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Listening to citizens

A Study of the Interaction between Citizens and Councillors in Four Municipalities in the Meuse-Rhine Euregion

MaRBLE Research Papers

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1   The importance of local democracy

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 citizens-representatives interaction, where 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 contact and interaction with citizens in 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's Research Based Learning project (MaRBLe), which aims at teaching students how to conduct academic research, based on a project, such as the one at hand.

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For this project entitled 'Inside Local Democracy', students looked into the interaction between citizens and local councillors in four municipalities the three countries surrounding Maastricht: the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany.

The main goal of this research is to provide insight into the interaction between citizens and local politicians and the expectations of citizens about that interaction in the countries in the border region of the Meuse-Rhine Euregion. We also explicitly want to formulate some recommendations for politicians based on our research. Therefore, we chose the following research questions:

> **What do citizens in four municipalities in Flanders, Wallonia, Germany and the Netherlands experience and expect from their local politicians (including the mayor) in terms of interaction, and what are significant differences? What can politicians learn from this to strengthen the ties with citizens and stimulate citizen participation?**

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 research questions are divided into the following sub questions:

1. What do we know from the literature about the interaction between citizens and local politicians in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands?
2. What do we know from the literature about the expectations of citizens about the interaction with local politicians?
3. What contact do citizens and local politicians have in the selected municipalities, and what are these contacts about?
4. What expectations do citizens in the selected municipalities have about the interaction with local politicians?
5. What are the main differences and similarities between the actual interaction between citizens and local politicians, and the expectations of citizens about this interaction, 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 of '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 fulfill their representative

role. Following Denters and Klok (2013), the Dutch "Nationaal Raadsledenonderzoek" (Flos c.s. 2012) and the introductory meetings with councillors in the four municipalities, 'demands' have been operationalized as 'wishes, concerns, complaints, requests and ideas'. Furthermore, according to Easton, 'output' is defined as 'the council's decisions'. Corresponding to Denters and Klok's (2013) concept of 'output', this research puts more emphasis on the on the explanation and justification of 'output' to citizens (p. 65).

Of course, this work has some limitations For instance, the findings cannot be generalized to local politics in the three countries. Moreover, 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 (and compare with actual behaviour) in the research project. However, that proved to be too much 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

Chapter 2 will discuss some of the existing literature about the local political system and the interaction between local politicians and citizens. In chapter 3, background information about the government systems and, more specifically, the local government systems of the three countries is given. In chapter 4, the research design of this work is presented. From the fifth chapter onwards the collected data for Riemst, Visé, Übach-Palenberg and Valkenburg are presented in separate chapters. In the final chapter 9, an attempt is made to compare the results obtained for the four municipalities, draw conclusions and formulate an answer to the research question(s).

Chapter 2   Citizens and local politicians

This chapter explores the literature on the local political system and more specifically the relationship between representatives and citizens. It is based on David Easton's analysis of the political system. In order to assess the relationship between political representatives and citizens, Denters' study of the interaction of these groups in the Netherlands offers some useful insights, but, firstly, there will be an explanation of the political system, based on David Easton.

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 2.1, 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 2.1 Easton's input-output model of politics
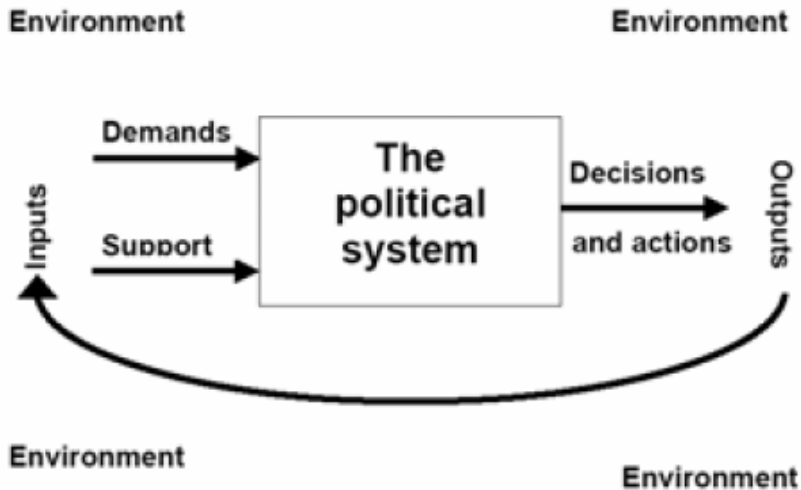
Source: Easton, D. (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley, p. 32.

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 the erosion of support (p. 200).

Political 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).

2.2   Representation at the local level

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, p. 1).

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). This then constitutes an example of feedback in order to enable the loop in the black box to function. 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).

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2.3 Citizens' expectations of politicians

Up until now, we don't know very much about the interaction between politicians and citizens at the local level, and neither do we know much about the views of citizens on what their local representatives should do. Citizens' expectations of politicians are a subject of the work of Denters (2013). He shows the normative expectations of citizens of representatives and the empirical perspective of their evaluation of the actual performance of the councillors.

As the actual meaning of 'representation' is nowhere near clear-cut, Denters presents the four most important models for the role of elected representatives, as based on the normative theory of democracy.

Descriptive representation is the model in which the representative body is supposed to represent at least certain aspects of the electorate (p.2). In this model the representation of the body in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, etc is seen as indicator of the extent to which the representative role is fulfilled (pp. 2-3). A recent example of a representative government body would be the Canadian cabinet under Justin Trudeau, which is based on the (almost) perfect representation of minorities, groups and equal power. The current movement for a more balanced gender representation in these bodies and other organizations is an example of this model as well.

The trustee model, which is based on Burke (1999), is the second model Denters presents. Here, the elected person does not represent partial interests of the people that elected him, but acts as a trustee, and is trusted to be in steady contact with the ground level and in which "sound judgement, impartiality and an eye to the common good" are crucial factors to fulfill this role and to satisfy the grassroots (p.3). He or she is supposed to act in the best interest of the municipality as a whole (p.4).

The party democracy model is a model in which the representative stands first and foremost for a political ideology that he identifies with. Party manifestos and party politics are of crucial importance, the parties themselves set lists with candidates. Here, voters rather choose a manifesto instead of a single representative. This way, parties can gain majorities and build broad coalitions which make output more efficient (p.3).

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The democratic watchdog model is different from the three other models, as, instead of assuming that "the representative is a mouthpiece for the grass roots" (p.4), the representative is supposed to use his power to enable direct democracy and citizen input. With this, it is more a control and report function (p.5). Nevertheless, also this representative is expected to be close to the citizens and to utilize this in order to get more input into the political black box.

Denters' empirical research showed that these models are not just a theoretical idea. When asked about the most important roles of a local councillor, the citizens in the survey saw similar roles or models (p.5). Which criteria do voters want their representatives to meet first and foremost? 'Trustee' is the most important role for citizens, followed by 'watchdog', 'party' and 'descriptive' (p.7).

2.4   Citizens' expectations of the interaction with politicians

In this research project, we focus on the expectations that citizens have of local politicians, and, especially, the interaction they have with local politicians. We created a simple framework, based on Easton's model of the political system. We have also added some more elements based on last year's MaRBLe project (Peters et al., 2015).

Citizens expect politicians to interact with them:

1. To ask for input:
   a. Individual input: demands or issues that affect a certain group of individuals, for example, sports clubs, housing, etc.; in the survey, examples, such as job loss and housing were mentioned.

   b. General input: demands or issues that affect the community, for example, construction sites, refugee centers, etc.; in the survey, examples, such as police opening hours and speeding issues were mentioned.

   c. Agenda related input: input related to planned decision-making by the council.

2. To explain output of the political system:
Politicians explaining decisions taken by the municipal council.

3. To ask for support:
This interaction is about election-related activities like distributing pamphlets, etc. This is a category which has been mentioned many times as quite annoying, as it seems politicians 'only address us when they need us'.

The distinction above can be related to Easton's model. 'Input' and 'output' are integral parts in the political system. They connect the citizens to the politicians and, thus, enables them to feel included, while the politicians can get feedback and reevaluate options. The impression in the survey was that the category of election-related support is an input many times given and the citizens see it overrepresented in relation to the other categories.

In Easton's model explaining the output is an important element. In last year's MaRBLe report, a study by Maastricht University (Peters et al. 2015), it proved not to be easy for councillors to grasp this concept of interaction with the purpose of explaining output. If this is also true for citizens, this would challenge Easton's model of the cycle of input and output related issues.

Chapter 3 Local government in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands

3.1 The political system of Belgium[1]

"Belgium was an artificial creation of the great powers, established as a state in 1830 to meet their interests and without any real cements for national unity" (Fitzmaurice, 1984, p. 418). Belgium was founded after the Revolution of 1830, when it was separated from the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Belgium is a constitutional monarchy and has a federal state construction (Belgium Const. art. I) wherein it is divided in communities and regions. The country consists of three communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community, and the German-speaking Community (Belgium Const. art. II). Then, for the regions, Belgium has the Flemish, Brussels, and the Walloon Region (Belgium Const. art. III). Furthermore, Belgium has four language areas, Dutch, French, bilingual (Dutch and French), and the German language area (Belgium Const. art. IV). The Belgian political structure is rather complicated with six parliaments and governments. There is, of course, the federal government and parliament, and on top of that the country has: the Flemish government and parliament, the Walloon government and parliament, the Brussels government and parliament, the French community government and parliament, and the German-speaking community government and parliament.

