Every six years, the 589 municipalities' mayors and councillors are elected by universal suffrage and following a non-majoritarian voting-system, with candidates surpassing a five percent threshold being elected (Wayenberg et al., 2012, p. 76). In line with the idea of a federal state, the Belgian constitution allows municipalities the right of self-government. This implies that "municipalities can take whatever initiative they want as long as this is beneficial to local interests and as long as no other government has assumed legal responsibility for the concerned field of action" (Wayenberg et al., 2012, p. 78). This apparent independence of local authorities should however not be overstated, as the bulk of important legislation is still decided on centralized platforms, such as regional and federal assemblies, and not in the town hall (p. 78).

In contrast to Dutch dualism, Belgium is in the typology of Page and Goldsmith (1987) presented as a South-European model (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 16). Page and Goldsmith argue that

local politicians in such a model are powerful at the central government, but they represent local communes that have few responsibilities (John, 2001, p. 27). Contrasting to the Netherlands, in Belgium the mayor and aldermen are still members of the council after their appointment in the Body of Mayor and Aldermen. Therefore, the executive and legislative powers are united within the council (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 19). However, also the Belgian regions enacted a LGA in 2007 to strengthen the executive and the controlling role of the council (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). Nonetheless, experts agree that in daily political practice the council isn't the chief actor in the decision-making process (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 19). The Body of Mayor and Aldermen (schepencollege) is the core institution (p. 19). These few politicians have more responsibilities than all other councillors (p. 19).

Focussing on Flanders, the aldermen have a rather strong electoral basis and position. However, the mayor plays the chief role in local politics and stays in office for usually six years. He or she collected the highest number of votes and is the accepted political leader (Korsten, 2012, p. 3). The mayor chairs the council and acts as the formal political leader responsible for the local administration (Wayenberg, De Rynck, Steyvers & Pilet, 2012, p. 85). This is undoubtedly the single most important local office. Mayors act as political leaders of their majority and party, and practice their mayoral office in a patronage-like mode (p. 85). A mayor does not primarily fulfil his representative role as a director, rather as a kind of 'father' of the citizens (Plees, 2005, p. 60).

In Flanders, like in the Netherlands, the councillor's representative role – in terms of contacts with citizens – has been challenged lately. Despite compulsory voting, the electoral turnout in local elections has never been as low as in 2012 (Hennau, 2013, p. 3). The local activities and membership of political parties are in decline as well (p. 3). Moreover, citizens have expressed a desire for extended participation rather than just voting once every six years (Plees, 2005, p. 56).

As in the Netherlands, Flemish local governments can opt to consult their constituents in several ways. Ad hoc meetings can be organized in neighbourhoods (Plees, 2005, p. 63). Citizens can formulate questions and remarks on the intentions of the council, e.g. before the start of a major construction project (p. 63). In contrast to the Netherlands, mayors and aldermen usually organize weekly individual consultation hours in their town halls, where citizens have the opportunity to directly address the politician they think can help him or her (p. 63).

Table 2.6 How frequent do Belgian councillors have contact with individual citizens?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	(Almost) never	15	2,4	2,4	2,4
	A few times a year	97	15,3	15,6	18,0
	A few times a month	267	42,1	43,0	61,0
	A few times a week	242	38,2	39,0	100,0
	Total	621	97,9	100,0	
Missing	9999	13	2,1		
Total		634	100,0		

Source: MAELG data set

Table 2.6 shows how frequently Belgian councillors have contact with individuals within their role as a councillor. Roughly 16% of 621 Belgian councillors only have contact with individual citizens a few times a year. The largest group of 267 councillors indicated to have contacts with citizens at least a few times every month. Another 39% designated to interact as a councillor at least a few times a week with citizens. Compared to their Dutch colleagues there are twice as many Belgian councillors that interact with citizens only a few times a year. The other results are not that different from the Dutch results. Hence, it is fair to say that, like their Dutch counterparts, Belgian councillors are rather active and present in their local community.

Table 2.7 Belgian councillors' contribution to explaining council decisions to citizens

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	6	,9	1,0	1,0
	Little	51	8,0	8,1	9,0
	Moderate	183	28,9	29,0	38,1
	Great	298	47,0	47,3	85,4
	Very great	92	14,5	14,6	100,0
	Total	630	99,4	100,0	
Missing	9999	4	,6		
Total		634	100,0		

Source: MAELG data set

Table 2.7 shows how the councillors see their actual contributions regarding explaining council decisions to the citizens. It is striking that almost half of the 630 councillors define their explaining of council decisions to citizens as "great". The Dutch councillors scored a lot worse with only 27%. Moreover, when looking at the valid percentages, almost three times as many Belgian councillors indicate their contribution to explaining council decisions is "very great". In sum, Belgian councillors play, according to their own account, a more important role in explaining council decisions than their Dutch colleagues.

2.5 Local councillors in Wallonia
In this study, we distinguish between Flanders and Wallonia. Both regions are part of Belgium, however significant institutional, cultural and political differences exist. (Wayenberg, De Rynck, Steyvers & Pilet, 2012, p. 81-83).

Zooming in to Wallonia, one can state that more than 61% of municipalities have a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants (Wayenberg et al, 2012, p. 79). Municipalities in Flanders are generally far larger with only nine municipalities of an equally small size (p. 79). Another noteworthy particularity of Wallonia is the 2004 basic decree fusing all local legislation into one document, the "Code de la Démocratie Locale et de la Décentralisation" (p. 81). All three Belgian regions nowadays have such a basic decree reflecting the subnational competency on basic legislation. The Walloon decree is more

traditional compared to the Flanders' legislation, implying "the Weberian bureaucratic culture and the perception of the passive and executive role of administrators that still strongly dominates the Walloon political system" (p. 83).

More concisely, the typical executive of a municipality can be divided into two pillars, the mayor and the aldermen. As Beck, Heinelt and Magnier (2006) reveal, "Belgian mayors are still among the weakest in Europe" (p. 12). Elected by a form of preferential voting, some structural reforms however allowed the mayor to assume an increasingly powerful position in municipal affairs. Apart from leading the council, the mayor connects with higher political levels and represents the municipality on and above the local level (Wayenberg et al., 2012, p. 85). Next to the mayor, the aldermen are the persons in charge of implementing the decisions made by the council. It is crucial to mention that both mayor and aldermen are members of the council, thereby allowing for a threefold categorization of councillors: the mayor, the aldermen, and the "ordinary" or "normal" councillors. Several authors agree that the municipal executive tends to dominate the council and even deprive the latter of an actual position of power, not only in Wallonia but also in Flanders. Wayenberg et al. (2012) confirm this stance arguing "the dominance of the political executive in local politics remains the cornerstone of Belgian local democracy" (p. 87).

Notwithstanding the disputability of influence of councillors, the council as such still fulfils a role in local politics, namely that of a legislative assembly. As Plees (2005) points out, council meetings take place at least ten times per year, and the number of councillors varies between 7 and 55 according to the size of the municipality. All decisions taken in the council follow the principle of simple majority, and most of the meetings are open to the general public (Plees, 2005, p. 52).

2.6 Local councillors in Germany
Within the field of local democracy study much attention has been devoted to the role of mayors as the most prominent actor in local politics, thereby neglecting local councillors. Research on local democracy in Germany does not constitute an exception in this regard. While Germany has been taken into account for comparative surveys examining role behaviour and perception of European councillors, alternative information on the subject is scarce. Nevertheless, the following section sketches out the findings of existing literature.

Based upon the MAELG survey, Denters and Klok (2005) analyse the role councillors play in local politics. With regard to Germany, the authors find that there is no deviation from the European mean in the role perception of councillors (pp. 70-71). According to the MAELG survey, German local councillors find the following tasks most important: defining main objectives of the municipality, representing citizens' concerns, controlling municipal activity, explaining decisions taken by the council to the citizens, and publicising debates on local issues prior to taking decisions (Denters & Klok, 2005, pp. 70-71). Similarly, German councillors do not deviate from the European mean concerning the actual role behaviour in those five tasks. As Denters and Klok conclude, Germany appears to be part of 'the middle of the European road' in terms of role perceptions and role behaviour" (p. 78). Whereas this study comes close to the research purpose of this contribution, details on motivations and actual behaviour in relation to citizens cannot be extracted.

Egner (2015) provides a different perspective on councillors' perceptions in Germany. He examines to what extent local councillors perceive themselves as local members of parliament implying that local councils resemble parliaments. Looking at classical functions of parliaments, Egner (2015)

highlights that "interest representation is quite important for German councillors" (p. 192). Depending on the political orientation councillors claim to represent specific interests such as those of ethnic minorities in the case of councillors from the political left. Moreover, Egner (2015) shows that councillors are usually members of local organisations, sport clubs and church being the most common, and thus engage with local society (p. 193).

The aspect of citizen participation in relation to parties dominating local politics is often considered by research focusing on reforms in German local democracy from the 1990s onwards. Distinguishing between local party democracy and local citizen democracy, Vetter (2009) argues that all over the German Länder this change from party domination to growing citizen influence took place. North-Rhine Westphalia is among the states "where change was greatest" (p. 126). For example, local referendums and the direct election of the mayor have been introduced (p. 126).

In general, the institutional set-up of German local politics centers on the directly elected mayor who holds a full-time position. Being the head of the administration the mayor chairs the local council meetings. In contrast, the councillors only hold their positions voluntarily in addition to regular occupations (Kost, 2003). Correspondingly, the municipal administration composed of full-time experts has a strong position in local politics (Kost, 2003). Nevertheless, the local council plays an important role in the legislative procedure on the local level. Some consider the possibilities for citizen involvement in law making in German municipalities as only marginally present (Kost, 2003, p. 251). Although some means of participation exist, such as the right to information in the form of question rounds, the frequency of usage and impact is not empirically examined (p. 251).

3. Methodology

This section discusses the research design of this work. First, the selection of municipalities will be discussed. The following sections focus on the methods of data collection and the selection of respondents.

3.1 Selection of municipalities

The municipalities were selected because they are close to Maastricht and part of the Euregio. An important criterion to categorise municipalities (in all political systems) is their size in terms of the number of inhabitants (Derksen and Schaap, 2010, p.16). Therefore, we made sure the four selected municipalities have approximately the same size, i.e. 17.000 inhabitants.

Riemst is located in the southeast of the Flemish province Limburg. It is a rural municipality entailing eleven smaller boroughs and bordering the Dutch city of Maastricht, but also the Wallonian province of Liège. Übach-Palenberg is located in the most western part of Germany and North Rhine-Westphalia and also borders the Dutch province of Limburg. It has twelve neighborhoods and approximately 24.000 inhabitants, which is slightly more than the other municipalities under investigation. Its proximity to Maastricht made it the best option available. Visé is the other Belgian municipality focused on in this work. The municipality is part of the province of Liège and part of Wallonia. It is the only municipality of the francophone Belgian community to border the Netherlands. Like the majority of municipalities in Wallonia, it has an industrial past linked to the mining industry of the country's past dominant economic drive. Lastly, Valkenburg is a rural municipality and is situated right in the middle of the Dutch province of Limburg. It contains sixteen smaller villages or *kernen*.

3.2 Data collection: selection of respondents

The group of seven students was split up in four different teams according to language qualifications and individual preferences, each covering a different municipality. One student participated in both the Valkenburg and the Riemst team. The supervisor was involved in the research in all four municipalities.

As for the selection of respondents, in each municipality between seven and ten councillors were interviewed. Not all councillors were willing to participate for different kinds of reasons. To ensure a representative selection of councillors, attention was paid to the criteria of political party, age and gender, important criteria according to the Dutch "Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek"(2012) and the MAELG survey. Hence, councillors of different gender and ages with varying political background were selected, as well as councillors from both opposition and coalition.

In Riemst, ten councillors were interviewed, of which two women. The mayor was included because he is a member of the council and is expected to keep fulfilling his role as both mayor and councillor (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010, p. 11). Their age varied from 27 to 67 years, with an average of 46 years old. All political parties of the council were represented. Politically, the Christian democrats (CD&V) rule in an absolute majority in Riemst. The other parties present in the council are the Flemish conservatives (N-VA), the liberals (OPEN-VLD) and the left-wing cartel Sp.a-Groen has one councillor. The political experience of the selected councillors varied from three to thirty years of experience.