In Belgium, a considerable amount of powers has 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

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[1] This section is largely based on: Peters et al. 2015, pp. 15-18.

subnational level has significant powers to legislate in their specific domains of competency (p. 50).

Belgium is a country wherein its citizens experience two types of nation-building that often clash with each other. The overarching national identity is the Belgian one, however, the Flemish and Walloon identity are often competing with this overarching identity (Billiet et al., 2003, p. 243). In the first years of its existence, Belgium was heavily depending on the region of Wallonia where mining was the main activity (UNESCO, 2012). This was highly profitable during the industrial revolution making it the economic driver of the country. The vulnerability of the Belgian nation-state is shown with the call by the Flemish nationalistic extreme-right party 'Vlaams Belang' which has the separation of Flanders as one of their key points and was highly popular in the first decade of this millennium. In Wallonia, there is a movement, Rattachism, which aims at unifying Wallonia with France. 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). 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).

Finally, Belgium has 589 municipalities and, with a population of around 11.2 million, this means that the average municipality has 19.000 citizens. Secondly, the country has 10 provinces and 43 arrondissements. 262 municipalities 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 a five percent threshold to get into the elected body (Wayenberg et al., 2012, p. 76). In line with the idea of a federal state, the Belgian constitution grants 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

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decided on centralized platforms, such as regional and federal assemblies, and not in the town hall (p. 78).

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, with its so-called 'dualism', 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 Local Government Act 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).

3.1.1 Local government in Flanders

At municipal level in 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 fulfill his representative role as a director, rather as a kind of 'father' of the citizens (Plees, 2005, p. 60).

In Flanders, 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).

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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). 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).

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present data on the interaction between Belgian councillors and citizens. The tables are based on the so-called 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.

Table 3.1   How frequently 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 3.1 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.

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Table 3.2 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 3.2 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".

3.1.2 Local government in Wallonia

Local governance in Wallonia is centered around the college, consisting of the mayor and the aldermen. The central government may appoint mayors as they wish, however, they have refrained from that and now always accept the candidate proposed by the municipal council (Wayenberg, De Rynck, Styvers & Pilet, 2011). In Wallonia, it is convention that the candidate with the highest number of preferential votes cast during the elections on the list that received the most votes is proposed as mayor by the council. Effectively, mayors are, thus, directly elected (Plees, 2005). Due to their appointment by the central government and their nomination by the council, mayors have a dual mandate (Wayenberg, De Rynck, Styvers & Pilet, 2011). At the local level, the mayor's role is predominantly

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defined by the symbolic nature of the office as figurehead and trustee of the municipality's citizens. This role fits with the overall personalisation of local politics in Wallonia (IBID).

The aldermen are each responsible for one or multiple policy domains and have expertise on the domains they work in. They are elected by the council and, thus, they are usually members of the parties that have formed the governing coalition. Aldermen are often experienced politicians who have served as councillors for a considerable period (IBID). Together with the mayor, they form the executive college of the municipality. In Wallonia, the college members remain members of the legislative during their tenure, so, besides their job as either mayor or alderman, they are still councillors in the governing coalition.

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. They are elected either as independent members, or, which is more usual, as members of a party who were on the party list during the local elections. In Wallonia, it is important for people with local political aspirations to be active in civil society and to have a strong ideological profile. Furthermore, the members of the council must represent all former municipalities, as the current municipalities were created as a result of mergers of smaller municipalities (Plees, 2005), which each retain some form of representation in the new municipality. The council may propose, amend, approve or reject legislation and may cast a vote of no confidence in the college.

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).

Local politics in Wallonia may involve the use of consultative local referenda, even though this option is rarely used (Wayenberg, De Rynck, Styvers & Pilet, 2011). This is partly due to their socialist history, as citizens are allowed to have their voices heard directly (IBID). That is why a public initiative (like a petition) is also among the possibilities of the citizenry to involve themselves in local affairs. Citizens tend to have a high degree of trust in local politics, but less in the political parties (IBID).

Nowadays, party membership is dropping across Belgium, so parties seem to be losing their status in society, even though municipalities are often defined by affiliation with one specific party or ideology (IBID). Therefore, there are only very few local parties, as local politics is often still dominated by local branches of the main political parties that operate on the federal and regional levels (IBID).

3.2   Local government in Germany

The German democratic system is divided into three tires, which are the federal level, named *Bund*, the state level, named *Länder*, and the local level. The local level is further subdivided into municipalities, counties and county free municipalities (Gabriel and Eisenmann, p.120). Germany consists of 16 Länder, with three city states: Bremen, Berlin, and Hamburg. This means that the cities are also a state, which has important effects on the regimes and political processes thereof. Due to the focus on the local level in North Rhine Westphalia, we will not go in depth about this aspect. Furthermore, the 16 Länder are different in size, structure and economic development (Gabriel and Eisenmann, p.120). From North Rhine Westphalia with the biggest population to Bavaria with the biggest landmass to the citystates there is no homogeneity between the 16 Länder. Moreover, there is a distinction between the old and the new Länder. This distinction is due to the German reunification in1990, where the Länder from the former DDR were incorporated as the new Länder and Germany was reunified. Due to slow and weak economic development in the five former DDR Länder, there has been an economic aid program which is supposed to equalize economic development at least partly between the eleven old and the five new Länder.

The three levels local, state and federal are interconnected and are set in a way to share responsibility and implementation. This is called reason of subsidiarity. Therefore, there are tasks such as trash disposal and care for elderly, which are administered at the local level, while the Länder are responsible for the educational system, for instance, and the federal level is mainly responsible for trade, defense, etc. This parting of responsibility enables sharing of workload and a clear distinction of fields of responsibility and freedom of action. The 'general competence clause' enables local self-governance and primary power to the local community in matters that affect it on the local level (Wollmann, 2004, p.650). The local level, which is divided into counties, county free municipalities and municipalities, has been in the focus of this study. Therefore we will explain this distinction further.

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The different types of local governance constitute different types of regions with different settlement structures. Nevertheless, they are all headed by a council and a mayor, even though this may involve different administrative tasks. While municipalities mostly include smaller settlements in the close range, counties are regions with many smaller municipalities of equal size, and county free municipalities are solely focused on the area of the cities, without incorporating other smaller municipalities. The graph below shows how the local level is structured. The three positions are mayor, council and administration. The mayor is the head of the administration and the council. Both council and mayor are elected by the public. This shows that in Germany the public at the local level decides not only about the council but also about the mayor. This, in turn, has an effect on the administration, as the mayor is head of the administration. Therefore, in Germany, the public has a say not only on the council and the main deciding body, but also on the lead of the administrative and thus on the execution of the new legislative proposals decided by the council (Gabriel and Eisenmann, p.126). Furthermore, as Wollmann (2004) describes, the mayor has major power in Germany and is directly accountable to the public. According to Wollmann, Germany has one of the stronger mayor and local politics sectors in Europe as compared to three other European countries, Sweden, England and France. (2004, p.653).

At the federal level, there is a coalition of the Union (CDU, CSU) and the SPD. It is headed by Angela Merkel. In North Rhine Westphalia, there is a coalition of the SPD and the Green Party, headed by Hannelore Kraft. In Übach-Palenberg there is a coalition between the CDU, FDP and USPD, headed by Wolfgang Jungnitsch as mayor (CDU).

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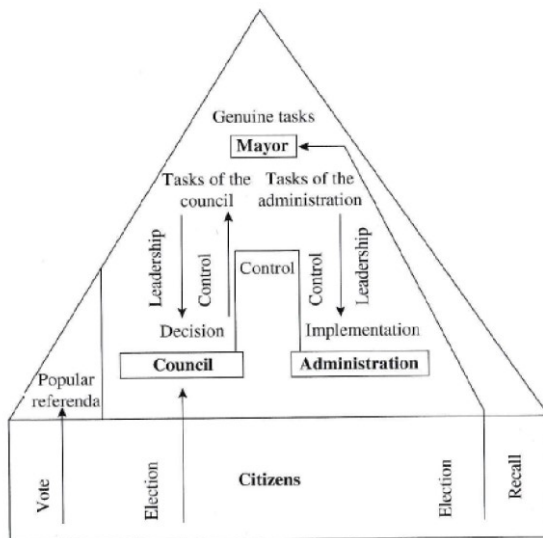Figure 3.3 The German mayoral system of local government

Figure 8.1   *The German plebiscitary mayoral system of local government*

Source: Gabriel and Eisenmann, p.126.