In context of the study in Übach-Palenberg eight councillors were interviewed. The sample in Übach-Palenberg included five male and three female councillors. This ratio reflects the male dominance that is found in the council of Übach-Palenberg. Additionally, amongst the eight participants all party groups represented in the council were included: two members of the biggest parties namely the CDU, SPD, Greens, and one member of the smaller party groups UWG and FDP/USPD. The ages of the councillors ranged from 46 to 69 years, the average age of the sample was 58 years. The interviewees have been all involved in local party politics for at least several years, the involvement ranged from 6 years up to 46 years in case of the most experienced one. Similar differences also exist in their experience as a council member. One interviewee was only elected to the council two years ago while another one has been a councillor for nearly 40 years.

In Valkenburg, eight councillors between 21 and 70 years old participated in our project. The average age of 57 years reveals the pre-dominance of the older age group: seven of the eight interviewees were above 54 years. Out of the eight interviewees one was female (6 out of 17 council members are female). At least one from each political party was interviewed and their political experience differed from 1 to 45 years. The mayor, who is not a member of the council, was not included in the interviews, but afterwards an informal meeting with him took place.

The study sample for Visé consisted of seven local councillors, all men aged between 40 and 62 years old. The average age of the selected sample was 50 years old. 5 out of 25 councillors of Visé were women, but we did not succeed in interviewing a female councillor. However, all political parties were represented in this study and as such included both coalition parties (MR and CdH) and both opposition parties (PS and Ecolo). For each political party, two councillors were chosen and interviewed whenever this was possible. The interviewee of the Ecolo Party was an exception as he is the only elected councillor of the party. For the sake of simplicity – and notwithstanding the abovementioned distinction of councillors into the three categories of mayor, aldermen and "regular" councillors – the subsequent discussion uniquely refers to "the councillor". All councillors had at least three years of experience as a local councillor, ranging up to 24 years for the most experienced and the average amount of experience being at 13 years across all seven councillors.

3.3 Data collection: semi-structured interviews with councillors
In preparing this research project, different methods of data collection were discussed. In order to collect data, qualitative individual interviews with councillors from the four municipalities were organized. Contrary to a survey, individual in-depth structural interviews allow a rather detailed insight into the actual behaviour of councillors. An important bonus was the opportunity for the students to actually meet the councillors and discuss their political work with them in person. As most of the participating students had no experience whatsoever with local politics, this was an interesting and useful experience.

In every municipality the research project kicked off with an introductory meeting. This first meeting was a group meeting with several councillors. The project was introduced and the main objective was to get a first impression of their interactions with citizens. These meetings were very useful for narrowing the research questions and formulating the interview questions. After this first meeting individual interviews with the councillors were organized to discuss the role behaviour of the individual councillors in closer detail.

The respondents were interviewed through face-to-face interviews. Qualitative face-to-face interviewing has the advantage that questions can be explained more precisely and further elaborations of answers can be asked (Bloch, Phellas & Seale, 2007, p. 182. For practical reasons the interviews were limited to a maximum of one hour. The questions were standardised and scheduled, which means that the wording and order of the questions was similar for every participant in all four municipalities. The interview started with an open question, to allow the respondents to choose their own words and give us a first impression of their personal experience with citizen interaction. The interviews continued with some more structured questions. Additionally, two fixed-choice questions were asked in which the responses were decided up front and framed in a certain way (p. 196), to discover patterns in the ways councillors both get information from and give explanations to citizens (see appendices).

The interviews in each of the municipalities were conducted in April and May 2015, in the municipal hall of the four municipalities. The same room was used, as much as possible. The interviews were recorded, with permission of the respondents. The interviews were not transcribed in detail, because that would cost too much of the limited time that was available. Instead, summary notes served well for most of the analysis, and occasionally the audio recordings were used to verify the notes. The data were used anonymously and gender neutral. No upcoming elections in neither of the countries had to be taken into account.

4. Local councillors in Riemst: empirical findings

4.1 Introduction
This chapter presents the result of the research in Flanders. These results are retrieved from qualitative interviews with ten local councillors of Riemst.

The chapter starts with presenting the selection of the councillors that were interviewed. This is followed by the results on how councillors retrieve political input in Riemst. Next, it will discuss the ways how councillors explain and justify municipal output to citizens. A few words will be spent on the importance of the distinction between being a coalition or opposition councillor. At the end of the chapter some conclusions regarding the representative role of councillors in Riemst will be drawn.

4.2 Councillors in Riemst: the sample
The municipality of Riemst consists of eleven smaller boroughs. There is no such initiative as village councils (*dorpsraden*) anymore. Politically, the Christian democrats (CD&V) rule in an absolute majority. The other parties present in the council are the Flemish conservatives (N-VA), the liberals (OPEN-VLD) and the left-wing cartel Sp.a-Groen has one councillor.

The following section provides a summary of the results from the individual interviews with ten councillors from Riemst, including the mayor. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include an alderman.

4.3 Councillors receiving input from citizens
Councillors in Riemst do receive input from different sources for their council tasks. When asked about the sources for input, only half of the councillors spontaneously mentioned citizens, mainly in the sense of daily interactions. Some councillors mentioned consultation hours – known as *dienstbetoon* – as an important source. Some other councillors, including the mayor, mentioned the events organized by associations – Riemst supposedly has 365 private associations – as an important activity for getting in touch with the concerns of citizens. Overall, it was noted that citizens and the administration of the municipality generate most input for the councillors. Table 4.1 indicates the sources that are most important or frequent to councillors.

Being present at associations was attributed the highest score, closely followed by daily encounters on the street and email. Nevertheless, only two councillors mentioned the associations in the open question about receiving input. A significant amount of councillors mentioned the documents they receive digitally from the secretary or administration to prepare for the council meetings. Some councillors referred to input from their political party or experts in certain matters. Another important way of receiving input is being present at events in the municipality. All of the councillors are living in one of the villages and they are well-known people in their particular village.

Table 4.1 How do councillors receive input from citizens in Riemst?

Source of input	Score (max. 50)[3]
At associations/clubs	33
On the street	31
Email	29
Party meetings or – events	15
Telephone	11
Others (administration / personnel)	9
At home (people ringing the doorbell)	7
Official municipality meetings	4
Facebook & Twitter	4
At work	3
Others (not specified)	2
Office or consultation hours	1

The usual environment for interactions with citizens is an event – such as a so-called 'spaghetti evening' – organized by associations. Citizens often have short questions or give their remarks to the councillors at these events. Riemst is a rather small community and in the interviews it was often emphasized that the councillors are very approachable. Especially the mayor is active in being present at such events: he visits an average of five events every weekend. One councillor said: "The mayor strategically stands at the entrance of the event to shake hands with both people entering and leaving the event."

Nevertheless, councillors' interactions with citizens shouldn't be emphasized too much. The mayor formulated it as following: "When I was a councillor, I did not receive much input [from citizens]. As an alderman a little bit more, but now as mayor it is multiple times the amount of input I used to get." One councillor of the opposition declared only spending approximately fifteen minutes a week on contacts with citizens. Furthermore, also councillors from the ruling party mentioned not being contacted that much by citizens, because people usually directly contact the mayor or aldermen. Nonetheless, the councillors ensure they are approachable and available for the people.

The topics that citizens approach councillors about are all in the category of personal problems and issues: broken streetlights, holes in the street, unsafe situations and personal issues concerning finances. Often, the councillors can solve these relatively small issues by contacting the technical service of the municipality. For more complicated issues, the councillors usually function as a contact point or ombudsman between the citizens and the mayor, aldermen or the civil servants who are needed to solve the issue. All councillors recognized that the mayor and aldermen receive a lot more

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[3] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 50 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (10) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

questions and remarks from citizens. Citizens that contact 'normal' councillors are usually people from their own networks of friends and family.

4.4 Councillors explaining output to citizens

Councillors in Riemst spend some time on explaining or justifying municipal decisions to citizens, but it does not happen very often. The councillors merely explain measures or policies when citizens ask for it, not on their own initative. The mayor and aldermen are easy to approach for explanations due to their consultation hours. Decisions and policies are generally explained by the municipal magazine, the municipal website and an annual report on the achievements and plans by the local government. In the open questions about output, some councillors referred to Facebook as an important means and also a party magazine was mentioned several times. Table 4.2 indicates the means that are most important or frequent to councillors for explaining measures to citizens.

Table 4.2 How do councillors explain output to citizens in Riemst?

Means of output	Score (max. 50)[4]
In the street	29
Associations/clubs	29
Email	27
Party meetings or – events	17
Telephone	12
Party newsletter	10
Official municipality meetings	7
At work	7
Letters	6
Others (municipality personnel)	4
Social media	2

In the open question about output only three councillors mentioned personal contact "in the street" or "at associations", while these were attributed the highest scores in the fixed-choice question. However, explaining measures through email correspondence closely follows explaining on the street and at associations. Nevertheless, none of these most important or frequent means of giving output was ever mentioned when answering the open question.

When asked about which way output is provided, most councillors referred to a website, Facebook page or party magazine, while apparently not thinking about the ways they do it normally: informal contacts in the street, at associations or through email. The explaining happens mostly in an informal way, which means being present and approachable in the community is essential for providing explanations to the people because councillors don't approach citizens actively to explain measures.

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[4] The councillors could score the means of output from 1 to 5 resulting in 50 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (10) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

Actively approaching citizens is too time-consuming and councillors think people don't want a councillor to explain things in which they are not interested. Councillors thus only explain when asked for, while being around in the village or at events. They make themselves approachable and citizens take the initiative to ask for explanations.

Some decisions can be explained right on the spot, while others require some more time and information. Email and telephone are important and practical means for getting back to the people with a sufficient answer. Furthermore, in the open question much emphasis was put on party newsletters, websites or magazines, while only 20% of the councillors ranked it within their top five. Meetings or events of the political party were never mentioned, but with seventeen points they were attributed the fourth highest score. These events or meetings are essential for explaining decisions to people from the party network or the direct supporters. Additionally, it is rather obvious that the mayor and aldermen explain decisions more frequent than other councillors because they are the ones actually in charge.

When comparing the sources of input and means of output for councillors in Riemst, we find that the top five is exactly the same. On the street, in associations, through email, at party meetings and through telephone prove to be the five essential sources of input and means of output. Next to these informal contacts, party magazines are an important means to reach many people. Less important ways of explaining are official municipality meetings, at work and through letters. Social media were given the lowest score, so apparently councillors generally don't use them for providing explanations to people.

4.5 Coalition vs. opposition

This final section discusses the implications of the distinction between coalition and opposition councillors for their representative role. From the interviews we learned that the distinction between being a member of the coalition or opposition is really essential in Riemst. We analysed the results for differences between young and older councillors and for differences between coalition members and opposition members, but we found no clear trends, perhaps due to the small amount of councillors interviewed.

We asked the councillors whether they believe their behaviour as a councillor is significantly influenced by being in either coalition or opposition. All councillors told us it makes a big difference for several reasons. Citizens firstly contact coalition councillors with their wishes, ideas, problems or concerns. Opposition councillors only come second. It is usually the party network, close friends, family and those not satisfied after approaching the majority that approach opposition councillors. Opposition councillors believe this is a tremendous disadvantage. Hence, it is hard for opposition members to have any influence at all. Members of the opposition cannot force things and people know they basically have 'nothing' to say. On the other hand, opposition members can keep their distance from council decisions they do not agree with, while ruling councillors sometimes have to defend the Body of Mayor and Aldermen even though they might not agree with some decisions.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to provide insights regarding the role behaviour of local councillors in Riemst, especially in relation to the citizens. The literature and the MAELG survey taught us that Belgian councillors are rather active and present in their local community. An important element of political life in Flanders concerns the essential role of the mayor in Flanders. As the literature pointed

out, he is really the chief actor in local politics. Another striking fact is that Belgian councillors believe they play a more important role than councillors from neighboring countries in explaining council decisions to the citizens.

Regarding receiving input, the observation was made that for councillors three sources of input are essential: on the street, in associations (events) and through email. Furthermore, the information councillors receive through the municipality administration and their political party should not be underestimated. The small municipality size plays a crucial role because it ensures that the councillors are both well known and approachable to receive input and explain output.

In the interviews we learned a lot about what councillors actually do with the input they receive. In Riemst, they can for instance contact the technical service of the municipality to solve a problem. Both coalition and opposition councillors do this. The mayor of Riemst transferred five thousand citizen requests to the administration during his nine years of office. Flemish politicians thus perceive themselves as people who provide admission to Easton's political 'black box' for the citizens. They don't go out actively to contact citizens because they don't feel a real need, as citizens approach councillors when they need them.

In Riemst associations are important for councillors to receive input. All participants were very proud about the *verenigingsleven* (community life or associations life) in Riemst. An interesting question is whether the councillors are participating in the *verenigingsleven* as a member of the association or as a councillor. It appears to be the latter in Riemst: only a few of them are actual members of associations and when they visit an event organised by one of the many associations it is often in their role as councillor.

Political input interaction seems to play a bigger role than the political output interaction in the work of a councillor, contrasting the results of the MAELG survey. Councillors in Riemst told us that they do sometimes explain council decisions to citizens, but not very often. They only explain council decisions when specifically asked for it. Therefore, being present and approachable in the municipality is a crucial requirement. Most of the explaining happens informally on the street or at associations (events). Additionally, email is also an important means.

Finally, the distinction between ruling and non-ruling councillors is essential in Riemst for numerous reasons. Being on the ruling side means you have influence on the measures that are taken and it is easier to actually do things for citizens, while for the opposition it is harder to have any influence at all.

5. Local councillors in Übach-Palenberg: empirical findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the findings of the research on local councillors and their interaction with citizens in Germany. The results are based on qualitative interviews with councillors form the German municipality Übach-Palenberg.

First, the sample of councillors that were interviewed is introduced. Second, a section analyses the information obtained in the interviews concerning input that councillors receive for their political work. Following this, the subsequent section focuses on how local councillors explain output. Thereafter, other observations from the interviews are discussed. Lastly, this chapter concludes on the representative role that is fulfilled by the German councillors.

5.2 Councillors in Übach-Palenberg: the sample

The municipality under examination, Übach-Palenberg, is located in the German state North Rhine-Westphalia close to the Dutch border. The municipality has approximately 24.500 inhabitants and is divided into twelve neighborhoods. The council of Übach-Palenberg is composed of 32 councillors, amongst which 28 are male. Six different political parties have been elected to the council in the municipal elections of May 2014. The parties represented are the Christian Democratic Union (CDU, 15 seats), the Social Democratic Party (SPD, 10 seats), Alliance '90/The Greens (Greens, 3 seats), the Free Voters (UWG, 2 seats), and finally the Free Democratic Party (FDP) who shares 2 seats with the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). All of the parties form their independent group in the council, only the FDP and USPD joined together to form a collective party group (FDP-USPD). At the time of our interviews the CDU, FDP and USPD together formed the municipal government. Consequently, the SPD, the Greens and the UWG form the opposition.

The group of councillors was rather diverse in terms of occupation. All councillors interviewed worked or work in different fields. Four councillors were already retired while the rest still worked. One councillor has a job in adult education. Two are stay-at-home mothers and one works in the local "Jugendamt" (i.e. government office for youth welfare).

5.3 Councillors receiving input from citizens

This section discusses the outcomes of the interviews with the councillors in regard to input for their work, and more specifically their interaction with citizens in this respect. When asked generally about where they get input, the interviewees' answers revealed certain parallels. The spontaneous answer of six out of eight councillors pointed to getting input from citizens. Citizens were the most cited source for input, followed by formal administrative input such as the council agenda and administrative conversations. The municipality of Übach-Palenberg has an online information portal that provides information on past decisions and administrative information. All councillors have access to this portal and it appears to be frequently used by them. The third most often mentioned source was the councillors' own party. Other sources for input, such as trade unions, associations and foundations were also mentioned.

It is important for the purpose of this research, which focuses on the representative role of councillors, to note that citizens were cited most often. The answers suggest that the councillors have an awareness of their representative role and therefore seek citizens' input. Interestingly, one

of the interviewed councillors made a distinction between what he called "Anregungen" (i.e. stimuli) from citizens on the one hand and "information" on the other. This seems to suggest that citizens' input is regarded differently from other more formal sources of information such as administrative or party information. This aspect will be taken up again further below (in the section in which we talk about "filters").

In order to obtain a better idea about councillors and citizens' input we asked about which are the most frequently used ways in which they acquire input from their citizens. In the interviews councillors were presented with a list of options, which they should rank. The table below shows the ranking in which ways citizens interact with councillors. While only six out of eight councillors indicated in the open questions that citizen's input is important for their work, all eight interviewees agreed that they do get input by citizens.

Table 5.1 How do councillors receive input from citizens in Übach-Palenberg?

Sources of input	Score (max. 40)[5]
In the street	26
At associations/clubs	17
At party events	17
Email	16
Official municipality meetings	14
Social media	8
Other (unspecified)	5
At work	4
Telephone	3
Other (kindergarden)	2
Letters	1

The ranking shows that informal contacts with citizens in the street, in form of casual conversations is the most important way of input, mentioned by seven out of eight councillors and with the highest mean. This is followed by party meetings/events and associations and clubs, which both received the same score and were mentioned by five councillors. The interviewed FDP councillor was one who stressed the importance of the contacts with citizens in clubs and associations. For him personally, this input was of great importance given his function as the president of a big local sports club. In the interview most councillors confirmed that the clubs and associations are very active in lobbying for their interest vis-à-vis the councillors when they need political support.

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[5] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 40 points as the maximum score. The maximum score (8) is the number of respondents multiplied by the highest score of 5.

It appeared that the associations and clubs are well connected locally, also with the councillors. Five interviewees mentioned them as venues from which they receive input. Three out of the five councillors that mentioned clubs and associations were also actively engaged in them. In the interviews it seemed the councillors participated as individuals in the associations rather than in their political function. However, at times they are approached because of their political function, which then generates input from citizens.

Emails were also regarded as another important means through which councillors get input from citizens. Six councillors mentioned email. Thus, this mean is only slightly lower ranked than the previous categories. Apart of the above mentioned it seems that municipal meetings or consultations are also fertile means through which councillors receive citizen input. Even though not scoring high two councillors also mentioned the so-called "Bürgerstammtische" as a source. These are casual meetings in which councillors regularly meet with citizens to discuss local politics.

A somewhat striking outcome was that social media were only mentioned by two, namely the Green Party councillors. This is striking because the citizens of Übach-Palenberg appear to be particularly active on social networks (especially Facebook) with regards to expressing their concerns and wishes. There are numerous groups on Facebook designed for this purpose. They have such telling names as "Übach-Palenberg aktuell" (roughly translatable to Übach-Palenberg topicalities), "Burgerinteressen Übach-Palenberg" (Übach-Palenberg citizens' interests) and "Übach-Palenberg hat die Nase voll" (literally: Übach-Palenberg's nose is full, meaning: Übach-Palenberg has enough). One group is concerned with the bothersome smell emanating from a local factory. From following the posts in these groups for a few weeks, it can be concluded that individual local councillors or even the local party group are absent from the debates in these groups. This is also true for the councillors who claimed to get input from Facebook, although it has to be noted that it is possible that they follow the discussions in these groups without contributing. The ranking also suggests that more formal means of interaction with citizens such as telephone calls and letters are not regarded as important ways for input. In the interviews all the councillors confirmed that letters are an outdated way of communication with citizens, they rarely ever receive any letters.

Another issue discussed during the interviews was who takes the initiative for input-related communication, the councillor or the citizen? The interviews showed that citizens usually take the initiative and approach councillors to give them input. The councillors broadly agreed that input occurs when citizens want to raise awareness for a problem that personally affects them or is highly controversial in the municipality. That is not to say that individual councillors do not take the initiative at all though. Answers ranged from "citizens always take the initiative" (one councillor who said this claimed that he thinks of himself as a "walking ear") to "half of the time I take the initiative and half of the time citizens approach me" and "we have to take the initiative most of the time". One councillor said that he actively approaches citizens to ask them about their opinion on certain future decisions. He claimed to usually do that if he meets people on his walks in his neighborhood.

However, in general all of the councillors held that citizens' input is not as much as they would expect. One should not overestimate the input that comes from the citizens. They felt that as long as citizens are not personally affected by a decision to be made, they do not engage with the councillors. In general we can conclude that citizens are more the initiators of input-related communication. This finding is a little surprising since many councillors showed dissatisfaction with

declining interest of citizens in municipal politics. We wonder if a more proactive approach on the side of the councillors could possibly help to engage citizens and make sure their interests are represented.

An issue discussed was the general agreement that input by citizens is mostly issue-related. The councillors claimed that citizens only care about issues that affect them personally, especially if money or well-being is at stake. Councillors seemed to be rather frustrated with this. Two of them mentioned, however, that there are rare exceptions of politically interested and engaged citizens. These people are usually personal trustees that regularly give more general input concerning the general direction they would like local politics to take rather than just becoming involved when affected personally. In the interviews councillors claimed that Übach-Palenberg apparently magically transforms into a very active polis when the personal well-being of great numbers of people are affected by an issue. Several of the councillors, five to be precise, gave a recent example for input-related communication with citizens, when the council intended to rearrange the water supply for the municipality. What was this about?

Since the contract with the current water supplier of Übach-Palenberg is about to end, the municipality decided not to prolong it and to look for alternatives. The plan is to get water from the Netherlands in the future. A lot of citizens raised concerns about the quality of the water and did not understand why the current arrangement should be changed at all. The issue attracted some attention from local media that further mobilized citizens' interest. In reaction to the heated public debate in the municipality the city planned seven events (a big one for the entire municipality and six more in each district) intended to inform and consult with the citizens. At the time of the interviews not all of these events had taken place, but the councillors generally seemed pleased with the considerable turnout and input by citizens – even if they did not understand exactly why there was such unrest among citizens. A Facebook group concerning the matter was also set up by citizens.

Another question that was discussed during the interviews was what councillors do with the input that they receive from citizens. It was striking that seven out of the eight interviewees said that they apply some kind of 'filter' to the input they get. What they meant by this is that they do not take the 'raw' input from citizens into the council straight away. Some (four respondents) said that they pre-select input by applying their own judgment before bringing things up in the council. Some others first of all discuss citizen's input in their political party and then decide if they bring the issues into the council. One councillor applies a combination of the two filtering mechanisms: he first looks at feasibility of what citizens want, then – if he things the demand is reasonable - he discusses it with his party colleagues, and then, in a final step, he checks if it is a general interest. He said: "Only if a citizen's demand passes these three stages I will bring it to the council".

The fact that such a big majority applies filtering mechanisms of some kind suggests that councillors see themselves rather as trustees rather than delegates of their citizens. There was one exception where a councillor felt that it was not up to him to decide whether a demand is worth bringing up or not. He seemed to think of himself as a delegate whose task it is to represent the citizens' interest regardless of his personal or his party's judgment. In sharp contrast to that, one of the respondents stated that citizens' input is "of course" being filtered because everything else would be incompatible with his perception of political work. This statement is reinforcing the prevailing image of the trustee conception amongst the councillors in Übach-Palenberg.

When being asked which type of citizens approach the councillors for input, the interviewees agreed that it is hard to generalize. Many explicitly stated that all types of people approach them and that they range from dissatisfied voters of other parties, (former) colleagues in the municipality, personal contacts and many more. It appeared that the councillors seem to be recognized by citizens and approached in their social environment, namely the supermarket, on the streets, in their clubs and associations. Most of the councillors mentioned that especially clubs and associations as well as volunteers are politically active in providing input. The Green councillor explicitly mentioned that sometimes citizens with green interests approach him specifically. Another councillor held that it is striking that less advantaged groups of the citizenry who would need to express their needs the most do not give input at all.