3.3   Local government in the Netherlands

This section elaborates on the set-up of governance in the Netherlands, by introducing the institutional framework before zooming in on local government and how it is organised.

In 1848, the King commissioned liberal statesman Johan Rudolph Thorbecke with writing the country's new constitution. His constitution, the 1850 Provinces Act, and the 1851 Local Government Act form the basis for today's governance in The Netherlands. Thorbecke "tried to create an association of mutually restricting bodies designed to work freely together" (Hendriks & Schaap, 2011, p. 97). The institutional set-up following from this constitution consists of three tiers of government, namely: national, provincial and local.

On the national level, the parliament is formed according to a bicameral system with the *Tweede Kamer*, the lower house, and the *Eerste Kamer*, the upper house. The former is directly elected every four years and

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possesses the right to initiate and amend legislation, whereas the latter is indirectly elected through the 12 provinces. However, the *Eerste Kamer* should not be regarded as a form of provincial representation on the national level. Within the two chambers, many political parties are represented due to the many socio-political and religious differences and the absence of electoral thresholds. The legislature is completed by government which is headed by a Prime Minister, currently Mark Rutte (Hendriks & Schaap, 2011, p. 99).

The provincial level does not play a key role in Dutch politics. Although historically being the building blocks of the Dutch state, provinces lost many of their administrative authorities during the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. However, they still watch over the local level and fulfill an intermediary role between the national and local levels (Hendriks & Schaap, 2011, pp. 102-103).

The third level of governance is the local level. The Netherlands currently consists of 390 municipalities, which are responsible for issues such as city (spatial) planning, primary and secondary education, and social care, as well as the execution of social security (Hendriks & Schaap, 2011, p. 102). On the local level, a municipal council is elected every four years as its highest governing organ. Once a council is formed, often composed in the form of a coalition, it elects the aldermen, or 'wethouders'. These aldermen are not required to have been elected as a councillor and can also come from outside the council. Together with the mayor, who is centrally appointed by national government, they form the municipality's executive board, the College van Burgemeester en Wethouders (Hendriks & Schaap, 2011, pp. 104-105).

The Netherlands is a country in which co-governance is the norm. Denters and Klok (2005, p. 66) argue that municipalities are free to use all their powers as long as their actions do not conflict with those of higher levels of government. Consequently, there is no ultra vires rule, and thus no predefined competences. This is in line with the country's general stream of politics, which is structured around a culture of consensus. Duyvendak (1998) and Hendriks and Toonen (2001) describe the country's governance style with the "three C's: consultation, consensus, and compromise".

Chapter 4 Research design and Methodology

This chapter 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 data analysis.

4.1   Selection of Municipalities

The surveys were conducted in four municipalities in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion. Due to the fact that the research was conducted by students from Maastricht University, four municipalities were chosen that were close to Maastricht, approximately equal in terms of population size and located in the three different countries that the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion covers. Consequently, Riemst, Valkenburg aan de Geul, Visé and Übach-Palenberg were the municipalities in which the surveys were conducted. These are the same municipalities that were selected for last year's Marble project on the role of local politicians. Therefore, by looking at citizens' expectations of local governance in these four municipalities our report complements last year' findings.

Visé and Riemst are both Belgian municipalities, but the justification for the inclusion of two Belgian municipalities stems from the linguistic, socioeconomic and political division between Wallonia and Flanders. Both Wallonia and Flanders enjoy great autonomy in the Belgian federal system. Furthermore, Flanders is economically stronger than Wallonia, with the port of Antwerp as a global main port and a service-oriented economy, whereas Wallonia is predominantly industrial. In addition, the official language of Flanders is Dutch, whereas Wallonia is largely French-speaking, although it has a German-speaking minority within its borders. Therefore, investigating two Belgian municipalities, a Flemish and a Walloon one, would provide us with detailed information on the differences within the Belgian state.

The group of eight students was subdivided into four teams, based on language proficiency. In the end, every team but one consisted of at least

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one native speaker; only the team responsible for Visé had no native French-speaker among its members. The supervisor was involved in all four of the teams, but as a result of the fact that the team for Riemst consisted of one person only, she was most actively involved in that team.

4.2   Data collection

4.2.1 Selection of respondents

In the months of April and May 2016, each team visited its municipality two or three times. The first time we made a "field-testing" trip to familiarize ourselves with the municipalities and with the questions. The teams visited the municipalities one or two more times to conduct the survey.

In order to include a representative sample of the local population, the students went to different places in the municipality at different times. For instance, the teams visited the municipalities on a weekday and during a weekend or went to different villages within a municipality.

The interviewees consisted of the local population, and only those who held the right to vote were included in the surveys. Those who did not have the right to vote, mainly people who were underage, were less likely to feel any connection to local politics and were, thus, less likely to have ever contacted a politician. If they had been included, the surveys would probably have been biased. Therefore, they were left out. Those who did not live in one of the four municipalities were excluded as well, because they do not have a connection with the municipality that is as intense as a local's.

4.2.2 Survey through street interviews

This section elaborates on the questionnaire used in the field interviews. The topics and questions are introduced and the choices that were made in developing the questionnaire are explained.

Our study is based on a survey composed of ten standardized questions, which we asked by conducting street interviews in the official language spoken in each municipality. The main reason why we decided to adopt this

method is because we wanted to hear the opinion of as many citizens as possible. If we were to conduct in-depth interviews, the scope of our study would have been very limited and biased. Contrary to the study conducted last year, which consisted of in-depth interviews with local politicians, our aim is to understand the citizens' point of view. Consequently, we needed a large number of interviewees and, therefore, we opted for a standardized and short questionnaire. The questions were developed and fine-tuned during the various tutorial meetings. The English version of the questionnaire is to be found in the report's annex.

The questionnaire started with two introductory questions, meant to select only inhabitants of the municipality (and not tourists or other visitors) and actual voters. In Riemst, Visé and Valkenburg aan de Geul, this implied that people younger than 18 could not be interviewed, while respondents in Übach-Palenberg had to be had least 16 years old, due to the different age thresholds for eligibility to vote in local elections.

After these introductory questions, the actual questionnaire started. The first half of the questionnaire discussed the actual interaction between citizens and local politicians.

The first question was divided in an A, B and C question. The A question dealt with the actual contact with mayors and councillors of the citizen's municipality. Respondents had to answer whether they ever contacted with a mayor or a councillor. While interviewing, the country teams noticed interviewees often mixed up local politicians and the administrative part of their municipalities. Moreover, respondents confused councillors and aldermen. The B question zoomed in on the contact if it had occurred. The question asked what problems the contact dealt with, the four answer categories being individual problems, general problems, upcoming decisions, or taken decisions. The answer categories were not given to the respondent, in order to prevent biases. The responses were thus categorised by the interviewers. We noticed that the boundary between individual and general problems was often blurry. The C question discussed the satisfaction about the contact, citizens having to grade their satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being not satisfied at all, and 5 being very satisfied. Many respondents stated the contact itself was satisfactory, although the solutions to the problems were not, and in some cases no solutions were found.

The second question was divided in an A and B question. Question 2A mirrored question 1A, now enquiring whether citizens have ever been contacted by a mayor or councillor of the respective municipality. The 2B question dealt with the contents of the contact, the answer categories being: input-related, output-related, election-related or other. Again,

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respondents were not given the answer categories. The responses were thus categorised by the interviewers.

The second part of the questionnaire was about the expectations that citizens have about interacting with local politicians.

The third question was divided in an A and B question. Question A asked whether respondents expected local politicians to actively approach them. If the respondent answered yes, Question B asked for which issues this should be the case. The respective answer categories were similar to the ones provided in Question 2: input-related, output-related, election-related and other.

Question 4 asked in what situations respondents would actively contact a local politician. Again, respondents often seem to confuse local politicians with administrative employees. For each category - individual problem, general problem, upcoming decisions, and taken decisions - respondents had to indicate 'yes' or 'no'.

The fifth question zoomed in further on the answers given in questions one to four. If respondents had answered 'yes' in one of the former questions, question A asked which local politician they would contact. The B question then asked why the respondents opted for this specific person. The given answer categories were: because of his/her specific position, because of his/her political party, because he/she lives in our neighbourhood, because he/she is a family member or friend, and because he/she belongs to the opposition. The respondents were not aware of the answer categories. The responses were thus categorised by the interviewers.

Question 6 concerned a more practical problem, as it asked for the preferred means of communication for contacting a local politician.
Question 7 mirrored question 6, as it asks about the preferred method of communication when being contacted by a local politician. The answer categories for both questions were: in person/office hours, telephone, email, social media, and other. The respondents were not shown any of these categories, and thus the answers were grouped by the interviewers. Both these questions were chosen in order to be able to give clear recommendations to the municipalities on how to improve the contact with their citizens.

Questions 8 and 9 served as control questions to examine the respondents' political interest. Question 8 asked whether the respondent was aware of their mayor's name, while question nine asked whether they also knew the name of a councillor. The reason why these questions where placed at the end of the questionnaire is to avoid making the interviewees feel

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uncomfortable when they are asked about their political knowledge and involvement. We believe that placing the questions at the end would have also helped avoid that their answers would be biased by this feeling.