The interviews gave the impression that the German councillors seem to serve as access points for citizens, especially when citizens feel that their personal interests are at stake. Overall, it seemed that acquiring or getting input from citizens does not play a big role in the general work of the councillors.

5.4 Councillors explaining output to citizens
This section outlines the outcomes of the interviews with the councillors in regard to their role regarding municipal output, and more specifically their interaction with citizens in this respect. What has come apparent during the interviews was that the term output in regards to citizen's interaction seemed to be hard to grasp for the councillors. When asked about output in general terms, the interviewees referred to issues that were generally more associated with input-related interaction. This shows a limitation of the transferability or recognisability of Easton's input and output model for the councillors in their working environment. However, the confusion could be partly resolved by a definition provided during the interview. When interaction in regard to output was defined in line with explaining political decisions of the council to citizens, all of the councillors attributed output as a task that they perform in their position as councillor. Still in some cases difficulties of separating input and output occurred amongst the interviewees.

A question that arose was how frequent councillors interact with citizens regarding output. There seem to be three groups of councillors in this respect. One group composed of four councillors indicated that it occurs relatively frequent; approximately to an equal extent as input-related communication. The other three interviewees claimed that output-related communication with citizens is less frequent. One councillor stated that it only happens very seldom that he needs to explain council decisions. According to him citizens are largely indifferent and uninformed about the majority of council decisions. Despite the difference across the councillors about the frequency of occurrence, many claimed that input-related and output-related communication go hand in hand. One councillor put it very neatly and said: "Once citizens tell me what they want, I first of all need to explain what has been decided by the council in the past". This suggests that in many cases councillors refer to their decisions when explaining citizens about the feasibility of their demands/inputs. In general it appeared that the councillors devote less attention to output-related communication than to input-related communication with citizens.

A possible explanation for this might be the fact that the municipality informs citizens about the work of the council with a leaflet five times a year. Many councillors also stated that additionally, output-related information is often provided either via their party's website and flyers, or party-related

information evenings as well as announcements in the local newspapers. Additionally, some claimed that the responsibility of explaining output lies more with the leader of their political party group or even with the mayor. According to the councillors, attempts of offering consultation hours in the city hall geared at informing citizens about the council work failed. Most of the interviewees interpreted the failure of the consultation hours as a clear sign that citizens are largely indifferent about output-related interaction.

In general most of the councillors, to be precise five out of eight, felt that when they perform output-related communication, it is mainly the citizens that take the initiative to approach them. The other three councillors believed that the initiative lies partly with the citizens and partly with themselves. They said that in some cases, if they feel the need to explain certain controversial output, they are more likely to take the initiative to get in contact with citizens. This suggests that councillors see little need of explaining output because of an apparent lack of popular demand for it. However, if citizens actively approach them they are willing to do so.

To get a better understanding of the most frequent ways in which councillors interact with citizens in regard to output, the interviewees were again presented with a list of possible options. They ranked them in the same way as for the input-related communication. Table 5.2 shows the ways in which councillors interact with the citizens regarding output. The most frequent way in which the councillors provide explanations or justifications for output according to the ranking is via informal contacts on the street, but official municipal meetings or events closely follow. In the interviews one councillor gave an insight into how these informal contacts during events may look like. "When I attend certain events in the municipality and political issues are being discussed, often citizens approach me afterwards and ask me to explain certain municipal policies to them".

Table 5.2 How do councillors explain output to citizens in Übach-Palenberg?

Means of output	Score (max. 40)[6]
In the street	20
Official municipality meetings	19
Other (bookstore, kindergarden)	18
At associations/clubs	14
Email	11
Party meetings or events	10
Telephone	8
At home	6
Social media	5
Other (homepage)	4
Other (whole category)	2

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[6] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 40 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (8) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

Yet, also very highly ranked are other informal personal contacts that the interviewees could think of. Four councillors claimed that they explain output in their social environments or favorite spots in the city in which they meet. These places or environments were the local bookstore, in the kindergarten, the supermarket or "Bürgerstammtische".

Five councillors also mentioned associations and local clubs as a venue where they explain output. Rather of lesser frequency are more formal contacts with citizens via email, telephone or organized events of the councillor's political parties. Virtual interaction with citizens in regard to output explanation via social networks or the party homepages seemed to be unimportant for the vast majority of councillors. The spread of the means across the categories was relatively small which suggests that there is less clarity where output occurs. Hence, it can be assumed that this means that output occurs rather unexpectedly.

The ranking is largely consistent with the perception of councillors only giving output-related explanations when approached by citizens. Informal contacts such as on the street, in context of municipal meetings and events or in their wider social environments were regarded as the most frequent ways in which councillors explain council work. These venues have an especially high likeliness that councillors and citizens meet, therefore it is not surprising that councillors might be faced with explaining their work. The social environments of councillors were also regarded as places in which they are performing output related communication. The explanations for this might be that citizens in these environments are most likely aware of the political function of the councillor and approach them once certain explanations are desired. Clubs and associations can be easily clustered into this group.

More formal ways of interaction such as email, telephone, and organized party events were less frequently used, which suggests that output-related communication is a rather informal task performed by the councillors. It appears that citizens and councillors do not regularly make an effort in communicating about municipal output in a formalized manner. A lack of use of other virtual means of communication such as party websites and social media goes in line with a lack of use of these channels by most of the councillors. One councillor mirrored the prevailing image amongst most of the interviewees: "I do not see the sense in discussing output with citizens via Facebook, where they can hide behind their screens. I rather prefer explaining things face to face or in a more formal way."

The interviews gave the impression that German councillors seem to perform output-related communication with citizens largely only when citizens approach them or in case they feel the need to explain controversial decisions made in the council. Overall, councillors conveyed the impression that output plays only a marginal role in their general work, maybe even less than input.

5.5 Coalition vs. opposition
The last section of this chapter summarizes the councillors' ideas on the question whether the coalition-opposition difference affects their interaction with citizens. It is expected that especially explaining political decisions in the council, so the output side of the councillor's work, might be handled differently by councillors in the opposition. Most councillors did agree on this aspect. Five interviewees thought that the work in the opposition especially regarding output is easier compared

to being in the governing coalition. They thought it easier to explain output because in the opposition you can tell citizens that affecting some decisions is not possible, as the majority decides. One experienced councillor confirmed the impression that it is markedly more difficult to justify policies when being in the governing coalition, he said: "I have been in the opposition in the council for nearly 35 years, and only 2 years ago I have been elected into government. I can feel that citizens are more critical with me than before, I felt increased responsibility to explain my actions".

The other group of councillors, three in total, held that it does not make a difference whether they are part of the opposition or the coalition. One councillor claimed that the council takes many consensual decisions that are agreed upon across parties of opposition and government. Hence, he did not feel that it influenced his performance as councillor. According to him, the council is a rather consensual body, which takes collective responsibility for its decisions. Yet, another councillor from this group had a completely different perspective why the distinction of opposition and coalition did not matter for him. He was councillor of one of the smaller parties and had experience both in opposition and in government. He claimed that because of the small representation of his party in the council citizens know that he does not have much influence in either position, so it does not really matter.

Answers in regard to the differentiation coalition-opposition largely concentrated on the output-related work of councillors, only three interviewees referred to input in this question. One councillor held that it is sometimes the case that dissatisfied voters of the governing parties would approach him as opposition councillor to raise their concerns. Two members of the governing coalition said that they realize that voters with specific demands are more likely to approach them because they know that they have the majority in the council. This suggests that citizens selectively approach councillors with different interest regarding their affiliation to opposition and coalition. When they have specific demands for which they need the backing of the council they would approach the governing parties, while when being dissatisfied with municipal politics they would rather approach the opposition.

5.6 Conclusion

The literature suggests that German councillors regard explaining decisions taken by the council to citizens as well as publicizing debates on local issues prior to taking decisions as very important for their work. This conception has been only partly validated by the research. Councillors seem to think informing citizens about output is important, however they mainly do so when approached by citizens. The task of publicizing debates on local issues before council meetings was not mentioned in any of the interviews. The research has however shown that the councillors place great importance on representing citizens. The German councillors show a strong trustee-approach towards citizens' representation. Another conception that featured in literature namely that councillors are likely to be active in local organizations or associations such as sport clubs or the local church was validated.

German councillors regard formal administrative sources as well as citizens as their most important source of input for their work. They seem well aware of their representative role. Input from citizens to councillors is transmitted through several ways. The most important ones are informal contacts on the street, political party meetings and events, associations and clubs as well as emails. It appears that associations and clubs play an important role in providing input to the German councillors. Citizens seem well informed and conscious of their possibility to approach councillors. Out of the

interviewees three were engaged in clubs and associations in the municipality. However, their involvement seemed to be motivated by personal interest rather than by political motives. This does not mean that their political function does not play a role at all.

In contrast, within the associations councillors seem to be actively approached with input. The citizens in Übach-Palenberg are active on social media platforms such as Facebook, but the research suggests a missed opportunity on the side of the councillors to receive input through these channels. In general, citizens seem to take the initiative in providing input to the councillors. It appeared that input does not occur intensively. Councillors are dissatisfied with the declining interest of citizens in local politics. Citizens mostly take the initiative to provide the councillors with input when their personal wellbeing is at stake.

Some councillors receive more general input in terms of policy demands by personal trustees. In general councillors are approached by a variety of citizens, which makes it hard to classify them in distinct groups. When councillors receive input from citizens nearly all apply filter mechanisms before bringing the issues into the council. The councillors appear to have a very strong trustee-conception vis-à-vis their citizens. Overall, the impression was conveyed that input from citizens does only play a small role in the work of the councillors.

The councillors struggled to differentiate output from input. This highlights the limitations of recognisability of Easton's input and output model in the working reality of the councillors. All of the interviewees agreed that input and output go hand in hand and are hardly separable. The interviews suggest that the German councillors devote less attention to output-related communication than to input-related communication. This was justified by the disinterest and lack of information of citizens about the majority of council decisions. Again citizens appear to be interested in output-related communication mostly when their personal wellbeing is endangered.

Another explanation for less emphasis on output-related communication by the individual councillors is the fact that these tasks are fulfilled in other ways in the municipality. A few councillors additionally believe that the responsibility for explaining lies more with their party group leader or even the mayor of the municipality. When the councillors perform output-related communication however, initiative largely lies with citizens. Some councillors suggested that they take the initiative to explain council decisions only when these are controversial. Output most often takes place in a rather informal setting: on the streets, during municipal events or in the wider social environment of the councillors such as clubs and associations. More formal ways of communication such as emails, phone calls and organized party events are less frequently used to explain output. A vast majority of councillors does not exploit social media as a means of communicating output related issues to the citizens. The classical ways of communication are preferred.

The research revealed ambiguous outcomes in respect to the question whether coalition-opposition affiliation makes a difference for interaction of councillors with citizens. One group of councillors claimed that it is generally easier in opposition to perform output-related communication, since responsibility for the decisions can be blamed on the governing coalition. Another group of the councillors believed that the affiliation does not matter at all.

6. Local councillors in Visé: empirical findings

6.1 Introduction

From 2007-2011, Belgian politics experienced one of its darkest times in that a lack of consensus on state reform led to a persistent government crisis. As Smith (2013) elucidates, the 2010-11 period was particularly precarious in that no working government existed for 589 days in a row. A major issue of contention was the question whether or not more powers should be delegated to the three Belgian regions of Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia. Arguably, the government crisis underlines the difficulty of uniting the interests of three distinct ethno-cultural and linguistic communities.

While the difficulties on the national level are easy to discern, this chapter sheds light on the subnational, municipal level by illuminating the case of Walloon municipalities. The city of Visé serves as an illustration of the way local councillors interact with citizens. In this regard, the guiding question of this chapter is: "How do local councillors in Visé fulfil their representative role?" This chapter thus not only contributes to the complex discussion on Belgian politics. It also shows some of the daily contact between ordinary citizens and local politicians, thereby adding empirics to an often under-researched topic. As explained above, the empirical findings are presented against the background of Easton's input-output model.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. First, the functioning and main tenets of the Belgian political system are explained with a particular focus on the specificities of local governance. Within this section, the particularities of Walloon local politics and municipalities as well as the general functioning of municipal councils are elucidated. Subsequently, the sample of the study is presented by giving a short overview of the interviewees and the political constellation in the Visé council. Thereafter follows the discussion of the empirical findings, as deducted from the interview material and based on the aforementioned input-output distinction. To allow for transparency and potentially replicability of the study, the findings are illustrated in tables.

6.2 Councillors in Visé: the sample

The selected city, Visé, represents the last Belgian city before the Dutch borders. Located in the region of Wallonia and province of Liège it is the only city of the francophone Belgian community to border the Netherlands. Like the majority of cities in Wallonia, it has an industrial past linked to the mining industry of Wallonia's past dominant economic drive. The city's current political leading party is the MR (Mouvement Réformateur), a conservative and liberal party, in the coalition over several decades with a mayor in place since 1989. Its current coalition partner is the CdH (Centre démocrate humaniste), a Christian Democratic party, with which it shares 7 out of 18 councillor seats, all 5 alderman seats, the mayor and one CPAS seat (Centre Public d'Action Sociale). With a total of 14 out of 25 possible seats, it faces the PS (Parti socialiste), a socialist party, which holds 11 seats and Ecolo, a green party, with one seat. The Visétois, which number slightly over 17 000, are therefore majorly of liberal orientation and have been so for many years without interruption.

The study sample for Visé consists of seven local councillors, all men aged between 40 and 62 years, the average age of the selected sample being 50 years. All political parties are represented in this study and as such include both coalition parties (MR and CdH) and both opposition parties (PS and Ecolo). For each political party, two councillors have been chosen and interviewed whenever this was

possible. The interviewee of the Ecolo Party is an exception as he is the only elected councillor of the party. For the sake of simplicity – and notwithstanding the abovementioned distinction of councillors into the three categories of mayor, aldermen and "normal" councillors – the subsequent discussion uniquely refers to "the councillor".

As a general trend it can be said that six councillors were employed and at least devoted half of their time to their job. The task of being a councillor was thus often comparable to a hobby or side job. Three councillors have a fulltime job despite their political obligations and the other three working councillors have some kind of split between both occupations. All councillors have at least three years of experience as a local councillor, ranging up to 24 years for the most experienced and the average amount of experience being at 13 years across all seven councillors.

6.3 Councillors receiving input from citizens

In this part, we will go into the input that councillors receive from citizens. Firstly, the ways through which councillors receive input for their council work are discussed. Secondly, the type of input is examined. On a more general note, it can already be said that all councillors cited citizens in more or less encompassing terms as one of their major sources of input. The exact sources of input can be seen in the table below.

Table 6.1 How do councillors receive input from citizens in Visé?

Sources of input	Score (max. 35)[7]
In the streets	27
Municipality meetings	24
In associations/clubs	21
Meetings with political party	14
Email	14
Telephone	9
Newsletter / party statement	5
"Me"	5
Newspaper	4
Publications on social media	4
Social media	4

Of all proposed ways of receiving input from citizens, four were never mentioned, namely "at home", "at work", "consultation hours" and "letters". By contrast, the councillors identified three other options as most prevalent: "in the street", "associations/clubs" and "municipal

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[7] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 35 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (7) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

meetings/consultations". With respectively 27, 21 and 24 points, these three options constitute more than half of the total number of points allocated by councillors (72 out of 131 points). Interestingly, only two councillors allocated only 15 points, instead the average per councillor is of 18.7 points.

6.3.1 Who takes the initiative: councillors or citizens?

For five councillors it is clear that citizens make the first move in approaching councillors with their ideas. For the two others, there is no visible difference between citizens or councillors taking the initiative. Remarkably, one councillor adds that for the output, it is the citizens that make the first move.

It is noteworthy that two out of the seven interviewees were aldermen, whose position distinguishes them from the "ordinary" councillor. For instance, one of the aldermen emphasised that his position as part of the executive increases the likelihood that citizens will approach him instead of a "normal" councillor. Furthermore, the aldermen considered themselves far more prominent since assuming their function as alderman; simply because much more citizens now know them and tend to approach them with their demands and ideas.

6.3.2 What kind of input do citizens provide?

For most examples of input given by citizens, the majority of councillors evoked "very small issues". Most of the received input is very individual to the citizens' own private space. For instance, citizens repeatedly mentioned the level of noise and cleanliness in the streets as a major concern. Other cases of such "low politics" concerns can be identified, such as the impact of municipal trees standing too close to the houses of local residents.

Larger projects, that could be beneficial to the community as a whole in Visé, are reported to be considered by local citizens with a Nimby approach. An example is a gas turbine project, designed to generate electricity locally, that failed. Moreover, almost all councillors mentioned the controversial case of the planned transformation of the central square from a parking space to a convivial place. Just as with the gas turbine project, the house owners non or near the square and the merchants complaining about visual pollution and lost parking spaces. Frequently, it is up to the councillors to evaluate, which "voices" are louder and which decision is strategically best for the party's popularity. In the case of the central square a compromise is possibly established with the merchants to provide underground parking; everybody's satisfaction nevertheless remains a difficult challenge. This is a major concern ushered by all councillors: there is a conflict between individual demands and the councillors' obligation to satisfy as many people as possible – put differently to satisfy the general interest.

As another illustration, a councillor mentioned the case of a local disco that provoked dissatisfaction among local residents. Following local inspections (also by councillors), the disco was closed on grounds of noise and lack of parking spaces – pleasing the residents while upsetting both the owner and potential clients. A similar conflict of interests arose when a resident complained about a particular street being too crowded with cars, leading to a restructuring of the street so as to have fewer parking spaces. This pleased people who had more place to walk in the street but displeased others who could not park their car now.

Not all debates are as heated and controversial. For example, calls for the establishment of an increased mobility between two districts were welcomed from all involved actors, considering the

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concerned districts were previously only indirectly linked together and separated only by a hill. Another example represents the creation of holiday camps for children. The councillor in charge had previously heard indirect complaints from parents saying they have to drive a certain distance before being able to access this facility in another municipality. The councillor subsequently reflected on this issue before enabling the establishment of the service closer to the parents.

Regardless of the political orientation of the councillors, all confirmed that they always apply their own judgment when receiving ideas from citizens. As one councillor stated: "It is indispensable to filter out citizens' proposals". Accordingly, the councillors agree on the idea that they will not pass on ideas to the council, which contradicts their own values and beliefs. Most of them also explicitly stated that they immediately provide the citizens with an explanation for their refusal. For instance one councillor explained that a citizen new to the city was particularly unhappy about the Church's bell ringing because it made his daughters feel depressed. His request to terminate this age-old practice in the city was clearly rejected by the councillor.

Another example concerned a citizen who asked for the installation of security cameras. The demand was refused due to the different atmosphere and of fear and feeling of insecurity the councillor believed it would create. The councillor nevertheless specifically added he brought the topic up in his political party. In both cases, the councillors discussed the proposition and their refusal with the citizen.

When citizens contact councillors they do not, however, exclusively talk about politics; as such there have been four councillors who declared their chat with citizens to be non-political and three councillors for whom the contact remains political in usual circumstances. One councillor admitted that in election times, he would also talk about non-issue related topics with citizens.

Among the four councillors with whom citizens chat about anything and everything, one indicated that he nevertheless tries to help through his political function whenever he can, another stated that although non-political related contacts happen, they are not as often political-related and a third explained that some of non-political related conversations turn into political-related ones after a small talk whilst others remain non-political.

6.3.3 Which citizens approach the councillors?
Importantly, all councillors receive political input. However, it is essential to ascertain whether certain social groups give more input than others and can thus be expected to have a more decisive impact on councillors. Four councillors indicated that people they know give input more frequently or at least consider their input to be more valuable in comparison to other citizens' input. Two councillors experience that more people from their own district come to them. Two other councillors indicated to have age restrictions of some sort, one having less young people giving input and the other getting more input from the elderly. A different councillor stated to receive far more input from women than from men. Another councillor accentuated his very limited input from the local Turkish minority and a second councillor to receive only restricted input from people of Muslim confession. The variety of responses thus reveals a very mixed picture, implying that in most cases people from all strata of society approach the councillors, but that people sometimes seem to choose a specific councillor.

Does the political orientation play a role for citizens when they address councillors? Only one Christian democratic councillor maintained that he does not expect citizens with liberal or socialist ideas to come to talk to him. Instead, he expects citizens with a catholic or Christian belief to be among the most prominent group of citizens providing him with input. All other councillors, however, do not see political affiliation as a factor driving the citizens' decision to address a certain councillor. Do citizens only approach the councillor they voted for? That is a question the councillors cannot answer. The councillors themselves often don't know if a specific person actually voted for them. More importantly, two councillors said citizens are mostly driven by practical considerations, for instance approaching the councillor that they know personally or that lives in their neighbourhood – regardless of the councillor's political ideology.

Most councillors attend events not only as citizens, but also as councillors whose aim it is to make their citizens happy in accordance to the input they receive. Only one councillor repeatedly expressed a strong dislike and unease about this representative role and function.

6.4 Councillors explaining output to citizens

Among the councillors of the coalition, all said that explaining output was part of their responsibilities or that they at least implicitly felt it to be their duty. One even indicated that there is "a clear obligation to explain political decisions to citizens". Councillors of the opposition on the other hand felt very differently on this topic. Two councillors explicitly denied any responsibility for explaining political outcomes. Instead, they "pushed" the responsibility to the coalition and declared it to be "not the role" and "not the task" of the opposition. The third opposition councillor did not have such a categorical division of tasks in mind and instead "explains a lot" to citizens. Nevertheless, all opposition councillors are united in their vision that when talking to citizens about political outcomes, they frequently criticise the coalition decisions and thereby (try to) reinforce their standing as the opposition. Table 6.2 elucidates the most frequently mentioned ways of how councillors convey political measures to citizens (output).

As a general remark it can be contented that there is only one most favoured option ("in the streets") with 25 points and a lot of secondary options whose level of frequency is quite similar ("meetings with the political party", "municipal meetings and consultations", "newspapers" and "associations/clubs"). In contrast to input, the category "newspaper" (13 points) is considered far more important when it comes to explaining political outcomes to citizens. Particularly, several councillors agree on the importance of the local weekly Visé magazine as a particularly suitable source for conveying political decisions to the citizens. An inverted trend can be witnessed for the suitability of emails as a tool to explain decisions. Compared to 14 points in the input table, only 9 points were given to emails in terms of output. Out of a total of 112 allocated points, each councillor on average gave out 16. Not only is it noticeable that the average for the output is lower than for the input, it is also noticeable that two councillors used fewer points than were at their disposition.

Table 6.2 How do councillors explain output to citizens in Visé?

Means of output	Score (max. 35)[8]
In the streets	25
Meetings with political party	17
Municipality meetings	15
Newspapers	13
In associations/clubs	12
Email	9
Newsletter / party statement	6
Informal contacts	5
Telephone	4
Social media	3
Party events	3

To account for these discrepancies between "input" and "output" tables, one could refer to the difficulty of the term "output" per se. As there is no literal translation into French available, one could evidently feel the difficulty many councillors had when asked about "output".

6.5 Input or output: what is more important?

In the coalition, three out of four councillors were convinced that they should explain the output more than they currently do. Moreover, within the council-majority, two councillors believed that they spend more time on explaining political outcomes than on listening to citizens' input. A third councillor thinks the opposite and the fourth equals input and output time. As for the opposition, one councillor also puts both "input and output time" on one level, while a second interviewee was convinced that input time is far greater than output time. The third councillor did not express any clear opinion on this issue. From this type of clear distinction with which councillors were able to speak, it can be deduced that they are able to separate both undertakings even in practice. It however has to be reminded that most councillors also stated they immediately explain their reasons for disagreeing with a citizen's proposal and its transmission to the council which can be considered as output explaining. Even though councillors were thus able to consider input and output as separate tasks for the question, they seem to mix and combine them in their daily council work.