Finally, Question 10 served a basic purpose, as it collected some key statistical data of the respondents: gender, age, and years lived in the municipality. These answers helped analyzing the data collected according to certain groups and profiles, which improved the quality of recommendations this report provides local politicians with.

Chapter 5 Riemst: empirical findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the research in the municipality of Riemst.

Riemst is geographically located in the south-east of the province of Limburg, which falls in the Flemish region and Dutch language area. Riemst is only a couple of kilometers away from the region and language border with Wallonia, also the Dutch border is just a couple of kilometers away. The municipality has just over 16.000 citizens (Livios NV, 2008) making it population wise slightly under the national average.

The municipality of Riemst consists of eleven smaller boroughs. The municipality has 25 local councillors, including the mayor and 6 aldermen. There is no such initiative as village councils 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 CD&V is dominating the council occupying 14 of the 25 available seats. The second party is the NV-A with 7 seats, followed by the Open-VLD with three seats, leaving 1 seat to Spa-Groen. Mark Vos is the mayor. He is a member of the CD&V party, and has a long history in the local politics of Riemst. He was a councillor from 1995 until 2000, and he became an alderman from 2001 until 2006. In 2007, he got elected to become the mayor of Riemst with 1983 votes. He gained support over the years as he got re-elected in 2012 with 3593 votes, which allows him to keep his position for another term (Mark Vos, n.d.).

Figure 5.1 Distribution of seats in the council of Riemst
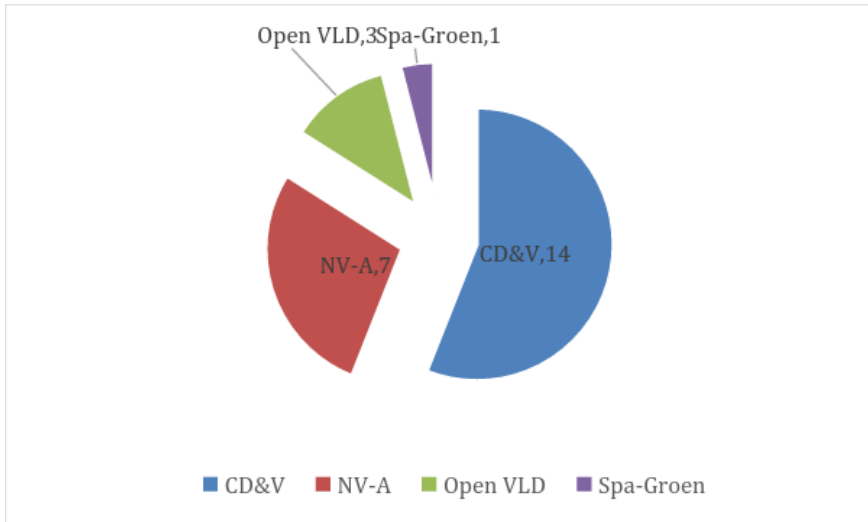
The chapter starts with presenting a description of the participants that were interviewed. In the next section(s) the results are presented. Section 5.3 contains the results on the actual interaction between citizens and local politicians in Riemst, as reported by the respondents. The next section (5.4) covers the expectations we found amongst the citizens of Riemst about their interaction with local politicians. At the end of the chapter, some conclusions will be drawn.

5.2   Description of the sample

The street interviews were conducted on Saturday 16 and 23 April 2016, at two different locations: at the local football club Jeugdvoetbal Groot Riemst (JVGR), which is located outside the village, and at the parking lot of the local supermarket Aldi in the centre of the village of Riemst. At JVGR, interviews were conducted round the football fields, and in the club cafeteria where the parents of the kids go to during rest time and after the match. The age we expected the interviewees to be was between 25 and 65 years old, and an equal share in gender diversity. In short, the football

location was chosen as a fairly justifiable representation of the Riemst citizens was expected to be found here. The Aldi was chosen as it was also expected that a representation of the population would be found here as on a Saturday most people enjoy their weekend, thus, have time to do groceries.

In total 51 respondents were interviewed during these two occasions. All 51 respondents were citizens of the municipality of Riemst, and were obliged to vote for local elections due to Belgian law that compels its citizens allegeable for voting to do so. The voting age for Belgian local elections is 18. For our research this entails that the minimum age of the respondents is 18. Of these 51 respondents, 25 were male and 26 were female. The average was almost 50 years, 49.85. Following the age groups of this study, this resulted in 4 people in the 18 to 34 age category, 20 people in the 35 to 44 age category, 12 people in the 45 to 54 category, 6 people in the 55 to 64 age category, and 9 people in the >65 age category. We also asked the respondents how long they lived in the municipality of Riemst. The answered ranged from 1 week to 69 years, and the average was just under 39 years.

Figure 5.2 Gender distribution of respondents Riemst

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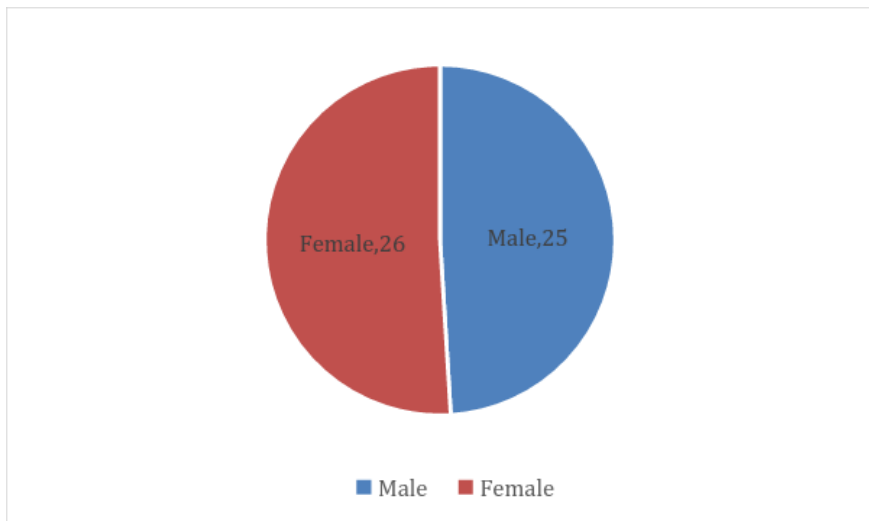
5.3 Actual interaction between citizens and local politicians

5.3.1 Citizens contacting politicians

Our research focuses, first of all, on the initiative that citizens take to contact local politicians of their municipality, whether they are councillors, aldermen or the mayor. Of all 51 respondents, almost half of them have at least once contacted a local politician in their municipality.

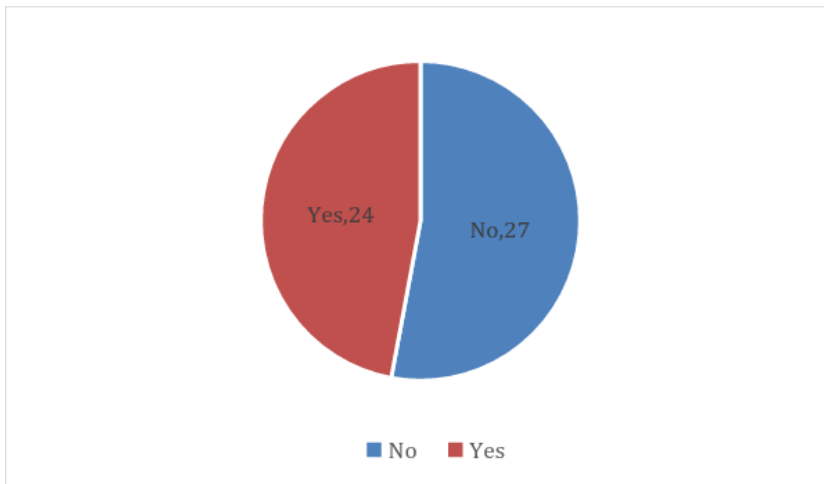*Figure 5.3 Citizens contacting a local politician*

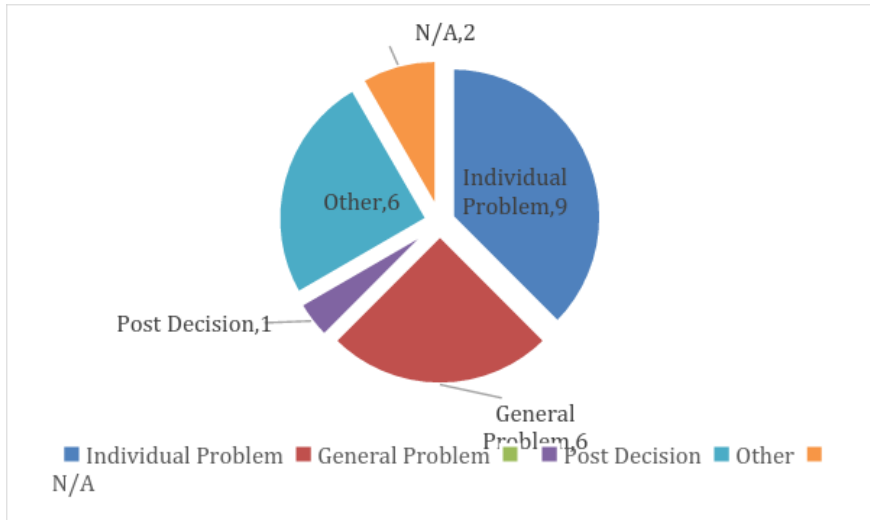*Figure 5.4 Reasons for contacting a local politician*