There is thus no clearly visible pattern in terms of the time and importance attached to either output or input. Again, one could assume a methodological difficulty in that the English terminology could not be effectively transposed into the French questions.

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[8] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 35 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (7) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

Interestingly, four councillors indicate that citizens are not interested or do not care at all about local politics, contrasted only by one councillor who believes people like and want to understand political issues when they are explained to them. However, another interviewee held that citizens change their tactic of approaching councillors, depending on whom they are talking to: a member of the opposition or of the coalition. The latter assumption would refute the idea that citizens do not care or do not know to whom they address their issues and concerns.

6.6 Coalition vs. opposition

When councillors were asked about a perceived difference between being in the coalition of opposition, their answers were very diverse. Four councillors agreed on the view that fewer citizens come to councillors of the opposition because they have less influence to transpose an idea into reality. Others expressed the opinion that the coalition likes to take credits for ideas developed by the opposition (shared by three councillors). Accordingly, there is no clear-cut consensus regarding the councillor's political grouping in the council.

In more general terms, councillors of the coalition are, however, believed to have access to more resources (such as insider information) whilst having the (sometimes frustrating) task to vote along the party line even when it doesn't reflect the councillor's own ideas on the topic. Opposition councillors, by contrast, are perceived to be freer in their political actions and voicing of opinions whilst it is expected that they articulate harsh criticism of the coalition's achievements – even though two councillors admitted that for most of the day-to-day work in the council, the political orientation within the coalition has little or no impact.

Finally, it is again crucial to state that the aldermen were believed to play a more influential role than "ordinary" councillors. In their function as executive agents implementing decisions, their power position is considered to be much greater. Therefore, both in terms of explaining decisions and receiving input from citizens, aldermen were expected to be more frequently in contact with citizens.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to Wallonia by illuminating the case study of Visé. It has given the reader an insight in how local councillors within the French-speaking part of Belgium interact with their citizens. The type of interaction differed from one councillor to another, but it can be said that councillors never get input while they are at home or at work. They equally do not receive input through letters and consultation hours. The same results are found for explaining output: none of these four options are used for that either. It has to be added that several councillors have explicitly stated that they refuse to do any council work at their workplace and prefer to postpone this to later in the day or to set up a meeting with the citizen. So the results can be an indication for two interlinked facts: firstly, councillors reject the communication through these channels. Secondly, citizens reject these channels of communication for to researchers unknown reasons.

The methods of communication most used by citizens to give and by councillors to receive input have been the street, associations and clubs and municipal meetings. For the citizens to receive and for the councillors to give output explanations, the street has been the most cited option among the councillors. Other options were also cited as important. However, due to the explorative nature of the research, no clear trends can be distinguished.

Additionally, most councillors said that for their daily work the *Nimby* concept (Not In My back Yard) and the need to filter out what citizens say are important. Regarding the topic of discussions between councillors and citizens, some interviewees indicated that not every discussion has a political orientation. Councillors are also citizens in their local community and not just as political actors. When asked, councillors mentioned having a stronger relationship with specific parts of the population. Due to time and resources restrictions, this chapter limited itself to individual interviews with seven councillors. Further investigation in this aspect can no doubt contribute to this field of research. Future research could also shed light on the municipal level by integrating new perspectives such as actual council meetings or citizens' surveys to assess the councillor-citizen interaction from the citizens' point of view.

7. Local councillors in Valkenburg: empirical findings

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter the results of the research in Valkenburg are presented. Valkenburg aan de Geul is located in the province South Limburg in the Netherlands, has a population of roughly 16,000 people and consists of sixteen smaller villages or organisational units, called *kernen*. The councillors often represent the interests of their respective *kern,* which usually hosts their own meetings for *kern*-related issues. According to the *Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek* of 2012, councillors in municipalities with a population of 14,000 to 30,000 spend more of their time on representative activities and less on administration than municipalities of other sizes (*Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek*, 2012, p.22). Therefore, we can expect to find close citizen-representative ties in Valkenburg. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that a Dutch councillor generally spends 66% of his council work on administrative tasks and 29.8% on representative tasks (*Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek*, 2012, p.23).

7.2 Councillors in Valkenburg: the sample

This chapter is based on individual interviews with in total eight councillors from Valkenburg. Regarding the constellation of the council, there are currently five political parties represented by in total 17 councillors: the local party Algemeen Belang (AB) with 7 seats, the conservative-liberals (VVD) with 3 seats, the Christian Democrats (CDA) with 3 seats, the PGP (a fusion between the Left and the Greens) with 3 seats, and the liberal-democrats (D66) with 1 seat. AB, PGP and the VVD form the coalition.

The age of the interviewed councillors ranged from 21 to 70 years, with an average of 56.5 years. The average age reveals the pre-dominance of the older age group: seven of the eight interviewees were above 54 years. Out of the eight interviewees one was female (6 out of 17 council members are female). Three of the eight councillors are retired, one is on the verge to retirement and one is a student. All of the five parties were represented in the interviews, of which AB was with three councillors most numerously represented. While the coalition is formed of AB, PGP and VVD, the opposition is formed by D66 and CDA. The ratio of coalition to opposition councillors in the council is therefore 13 to 4 and in our interviews 5 to 3.

7.3 Councillors receiving input from citizens

This section presents and analyses input-related communication between councillors and citizens. All councillors - without exception - mentioned citizens as a source of input. Another frequent source that was indicated is input from "above", referring to their political party (local, provincial and national level) and the administrative work that is created in the municipality itself. One councillor explicitly mentioned the workplace as an important source of input for the content of the council work and emphasised the central role of local and national newspapers for relevant information. Only few councillors mentioned local newspapers and the local TV channel as a form of input and rather placed it as a way to communicate output, which is addressed in a different part of this chapter. In regard to national news broadcasting, several councillors mentioned that they follow national developments, as they are transferable to the local level. Overall, the interviews revealed that citizens and the administrative levels of the municipality generate most input and consequently constitute the most important sources of input for the councillors. Zooming in on the citizens as an

input source, it is interesting to ask about the most frequent and important ways in which input by citizens is transmitted.

Table 7.1 How do councillors receive input from citizens in Valkenburg?

Sources of input	Score (max. 40)[9]
Email	25
In the street	23
At associations/clubs	17
Municipal meetings (official)	12
Facebook & Twitter	12
Telephone	11
Party meetings/ events	9
Others	5
At home	1

The activities listed in the table above describe ways through which citizens' input can be conveyed and were ranked by the councillors during the interviews according to their frequency and importance. The highest possible score is 35 points. The highest percentage refers to "most frequent and important" and the score of zero percent indicates "least frequent and important". The medium of interaction "email" obtained the highest score with 71.4%, followed by "in the street" with 65.7%. The latter refers to spontaneous interactions in public places, such as the neighbourhood, the grocery store, the centre of town or elsewhere. The third most frequent and important way of receiving citizens' input takes place at associations and clubs, for instance at sports clubs and other organisations. Official municipality meetings and social media (Facebook and Twitter) obtained the same score, closely followed by telephone usage and party-related events and meetings. The category "others" refers to *kernbijeenkomsten*, which are public meetings in the *kernen* of Valkenburg. "at home" scored very poorly, whereas "at work", "office/consultation hours" and "letters" were not considered to be frequent and important by any councillor.

Based on subjective observation, the ranking of "email" as the most important way of receiving input from citizens came unexpectedly. None of the interviewees had mentioned email in the open questions. Merely one council member briefly referred to email in the context of his presence and availability on social media. Instead, activity two and three in the ranking appeared most frequently in the councillors' open answers, namely "on the street" and "at associations/clubs". The former one was the most outstanding. It was mentioned by all councillors, with reference to the small-town

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[9] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 40 points as the maximum theoretical score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (8) multiplied by the highest score of 5. Due to missing values 35 is the maximum score instead of 40.

character of Valkenburg, which enables citizens to informally communicate their ideas, concerns and desires to the council members in a spontaneous conversation.

Furthermore, nearly all councillors referred to the *kernen* (villages) as an important dimension for these interactions. The rather small population of a *kern* and the fact that almost all of the interviewed councillors currently resides or used to reside in one of them rendered them well-known people in the community. Several councillors confirmed prominence in their *kern* and often attend the official meetings - the *kernbijeenkomsten*. Most interaction consequently takes place on an informal and frequent basis on the street, referring to spontaneous encounters in public places, such as the neighbourhood or the grocery store. Additionally, input from the own home was brought up several times: "at home is almost the same as on the street", in the sense that family members and their visitors contribute to input in the same way as regular voters, yet as the ranking reveals, input from home does not hold a significant role.

Another dimension of informal interaction with citizens is the *verenigingsleven* – the local sports clubs, music bands and other voluntary associations. The engagement in such organisations scored 48.6% in the ranking, demonstrating that this activity is fairly important for the transmission of input; yet, in the councillors' open answers this activity appeared to be even more important. The majority of the interviewed councillors are members or hold board positions in often more than one organisation and emphasised the importance of being present in such associations. The *verenigingsleven* establishes an essential environment where they can socialise, create networks and consequently receive input from citizens for their council work. Moreover, sports clubs and voluntary associations often hold specific interests, which they want to defend. Several councillors in Valkenburg mainly mentioned two conflicts: the usage of the *kunstgrasvelden* (artificial grass fields) and the allocation of subsidies for the clubs. Competing sports clubs mobilised the councillors who were members of these clubs to represent the club's voice and interests on council level. Therefore, the engagement in such sports clubs and volunteer associations assists councillors to be publicly present and to represent the desires of local clubs and associations.

One outstanding answer was that "many of the council's tasks are pre-determined and detached from the citizens' input". In this sense the interviewee expressed his surprise over the reality of council work, which is often pre-occupied with "many legal issues that nobody cares about". A concrete example of these legal issues were the budgetary decisions on schools in the face of a strong urbanisation trend, leading to a shrinking population in Valkenburg and consequently the closing of schools. Thus, even though the council was equipped with a secretariat to lift the burden of administrative work after 2002, councillors in the Netherlands still have to engage in activities where citizens are not directly involved.

Regarding the role of the initiator for input-related communication, three councillors stated that they themselves try to reach citizens in order to seek their input and opinions. Two councillors responded that it was more the role of citizens to take the initiative while the residual three councillors saw the initiative equally balanced between them and the citizens. However, all interviewees stressed their availability and openness for input and their effort to offer citizens the opportunity to express their opinion, while only one admitted his limits in reaching out to citizens.

Another result is that input is always issue-related, meaning that input usually does not appear in form of general requests, such as the demand to adopt more environmentally friendly policies or to

integrate more gender equality targets in the political agenda. One councillor noted that criticism is sometimes communicated in a more general way, holding the municipality as a whole liable, while another councillor stated that he receives general compliments from time to time. However, in most cases the councillors answered in a similar way: "If people have a problem they contact you, if there is no problem you do not see them".

An example of issue-detached input was not given. In most of the cases, the examples that were mentioned were indeed very personal or local problems, such as "cutting the trees in a street" or "putting up new benches for old people to sit on". When being asked whether or not councillors form their own opinion on the matters brought to them by the citizens, the interviewees confirmed that they apply their own judgement. One councillor stated that he formed an opinion based on the party line; three said they would always check whether the citizen's input was realistic or feasible before bringing it into the council work. In general, all seem to apply their own thoughts on a matter before proposing it in the council.

This affects the attitude of councillors how to proceed with the input they receive from citizens. Here, councillors indirectly expressed their different manners of transmitting input: some interviewees explained that they address received input in official council meetings, pushing the concerns, requests and ideas of citizens on the official agenda, whereas others take the initiative and realise the solution themselves outside the council. One councillor provided a specific example of being approached with citizens' concerns that benches were missing on a walking path (*wandelpad).* The councillor then directly relied on the municipalities' facilities in order to provide the required benches, circumventing the political debate in the council. In line with this proactive way of reacting to input is the concept of *zelfsturing* (self-steering), which demonstrates its impact on the notion of how to solve an issue. Several councillors confirmed the application of zelfsturing in their daily work, challenging the citizens to become active themselves and providing them with the necessary means.

Other interviewees described how they advise citizens to directly approach the *wethouders* (aldermen) or the *burgemeester* (mayor), as the councillors' capacities are fairly limited in certain fields. Consequently, bringing the input into the council would not bring an effective solution. One councillor shared his experience of how he wrote an official letter directly to the mayor, addressing the issue of a broken traffic mirror in the inner city. In this way, the problem could be solved in a fast and effective manner. This leads to the assumption that councillors do not necessarily bring citizens' input into official council meetings but choose routes, which appear more effective. However, the interviewees did not provide sufficient information on this matter in order to draw a complete picture of the processing of input.

The next section summarises which groups of citizens predominantly approach councillors. All interviewees indicated that the majority of people who approach them are people they knew beforehand. Two councillors stated that older people are usually more active in giving input. However, there is no outstanding group that contacts councillors more frequently than others. Party affiliation does not play an essential role in this context. Councillors stated that it is easier for party members to contact their representative. The majority of the interviewees however expressed that they do not know whether the voters of their party approach them more frequently as they don't know of course what citizens voted.

The main impression which was conveyed by the councillors was that Dutch councillors are very active and informal access points for citizens to voice their opinions, continuously referring to spontaneous encounters with citizens on the street, portraying a "everybody knows everybody"-image and emphasising their large network of friends and family.

7.4 Councillors explaining output to citizens

The following section focuses on the output side, employing a similar approach to enquiring the input-side of the interaction between councillor and citizen. Generally, when asked about their interaction with citizens the councillors did not spontaneously mention output-related activities as part of their council work throughout the interview. Instead, they brought up examples that represent input-related communication, which leads to the assumption that output takes a subordinated role in the interaction between councillors and the citizenry in comparison to input. However, after addressing output-related interaction, or rephrasing the question whether they "explain decisions to the constituency", the majority confirmed that it does play a role in their work. Yet, as outlined in more detail below, the councillors' role in the communication of output is not clearly defined: individual councillors' perceptions regarding this aspect of their representative responsibilities varied to a greater degree than their perception on their responsibilities for the input side.

In regard to the input-output balance, the councillors' statements on the frequency of providing output to citizens varied substantially. Three councillors indicated that output-oriented communication takes place as frequently as input-oriented communication, whereas four stated that it is less frequent. Less frequent was explained as, for instance, "30/70" and "this does not happen often. I receive twice as much input as giving output". Nonetheless, the interrelatedness of input and output was acknowledged ("I think it is both the same"), referring to them as being inseparable: "You cannot have output without input. […] It is a circle of information". However, the impression prevails that the output side receives less attention than the input side in council work.

The councillors provided a possible explanation for this in reference to the initiating role on the output side. Here again it was confirmed that the councillors' role in the communication of output is not clearly defined: the answers varied substantially, locating the responsibility of initiation with the municipality on the one side and the citizens themselves on the other: "The issues concerning the municipality should be explained by the municipality". In this way, the councillors stressed the municipality's administration's duty to publish recent policy decisions through newsletters and such, arguing that many decisions are taken without a role of the councillors. On the other side, the majority of interviewees indicated that they provide output only as a reaction to a specific request from the citizenry: "Only when citizens ask for it" or "If they ask me, I explain it". Looking again at the input side, many councillors stated that they actively try to engage with citizens. This reveals the difference to the output side, where the citizens seem to be the initiators. The councillors conveyed an image of themselves as access points for output, intentionally presenting their availability in public, yet take up a rather passive role: "They can always come". In this way, the provision of explaining output is of spontaneous nature, initiated by the citizens, whereas an organised communication of output is rare.

One councillor explicitly stated that he communicates all council decisions through social media (Facebook). Moreover, two councillors offer consultation hours to justify and explain council

decisions in an organized manner; however, they experienced these meetings as rather inefficient as few people turn up. Here, several references to unsuccessful council initiatives to provide output were made. Generally, the councillors questioned the necessity of providing explanations about output to citizens in such an organized way in the first place. Several councillors claimed that there is no need to do this in an organised way, as only few citizens are interested in the outcomes of the policy cycle. The reason is that many council decisions are of such technical nature that they simply aren't interesting for citizens.

The majority of councillors finds it most effective to present citizens with an easy access point for information, leaving them free to choose which policies and decisions they find important and in need of explanation. One councillor gave the example of his choice to ride his bike instead of driving his car in order to be more visible in town, offering citizens the chance to spontaneously approach him. Moreover, several councillors stated that they do not always justify political decisions because they were made against their personal belief or opinion. One councillor noted: "It is a difficult question whether I justify decisions because I do not always agree with the decisions. Nine out of ten times I disagree". Here it is interesting to ask what effect the coalition-opposition constellation has on the individual councillors' output-related activities. This will be elaborated on in a separate section.

A list of activities in which output-related interaction with citizens can take form – almost identical to the one for the input side – was then presented to the councillors who were asked to rank the activities according to their frequency and importance. The only difference to the previous list is the addition of the option "Newsletters".

Table 7.2 How do councillors explain output to citizens in Valkenburg?

Means of ouput	Score (max. 40)[10]
On the street	26
Email	24
At municipal meetings	18
At associations/clubs	17
Telephone	14
Facebook & Twitter	11
At party meetings	9
At home	6
Newsletter	4
Others	3

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[10] The councillors could score the sources of input from 1 to 5 resulting in 40 points as the maximum score. The maximum score is the number of respondents (8) multiplied by the highest score of 5.

The option "on the street" received the highest score of 65%, closely followed by "email" with 60%. The former, identical to the input side, refers to spontaneous interactions in public places, such as the neighbourhood, the grocery store, the inner city and such. It is interesting to note that "On the street" received almost the identical score as in the input ranking; yet, "email" scored less than in the input ranking. The third most frequent way of communicating output is "at municipality meetings", designated through a score of 45%, and closely followed by "at associations/clubs" with 42.5%. The usage of telephone (35%) to communicate output was ranked to be more important than social media (27.5%). Party meetings obtained a score of 22.5%, which is slightly lower than its score in the input ranking. "At home" surprisingly received a score of 15%, which is significantly higher than its score of 2.9% in the input ranking. The newly added option "newsletters" scored 10%, followed by "others" which referred to municipality notifications in this case. None of the councillors considered "letters", "at work" and "consultation hours" as frequent or important.

The retrieved numbers are in line with the findings from the open questions: they confirm the assumption drawn from the councillors' statements that the provision of output is a rather spontaneous act that takes place upon request from the citizenry. The councillors therefore try to make themselves publicly visible to show their availability for explanations and justifications of council decisions. Email correspondence plays an important role in this context, as it simplifies the communication between councillor and citizens. Some councillors referred to their availability for citizens because their email address is public. However, according to the ranking, email correspondence appears to be more important for the input side than the output side. This indicates that emails are used more to communicate ideas, desires and requests than it is used to justify and explain council decisions.

The two options that stand out are "at home" and "newsletters". The higher score of the former one in comparison to its score in the input ranking might be explained by the assumption that communication at home with family members is more elaborate than spontaneous interaction on the street, for instance. One might deduce from one councillor's statement that "output takes longer than input" and from other councillors' statement that citizens often are not interested in technical decisions, that family members have more time and interest in explanations of policy outcomes. The option "newsletter" was not included in the input ranking and can therefore not be compared. Its low score of 10% indicates that it does not play a significant role in the provision of output. One councillor elaborated on it, stating that his party has "a newsletter but it is very rare". Furthermore, he explained that in the election cycle there are fluctuations in its frequency: the closer the period for election gets, the more output is provided - not only through newsletters but also through public party meetings and such.

To briefly conclude the findings on the output-side, it can be said that the individual councillors' perception of their representative tasks varied to a greater degree than the perception of their tasks in regard to the input-side. Moreover, results substantially varied in reference to the input-output balance in terms of frequency. Some councillors stated that output occurs to a considerable amount less than input, whereas others claimed that the frequency of output is comparable to input. Yet, the general impression that was conveyed is that output plays a subordinated role in the interviewees' council work. Additionally, councillors are not as active in seeking output-related communication with citizens as for input. An organised way of providing citizens with output - apart from consultation hours and newsletters, which do not constitute a significant amount - is mostly missing.

Additionally, councillors regard citizens to be the major initiators for output-related communication and see their own function in this relation as an output-source on request. We could assume that the small size of the municipality of Valkenburg allows for spontaneous interaction on the street and at informal get-togethers where these requests can be made. Moreover, the small size facilitates an "everybody knows everybody" environment in which establishing personal contact with a council member is easy. This renders the organised delivery of output unnecessary, given that there is low interest from the population in many council decisions.

7.4 Coalition vs. opposition

This section explains the impact of the opposition-coalition dimension: is a councillor's behaviour significantly affected by his affiliation to the coalition or the opposition? One might expect to find that particularly the output side is influenced: councillors belonging to the opposition might not feel obliged to explain or justify council decisions, as they do not feel directly responsible for the outcomes. Our research generated very diverse results on this issue. Some councillors responded that being part of the coalition affects the council work differently than being in the opposition, whereas others claimed that it does not make a difference. Here it became clear that their opinion depended highly on their personal experiences in either the opposition or the coalition. One interviewee - who had been active in the political context of Valkenburg for thirty years - explained that he had been part of the opposition for two years within this period: "That was a lot harder than being in the coalition". Yet, he claimed that it did not affect his output-related communication. Others had not experienced both sides yet and gave hypothetical answers based on their personal assessment.

The assumption that the coalition-opposition dimension has a larger effect on the output-side than the input-side, was not confirmed. One councillor stated: 'When you are in the coalition, people approach you more often', implying that there is an impact on the input-side. For the output-side, no clear tendency emerged from the councillors' answers. Instead, the results revealed that the simplified classical output model does not sufficiently capture the complexity of reality. Several councillors indicated that, even though they are part of the coalition, they often disagree with the decisions made in the council, which then affects their output-related communication. As one councillor from the coalition noted: "It is a difficult question whether I justify the decisions because I am not always agreeing with decisions made. Nine out of ten times I disagree". Therefore, it can be concluded that the coalition-opposition dimension does not significantly affect the councillors' work, neither for the input nor the output-side.

7.5 Conclusion

The conducted research in Valkenburg shows that Dutch councillors are overall actively engaged in the communication with citizens. Although not always taking the initiative, they offer the citizenry an access point for both input and output. Regarding input, email correspondence is the most important and frequent way of communication, whereas a lot of interaction seems to be taking place spontaneously on the street or in clubs and associations. Here the small size of the municipality, which allows for this form of personal and spontaneous encounters, needs to be mentioned. Particularly the *kernen*, where political issues are discussed informally and personally between the residents, breaks down the political organisation of the municipality and contributes to a familiar and casual atmosphere. Issues that are addressed by citizens are mostly very specific and non-political, meaning that the concerns are generally linked to residence issues and disconnected from political

ideologies. This could explain why the difference between opposition or coalition does not seem very important in councillors' interactions with the citizenry.

In regard to output, the results suggest that the councillors' opinions on their responsibility to explain and justify policies to the citizenry vary. Generally, communication of output takes a subordinated role to the input-related interactions. Councillors explained this by claiming that the citizenry is often not interested in decisions taken by the council, as these decisions are either very specific and do not concern many citizens, or because they are too technical to be of interest. Additionally, they consider the administration of the municipality responsible for the communication of council decisions. Therefore, the communication of output happens on request from the citizenry. In this sense, the councillors intend to demonstrate their availability by being present in the public sphere.

Comparing the findings with the literature, various connections can be drawn. Valkenburg represents a typical Dutch municipality in terms of size and its position close to the population, constituting the lowest level of political organisation in the Netherlands. According to the findings of the *Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek,* the Local Governance Act (LGA) did not successfully strengthen the responsiveness of councillors by contributing to their active communication with the constituency outside the city hall. However, our research suggests that Dutch councillors do attribute a significant amount of time and personal effort to the interaction with the citizen*.* Our study shows that a significant share of their council work – we don't know how big though - is related to interaction with citizens in, for instance, sports clubs and associations. This might demonstrate the integrative and corporatist nature of the Dutch political system in which societal groups and associations hold an important position in the policy-making process. Moreover, the subsidiarity principle – which intends to transfer the responsibility to act to the smallest organisational level – is strongly embedded in Dutch local governance. The idea of z*elfsturing* mobilises citizens to take an active role in the political arena in the form of taking self-initiative. In this way, councillors facilitate the access for citizens to do so.