Figure 5.5 Examples of reasons for contacting a local politician

Category	Reasons
Individual	- for administrative work within the municipality - for a problem with youth causing noise and feelings of unsafety near the house
General	- the sidewalk in the street needed to be repaired - parking problems

Our next question to these 24 citizens focused on the reason for the initiative they took, as shown by the figures 5.4 and 5.5. Most people (9) contacted the politician to get attention for a specific individual matter or problem. Examples mentioned were contacts to report a violation of building regulations by neighbors, to get information about the schools and sports clubs in Riemst, to ask for the reparation of the sidewalk in front of people's home and to ask about the costs of child care in Riemst. A smaller

number of people (6) contacted a politician for a problem or matter of a more general nature. Several respondents mentioned traffic, parking and road issues in the municipality. This result is in line with the findings of last year's MaRBLe project, in which councillors reported that citizens contact them mostly about individual or personal problems. Topics mentioned by councillors in Riemst were: broken street lights, holes and other unsafe situations in the street and personal finances (Peters et al. 2015: 24). We have to note that the line between individual and general problems often is blurred. For instance, when a citizen contacts a local politician for a street light one can argue that this is a personal problem, but it can also be argued to be a general problem as other people in the street would also benefit from a repaired street light. In our research in Riemst, only one respondent contacted a politician to give input related to an upcoming decision of the local council, and none of the respondents contacted politicians to give their opinion on decisions already made by the council. 6 of the 51 respondents took the initiative to contact a politician for other reasons than the ones mentioned so far. Several of these people mentioned that they wanted to meet or get to know the local councillor, which in Riemst happens often at informal gatherings at one of the many clubs or associations.

Citizens that had contacted a local politician were asked about their satisfaction with that. From the citizens' point of view, it becomes clear that not all contacts are satisfying. The average satisfaction is a little bit more than 3 on a scale between 1-5. More importantly, the standard deviation is 1.435 which shows that citizens are either (very) pleased or not pleased at all with the contact.

Figure 5.6 Satisfaction with the contact with a local politician

Answer*	Frequency
1	5
2	2
3	4
4	8
5	4

Average	3.174
Standard Deviation	1.435

* 1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied

It is important to note that the satisfaction results might be strongly related with the extent that people got what they wanted, and not so much with the quality of the contact itself. During the street interviews, we realized that people have difficulty distinguishing between satisfaction with the result versus satisfaction with the contact itself. Furthermore, it became clear to us that, although many people were really satisfied with the contact, they felt that a perfect score can never be given. The same could be said for dissatisfaction, but we did not encounter this in the interviews. This feeling can explain why the score of '1' is the most popular at the bottom of the scale, while '4' is the most popular at the top of the scale. Moreover, the lowest score was often given just to express their dissatisfaction with the contact, or its result regardless if it really resembled the worst score possible on the scale.

5.3.2 Politicians contacting citizens

Another element of our questionnaire focused on initiatives taken by local politicians to contact citizens. We asked citizens if they were ever contacted by a local politician of Riemst. 19 out of 51 respondents mentioned that they were approached at least once, and 32 said they were not. Of these 19 people, 8 people were approached by the mayor of Riemst, 7 by a local councillor, 2 by an alderman, and 2 people did not specify with who they had been in contact with.
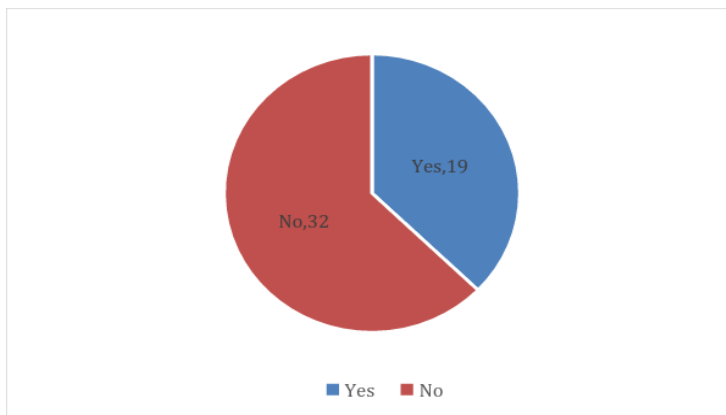
Figure 5.7 Citizens contacted by local politicians

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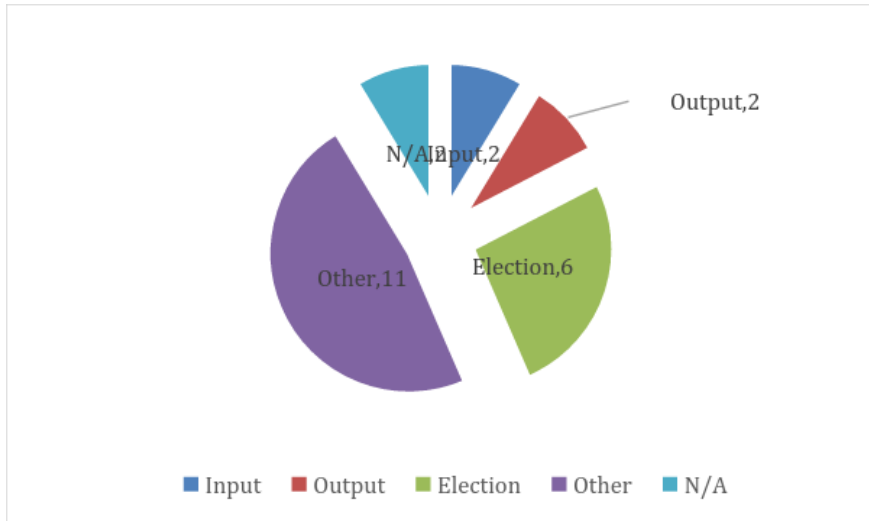*Figure 5.8 Reasons for being contacted by a local politician*

Figure 5.9 Examples of reasons for being contacted by a local politician

Category	Reasons
Input	A problem with youth causing noise and feelings of unsafety near the house
Output	explaining decisions like the artificial football fields
Election related	Distribution of party manifests
Other	The garden wall had to be repaired on request of the municipality

We have to note though that this number of 19 positive answers should probably be higher than that. We have the strong impression that many people did not realize that we wanted them to report election-related contacts too. A few times we did a check on a respondent who answered negatively. We asked whether they had had election-related contacts, i.e. politicians approaching citizens to explain their program and/or ask for

people's votes. These respondents then remembered these contacts, and answered something like 'O yes, of course, during election time, I was indeed approached by politicians…', from which it became clear that they had not realized that they should have answered positively on the question.

Of the 19 people who were actively approached by a local politician of Riemst, 6 reported that the contact was election-related, i.e. politicians approaching citizens to explain their program and/or ask for people's votes. Two people were asked for input by a local politician, two people were approached by a politician who wanted to explain a decision taken by the council, and two people did not want to answer. Interesting is that 11 people told us they were approached for other reasons. These reasons vary from informal meetings at local clubs to work related contacts, and one person was a family member of the mayor.

The results of our research can be compared with last year's MaRBLe research. 19 out 51 respondents being approached by a local politician is rather high compared to last year's findings. The councillors in Riemst indicated that they do not often contact citizens to ask for their input. They don't feel a real need, mostly because in their experience citizens do take the initiative when they want to (Peters et al. 2015: 27).

5.4 Citizens' expectations concerning interaction with local politicians

In the section above, we reported on the actual interaction between citizens and politicians in Riemst. For our research project, we were also interested in the normative expectations that people have about interacting with local politicians. What is it that people in Riemst expect from the representatives that were elected to the municipal council?

5.4.1 Expectations concerning the content of the interaction

In Figure 5.10 we see that 36 out of 51 respondents expect local politicians to actively seek contact with them, which is more than two thirds of the sample.