Finally, the composition of our interview group suggests that the professionalization efforts of the LGA were not very effective. Only three out of eight councillors are economically active, hinting at the difficulty to combine a full-time job with a seat in the council. The lack of councillors representing the age group of 25 to 45 year olds arouses attention. On a similar note, the marginal use of Facebook of the interviewed councillors can also be linked to age-dependent factors.

8. Conclusions

In this chapter we will answer the question that has guided our research on councillors in the municipalities of Riemst, Übach-Palenberg, Valkenburg and Visé:

How do local councillors in four municipalities in Flanders, Wallonia, Germany and the Netherlands fulfil their representative role and what are the significant differences?

In this research project, we have concentrated on the interaction between councillors and citizens, as a key aspect of the representative role of councillors. Based on the literature, we distinguished between citizens giving *input* to councillors, and councillors explaining or justifying municipal *output* to citizens. These two key concepts, input and output, are derived from the political system theory of the well-known American political scientist David Easton (Miller, 1971). Our main goal was to find out more about these concepts and the way they can be observed in the daily political life in the four selected municipalities in the environment of Maastricht University.

Councillors receiving input from citizens
On a general note, we found that in all four municipalities councillors receive input from citizens. However, citizens are not the only source of input for councillors. Other ways are for instance municipal documents, council meetings and meetings of their political party. We have not measured the relative importance of citizens as a source of input in relation to other sources, but it seems this relative importance differs in the municipalities we visited. In Riemst and Visé, councillors stated that they attach great value to the input of citizens, but it seems not the most important source of input for most of them. The interviews in Übach-Palenberg and especially Valkenburg leave us with the impression that the wishes and ideas of citizens are a more important source of input for councillors. We don't know whether these impressions are truly correct. This might be something to look at in a new research project.

This difference could be caused by an important institutional difference between Belgium on the one hand, and Germany and the Netherlands on the other hand. In Belgium, the aldermen (schepenen and échevins) and especially the mayor dominate the 'normal' councillors. These 'special councillors' – mayor and aldermen are members of the council - are the ones that are often approached by citizens, simply because they are in charge, and people expect they can help them better and quicker. 'Normal councillors' are therefore a less obvious 'target' for citizens that want something form their local government. Nonetheless, our sample was rather small to draw strong conclusions about this, as we only interviewed the mayor and one 'schepen' in Riemst, and two échevins (aldermen) in Visé.

An important aspect of our empirical research focused on the way councillors receive the input from citizens. We can conclude that three ways of interaction or communication are dominant in all four municipalities: "in the street", through email and in associations/clubs. "In the street" is clearly the most important way: it is the top answer in all municipalities, except Valkenburg (where it ends on the second place). "In the street" means literally in the street, outside, but also while shopping, etc. Councillors are recognized and approached by citizens all the time, we found. Some councillors even anticipate on this and spend time moving around in the streets in order to be easily approachable by citizens. This result is probably typical for relatively small municipalities. One can expect this to be

different for larger cities, where councillors are more anonymous and less approached because they're well known.

"In the street" often means in the councillor's own part of the municipality ('kern', village, neighbourhood). In Riemst and Valkenburg this has been stressed by most councillors: they are especially 'famous' in their own village or 'kern' and people living there approach them, regardless of their political party. An interesting observation is that it seems citizens in Riemst often vote for a councillor from their own village, regardless of their political preference. This might be something for further research.

The second most-used way of communication is email, in all municipalities. Email is obviously an important medium through which councillors receive input from citizens. This result should not be surprising in an age where technology is playing a dominant role. What is surprising, on the other hand, is that social media do not play an important role in the interaction between councillors and citizens in any of the municipalities. In fact, most councillors told us that social media are rather unimportant in this respect. The Übach-Palenberg research team checked how the citizens feel about the importance of the social media, and found several active Facebook groups of citizens expressing their concerns and wishes for their municipality. It is surprising that most councillors do not actively use these groups to get input for their council work.

A third important way of interacting with citizens is through the associations and clubs in the four municipalities. In Riemst, councillors are proud to have 365 associations, a number that seems almost impossible for a municipality of that size. An interesting difference between the municipalities concerns the question whether the councillors get input as a member of the association (for instance while playing football at the local football club, or being a board member of the club), or in their role as councillor. Especially in Riemst, it is common that associations invite council members for the events they organize (the so-called 'spaghetti evenings' and similar events are very common), and councillors see it as part of their work to visit these events. In the other municipalities this is not how it seems to work. In Übach-Palenberg and Valkenburg councillors are often approached when they are at their own club, choir or other association, as an active (board) member.

We asked the councillors about other ways of getting input from citizens. We expected they would mention receiving input in meetings organized by the municipality for their inhabitants, about specific policies or plans. But this does not happen very often, according to the councillors. Only in Übach-Palenberg the councillors stressed the importance of municipal meetings for getting input. In contrast to the three other municipalities, Übach-Palenberg has meetings of this kind organized several times a year.

Another observation was that Belgian councillors (mostly the mayor and aldermen) organize weekly consultation hours for citizens, which are an important source of input for councillors in Riemst and Visé. These consultation hours are also known as 'dienstbetoon': people can come to talk with a councillor about their personal problems, and the politician offers help in trying to solve the problem. Here we observe an essential difference in style of politics between the countries we did our research. In Germany and the Netherlands this phenomenon is almost non-existent and this style of doing politics is generally perceived as somewhat sketchy, in particular in the Netherlands (Ostaaijen, 2010; Wouters, 2005, p.59). In Belgium this kind of direct relationship between the local

politician and citizens is a crucial aspect of local politics, and is considered as a good way to fulfil your representative role by many politicians.

Looking at this phenomenon of input from citizens, an interesting question is who takes the initiative: the politician or the citizen. The answer is: almost always citizens. That is a rather surprising outcome, we expected councillors going out to the public to actively ask people for their opinions on issues, like municipal plans or projects, but that does not seem to happen a lot. Most of them don't ask their friends, colleagues and other members in the associations, they don't organize a poll, they don't ask for opinions on social media, etc. We don't know why they don't do this. Could it be that they already know what people think or want? We need to make one remark though: when we take a closer look, it is a bit more complicated than it looks at first sight. Councillors often make themselves 'available' for input, by going to events of local associations, by having weekly consultation hours or by leaving the house and make a tour around town. They might not ask people for their opinion, but they do more than passively await people's input, we can conclude from this.

When starting our research project we wondered whether councillors belonging to a coalition party would receive more input from citizens than councillors of an opposition party. The reason would of course be that coalition councillors could more easily help the citizens, because they are 'in charge'. Regarding the distinction between coalition and opposition councillors, we got somewhat different results from the respondents in the four municipalities. In Riemst it seems that it makes a big difference. Many councillors mentioned that citizens, who know the coalition could do more for them than the opposition, will mostly approach coalition councillors, and leave opposition councillors alone. Some of the councillors in Übach-Palenberg, Visé and Valkenburg agreed with this opinion, but other in these 3 municipalities say that it makes no real difference. Some councillors suggested that people will contact the opposition when they are not satisfied with the reaction of the coalition.

Additionally, we looked for any patterns in the kind of citizens that approach councillors. It turns out that citizen-councillor interaction is almost never party-related. So, councillors are only approached by fellow party members or people who say they voted for them. In Riemst and Valkenburg it is mostly the kern or village that determines the contact: people from a certain village or neighbourhood approach a councillor from that specific area more or quicker. We did not find many other patterns. The only other interesting observation was the councillor from the Greens in Übach-Palenberg, who receives relatively much input about green issues. This kind of a specific theme-related bond between certain councillors and citizens is not very common, according to our findings.

What kinds of topics are usually subjects of input-related political interaction? Our research shows that the input is always about specific issues, and never contains general policy demands (to adapt more environmentally friendly policies, or to integrate more gender equality targets in the local political agenda, for example). The interaction is most of the time about something that bothers the citizen personally. That doesn't mean it always is an individual matter: dangerous roads or cross roads are often mentioned as an example, and in all municipalities people mention demands of an artificial grass field for a football club. Nevertheless, In Belgium it seems more common for citizens to contact local politicians about individual things, like a question to remove a tree in front of their house because it is blocking their sunlight, or to get a building permit, etc.

In the end, you can wonder, what is it that councillors do with the input from citizens? We did not formulate an explicit question on this in our interview format, but it often came up in the interviews,

especially in Riemst and Valkenburg. At the start of the research project, we probably expected the councillors to use the input for preparing political debates in the council or to attack the mayor and aldermen during council meetings, but not many councillors mention this way of using the input. Instead, In Riemst the mayor, the aldermen and sometimes also the 'normal councillors' (even from the opposition) direct the input to the municipality personnel, and ask them to solve the matter, help the citizen or answer him about his request. In Valkenburg, the answers are more diverse: often citizens are stimulated to solve the problem themselves (in line with the dominant concept 'zelfsturing'), and sometimes people are referred to the website or the opening hours of the municipal office. Tis might be an interesting aspect to do some further research about.

Councillors explaining municipal output to citizens

In addition to receiving *input*, councillors also provide, as part of their representative role, explanations or justifications of the decisions of the municipal council to citizens. We call that the municipal *output*. Although Easton's theoretical framework and the distinction between input and output is very useful for understanding the political system, we noticed that for local councillors it is not always easy to make this distinction in the everyday reality of political life in their municipality. It is obvious that for many of them the concepts are interrelated in the work of a councillor.

Output-related communication happens less frequent than receiving input, is our distinct impression. But we did not measure the (relative) frequency; that would probably have been difficult, but if we could do it again, we would have tried this. We also realised that the concept of output and the concillor's role in explaining it was more difficult to explain to the councillors than input. We noticed, but can't really explain, that the answers they gave to the closed question about ranking the different ways of explaining output (ways of communication) were not always consistent with their answers when asked for examples. When asked for an example, councillors sometimes mentioned other means of communication than when asked to rank them. In Wallonia, we found that the word 'output' was not recognized by the French-speaking councillors, which resulted in more complicated interviews.

Nevertheless, when it comes to municipal output, we have seen that most of the councillors do explain or justify municipal output to citizens. Most of them agree it is usually the citizens that take the initiative and ask for an explanation or justification. In general the same means of communicating about it with citizens are used as in the case of input-related communication. In addition to the most mentioned ways 'In the street', 'email' and 'in associations/clubs', the councillors often mentioned their party magazine or the municipal magazine/local newspaper. We have to remark however, that in those kinds of communication it is not the councillors themselves communicating, but the municipality or the political party.

When starting our research project we assumed that councillors belonging to a coalition party would feel more obliged or stimulated to go out and explain council decisions to the public than councillors of an opposition party. After all, it is the coalition that rules. There are no clear patterns in the results we found. The observation that was made in several municipalities is that it is easier to comment on municipal decisions when you are in the opposition. When citizens complain, they can tell citizens that 'the coalition decides' and that they didn't agree either. But some councillors told us that they would do the same thing (distance themselves from the decisions), even when part of the coalition! Some councillors confirmed our assumption that coalition councillors feel more responsible for

explaining decisions, and that they have better access to information about decisions and policies. But other, mostly in Übach-Palenberg, objected to this, saying that most decisions are unanimous anyway, so what is the difference?

Concluding remarks

To finish this report we can conclude that we learned a lot about councillors and the way they interact with citizens. The explorative nature of our research project meant that we had not much knowledge on councillors receiving input from citizens and explaining municipal output to them. We went out to the local politicians in our four municipalities and tried to find out as much as possible, and painted a picture of the way councillors fulfill their representative role in four different regions of the Euregio. But we think there is much more to discover in the field, so we hope our report is not the last one on local politicians and their relationship with the citizens.

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