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Figure 5.10 Expectations of citizens about local politicians contacting them
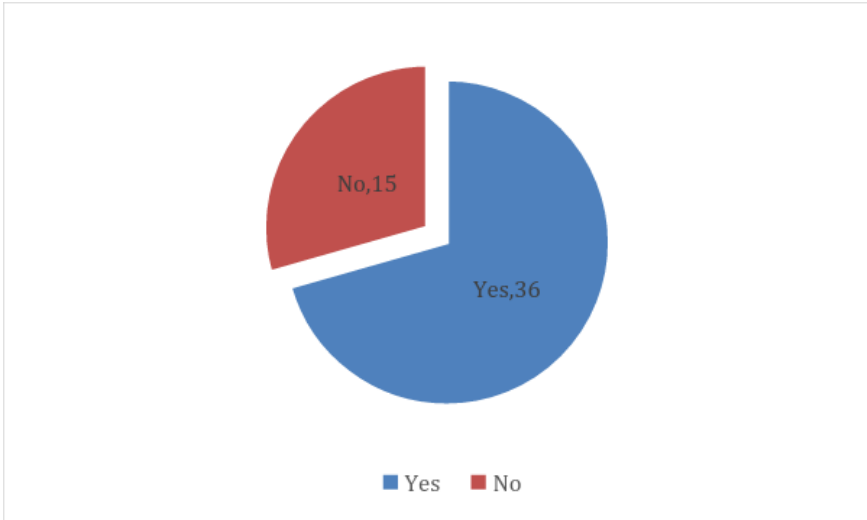
In Figure 5.11, the reasons why citizens should be contacted are given. Of the 36 people being open to be approached by a local politician, a large majority of 27 citizens wants politicians to seek contact to ask citizens for their opinion or input before council decisions are taken. Other reasons are mentioned far less: 8 people want politicians to take the initiative to explain council decisions to the citizens of Riemst, and only 5 people expect politicians to explain their party program and promises in the period before elections. 7 people gave other reasons why they expect politicians to approach citizens. Several said that politicians should contact citizens so they know 'what is going on' in the municipality. We also asked people for what kind of matters they would consider contacting a politician. The results of this question are presented in Figure 5.12.

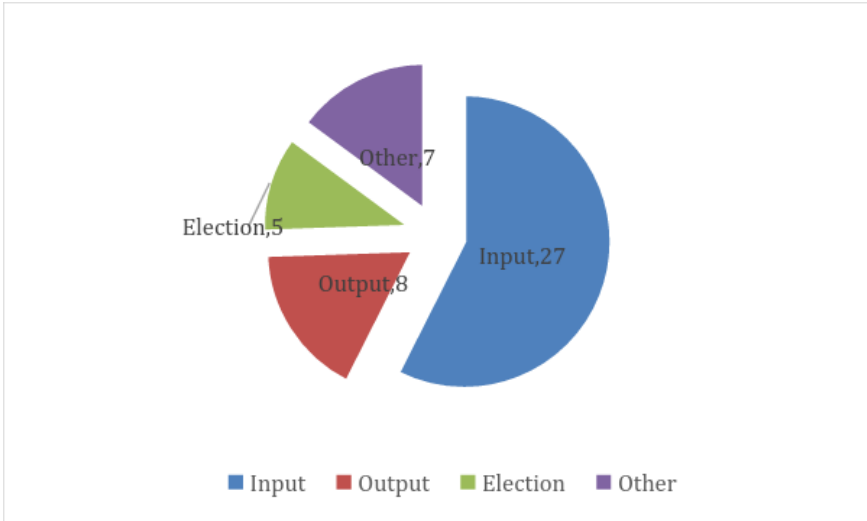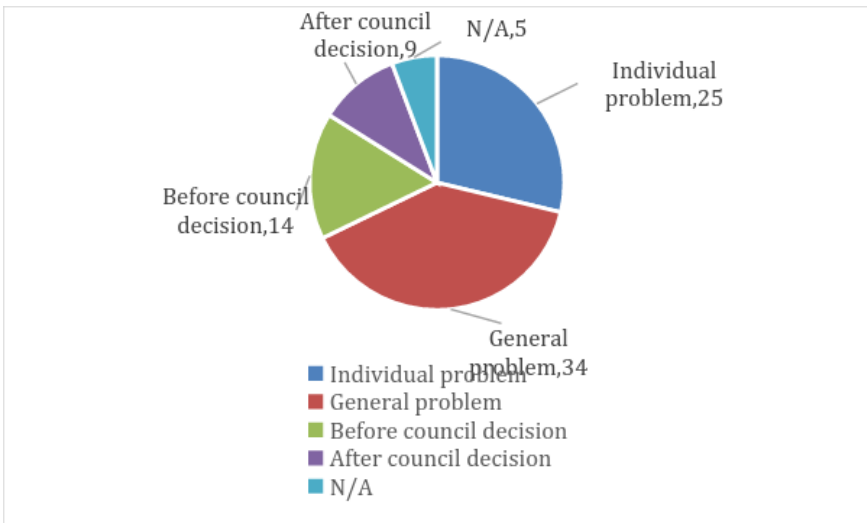*Figure 5.11 Reasons for being approached by a local politician*

Figure 5.12 Reasons for possibly contacting a local politician

Almost half of the respondents in Riemst (25) told us they would consider contacting a local politician for an individual problem[2] they experience. 34 people, which is almost two thirds of the respondents, would consider seeking contact with a politician to discuss a problem of a more general nature in the municipality.[3] Considerably less people, 14 to be precise, told us they would contact a politician if they knew an important decision was to be taken by the local council.[4] Finally, only 9 people would get I touch with a politician to let him/her know what their opinion is about a decision that is already been taken by the municipal council. The reason for this low number might be explained by the comments of several respondents, who said: 'Why would I do that, if the politicians have already decided?' Only 5 of the respondents would not consider to get in touch with a politician for any of these reasons.

*Figure 5.13 Citizens knowing the name of the mayor*

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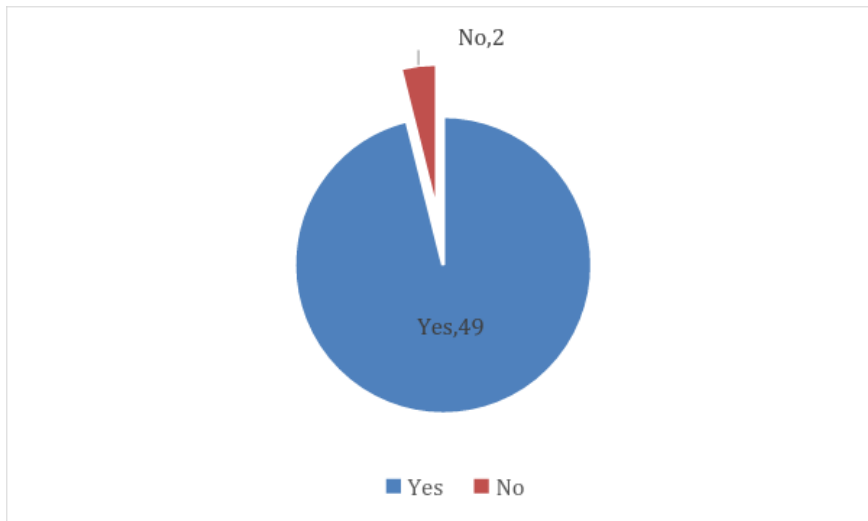
[2] Examples of an individual problem we gave were: to ask for a job or a house for yourself or a family member.

[3] Examples of problems of a more general nature we gave were: speeding or traffic problems in the municipality.

[4] Examples of such decisions we gave were: a merger with another municipality, or a new refugee center in town.

We also asked the citizens which politician they would approach if they wanted to contact a local politician. A majority of 28 of the 46 people that would consider contacting a politician would go to the mayor of Riemst, Mark Vos. They often were very clear about the fact that the mayor is for them the most obvious politician to approach. Comments that were often heard said: 'The mayor, I guess', 'The mayor of course', or 'Definitely the mayor'. Furthermore, one respondent said that although the mayor is representing a political party that not has his preference, he would always go to the mayor. This fits our impression that contact between citizens and local politicians can be defined as informal wherein citizens are comfortable with contacting the mayor also outside the formal setting of the official contact hours in the town hall. Furthermore, the mayor is well-known for visiting events and gatherings of local clubs which strengthens our impression of the informal relationship that exists between the mayor and the citizens of Riemst. The importance of the association events was also mentioned in last year's report (Peters et al. 2015: 27). Mark Vos has a long track record in the local political arena of Riemst, and almost all respondents, 49 out of 51, could name him as their mayor. This was even the case for people who just moved to Riemst. It can be seen as normal that the mayor, as the head of the municipality, is the most well-known local politician among the citizens.

Figure 5.14   Citizens knowing the name of a local politician (the mayor excluded)
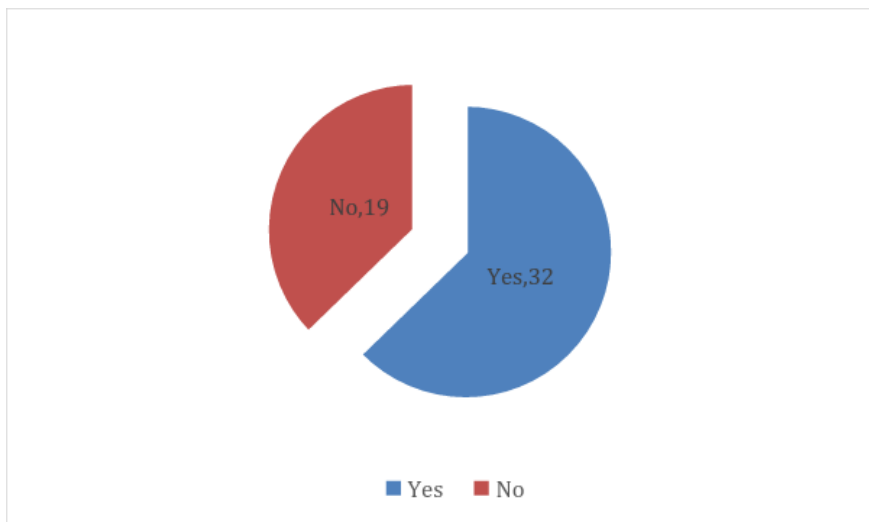
However, the big difference between people knowing the name of the mayor and knowing the name of other local politicians is remarkable. This difference is likely to be explained by his long presence in local politics of Riemst wherein he evolved into the role fitting the trustee model (Denters, 2013). In the trustee model the representative does not act solely to please his backers, but tries to be a non-partisan actor making decisions in the interest of all citizens (Ibid). We believe that the trustee model is applicable for Riemst mainly for three reasons. Firstly, almost everyone knows the name of the mayor and in many occasions he is the first for people to contact. Secondly, the relationship of citizens with the mayor seems to be very informal with the mayor attending many events in the municipality. Thirdly, we spoke to many citizens that were very positive about the mayor and the contact they had with him despite not being supporters of his political party.

13 people in the sample (partly overlapping with the 28 that would go to the mayor) would go and see a councillor or alderman, often described as 'the person who is in charge of the matter' ('de bevoegde persoon'). 17 people of the 46 would not know which politician they would approach. One person would go to a specific councillor regardless the matter as he had a good relationship with the person. Another interviewee told us that he would go to a specific alderman as he lives in the same street. One person would go to the mayor as they were class mates in high school.

5.4.2 Expectations concerning the means of communication

We not only asked the respondents about the reasons for contacting politicians, which politicians they would contact and whether they would want to get contacted by them, but we also wanted to find out what means of communication they prefer.

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Figure 5.15 Preferred means of contacting a local politician
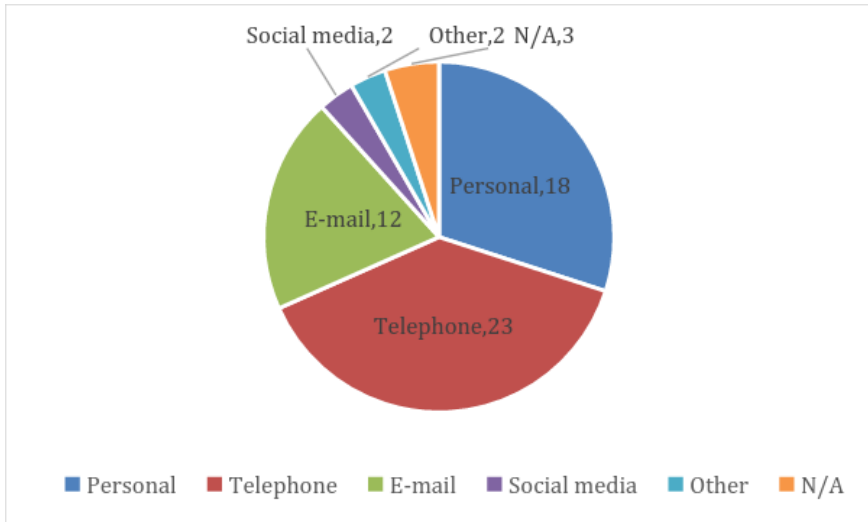
In Figure 5.15, we present our findings concerning the means of communication people in Riemst would use to contact a local politician. To our surprise, people prefer phone contact over other ways. It maybe is proof of the rather informal contacts between politicians and citizens in Riemst: citizens tend to just pick up the phone and ask their local politician whatever it is they want from him or her. Second comes the personal contact. People would either go to the municipal hall or try to talk to the mayor or the other local politician they want to speak, at a social event in the municipality, at a sports club or association. It is interesting to see that only two people would contact the municipality through social media.

Figure 5.16 Preferred means of contacting a local politician sorted by age category
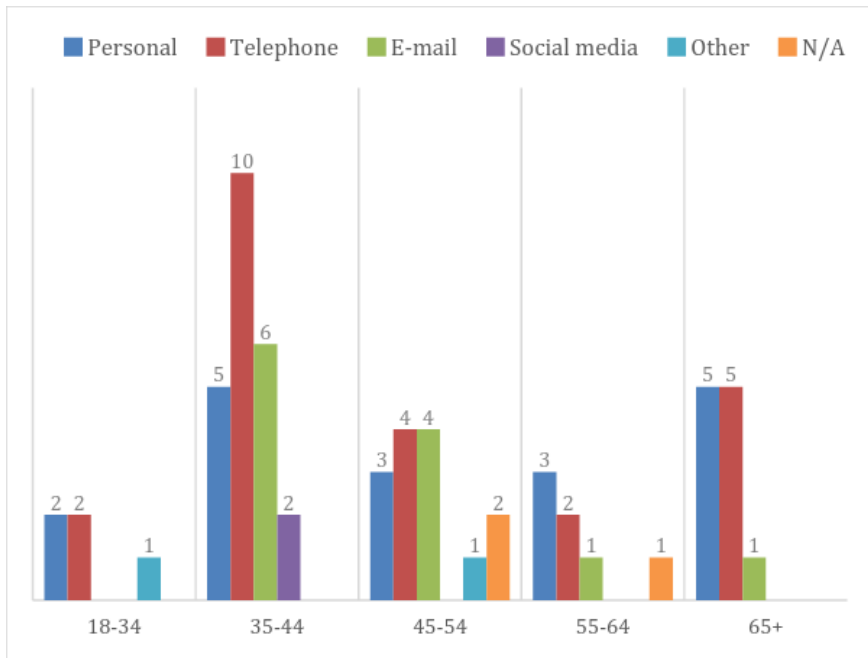
It was expected that those contacting a local politician through social media would belong to the youngest generation. However, after sorting the results into the age categories it became clear that both of them belong to the age category of 34-44. Furthermore, when examining the results based on age, it becomes obvious that all answers of contact given by the youngest generation does not match our expectations. For instance, e-mail is not once preferred, while personal and telephone contact are mentioned most often. Surprisingly, the pattern of the 18-34 group is almost identical with the 65+ age group. However, in this age category, e-mail is mentioned once, which is also the category wherein we would expect contacting via e-mail the least. Therefore, it is highly likely that we spoke to people that do not give a representative image of the youngest age category. This is most likely when one takes into account that we only had 4 interviewees within this age category. Another explanation could be that the people in Riemst are unaware of the option to contact local politicians through social media. Another unexpected outcome is that the use of e-mail to contact a local politician of Riemst has the preference, shared with

the telephone, only in one age category. Furthermore, this is in an age category, 45-54, which we did not expect to be as we thought e-mail use would be higher among the younger generations. The use of telephone is in all categories very popular, but only has a dominant position in the 35-44 age group. The negligence of social media falls in line with last year's report wherein the social media use by local politicians is also barely used (Peters et al. 2015: 23). However, we do believe that social media entails opportunities for the contact between citizens and local politicians of Riemst, especially as the relationship is characterised as informal.

Figure 5.17 Preferred means of being contacted by a local politician
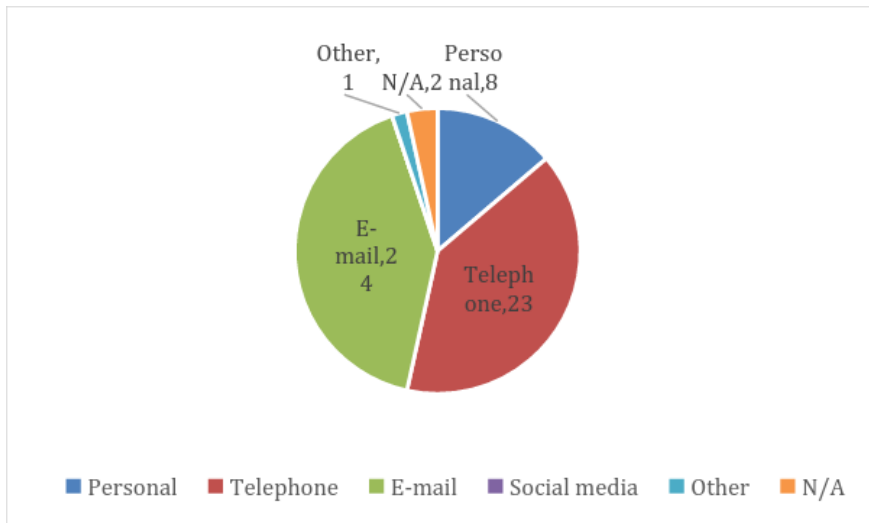
Do citizens in Riemst have a different preference when it comes to politicians approaching them, instead of the other way around? The answer is yes, at least partially, as can be seen in Figure 5.17. The most important difference is the way they look at personal contact. When it is politicians that want to approach them (instead of them approaching the politician), they are less enthusiastic about personal contact. Only 8 people prefer personal contact in those situations, compared to 18 when it is the other way around. Possibly they find the personal contact somewhat too direct when it comes to initiatives from the politician. We did not ask the respondents about the difference between the answers on both related questions, so we can only guess. Instead of personal contact, they seem to prefer e-mail contact for these kinds of contacts, because the number of

people that wants to get contacted by e-mail is much higher than people using e-mail themselves.

Figure 5.18 Preferred means of being contacted by a local politician sorted by age category
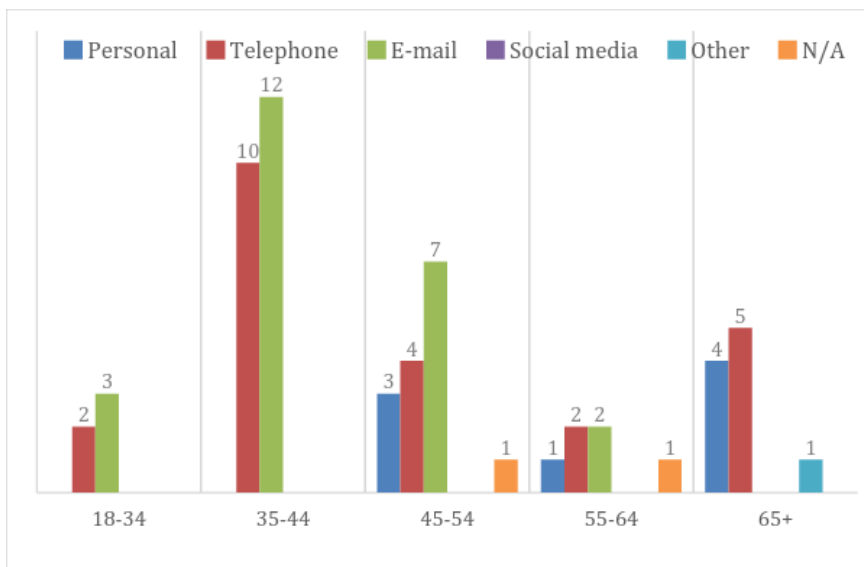
After examining the results according to the age categories, the difference in pro-actively contacting versus being contacted by local politicians is the largest regarding the use of email. Whereas the two youngest age groups did not have e-mail as their preference for contacting a local politician, this changes when they are contacted themselves and it becomes the most preferred option. However, it must be mentioned that using the telephone, which was dominant in contacting, is still a popular way of being contacted. It is only the oldest age category that barely shows a difference between contacting or being contacted by a local politician.

5.5 Expectations and actual interaction

In this section, the results of the actual interaction and the expectations of the citizens are compared (Figure 5.4 and 5.12).

Regarding the question why citizens would contact a local politician, 4 respondents indicated that they would never contact a local politician. This leaves 46 respondents with one or multiple reasons that would do so. Of these 46 respondents answering positively towards contacting a local politician, 25 would do that for personal reasons. This means that of the 51 interviewees, 25 would consider to contact a local politician for personal reasons while in reality only 9 had done so. For a general problem, the differences seem to be more outspoken, with only 6 people claiming to have had contact with a local politician for this, while 34 answered that they would contact a local politician for a general problem.

When conducting the interviews, we had the impression that people did not want to admit that they would contact a local politician solely for their 'own individual problems'. This can also explain the high amount of people that claim they would do it in the case of a general problem, which can be seen as socially desirable behaviour. The biggest difference between hypothetical action and actual action was in the upcoming decisions of the council. Here, 14 people could imagine that they would contact a local politician for an upcoming council decision. However, in the answers of actual contact none is done with this reason. The big discrepancy of the answers in actual acting and hypothetical acting might lay in the big difference there is between people imagining that they would do it and the actual process of taking action. Another explanation can be that they have never been in the situation, although this seems to be highly unlikely.

5.6   Conclusions and discussion

In this chapter, the findings of the 51 interviews that were conducted in the municipality of Riemst are presented. The sample, on which these findings are based, consists out of 25 males and 26 females, with an average age of 49.85.

Just over half of the respondents had contacted a local politician. This was mostly done for individual problems. For example, one interviewee stated that she had contacted a local politician for a problem with youth causing noise and feelings of unsafety close to her home. This falls in line with last year's results wherein the interviewed councillors mentioned that individual problems are the main reason for being contacted by citizens. However, the line between individual and general problems is often vague. Regarding the satisfaction of this contact, citizens are either really satisfied or extremely disappointed. The average is 3.174 out of 5, with a standard deviation of 1.435. However, it must be noted that during interviews we

felt that the lowest grade was given more easily when being discontent, while the highest grade was almost never given, despite being very content about the contact. Furthermore, we felt that citizens based their grade on the outcome of the contact rather than the contact itself.

Furthermore, it is interesting to find that none of the respondents contacted a local politician for an upcoming or past decision in the council. Another finding is that just over one third of the respondents were actually contacted by local politicians, while two thirds of these respondents expected to be contacted. The majority of the interviewees that expected to be contacted believed that this contact between citizens and local politicians is important in order to give input and make sure that their views are picked up.

When contacting a local politician themselves, citizens indicate that they most likely do it for a general problem, followed by an individual problem. Although 34 out of the 51 respondents would contact a politician for a general problem, only 6 out of 51 had actually done so. This indicates that the barrier between hypothetical action and actual action is relatively big. Another contradiction was found when looking at the reasons for having contacted a local politician. Herein, individual problems are mostly mentioned to be the reason for this contact. However, when asking the respondents for what reasons they would contact a local politician, a general problem is mentioned most often. We believe that this discrepancy can be explained by people giving an answer that is a socially desirable. Regarding the preferred means of contacting a local politician, personal and contact via telephone are the preferred ways of communication. For contacting citizens, email is the most preferred way.

The mayor of Riemst, Mark Vos, is very well-known among the respondents, 49 out of the 51 know their mayor by name. Other local politicians are less well-known as only 32 could name any other local politician besides the mayor. Even people that have lived in Riemst for only a couple of weeks could name Mark Vos. Partially, this is the result for the long time that Mark Vos has been active in the local political arena of Riemst. The other reason is the way he fulfils his role. We spoke to people that were not a member of his party or of any party, and all of them were very positive on the mayor and indicated that he would be the first person to contact among the local politicians. This, together with the informal and prominent relationship of the mayor with the citizens, makes the local politics of Riemst fit the trustee model of Denters (2013).

After having talked to 51 people living in the municipality of Riemst, we came to the conclusion that the relationship between citizens and local politicians is highly informal. Herein, the mayor is often the central actor.

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He is well-known by almost all people living in the municipality. This study finds that many citizens would like to be contacted by local politicians to make sure that their opinions on matters are heard. The means for contact or being contacted by local politicians through social media is very unpopular. However, in order to get in contact with the citizens of Riemst we believe this could be highly efficient. Especially, as the contact between citizens and local politicians is characterized as informal. Moreover, social media is time efficient, and could also be a great way to involve the younger generations. Nevertheless, the results show that so far citizens are either not aware of this option, not familiar with social media, or simply not willing to use it. Therefore, if local politicians decide to do so, it is important to make the citizens of Riemst aware of this option.

Chapter 6 Visé: empirical findings

6.1   Introduction

In this chapter, we answer the research question "What do citizens in Visé, in Wallonia, the francophone region of Belgium, expect from their local politicians (including the mayor) in terms of interaction?" Its aim is to make recommendations to local politicians about the expectations of citizens in order to improve their relationship with them and stimulate citizen participation. This chapter claims that local politicians are most often contacted by citizens about problems of a rather general nature, in contrast with more individual problems that simultaneously play an important role too. Citizen satisfaction rates with local politicians are mixed, but on average neutral. This paper uses the English names for the different local political offices in Wallonia. The French equivalent for mayor is *bourgmestre*, for alderman it is *échevin*, and for councillor it is *conseiller*.

To answer this research question, we will first explain the political structure of the municipality of Visé. We will then describe the sample of the local population that was used to conduct the survey and analyze the data. We will also seek to establish a relationship between citizens' expectations and the actual interaction between them and their local representatives. This will guide us in proposing recommendations to the different actors in the local political affairs of Visé.

Visé is a francophone municipality on the Dutch-Belgian border, in between the larger cities of Maastricht, in the Netherlands, and Liège, in Belgium. The municipality has 17,627 inhabitants. Since 1989, it has always had a coalition led by the liberal *Mouvement Réformateur* (MR). Consequently, that party has delivered the mayor since 1989. This position is currently held by Marcel Neven, who has held the position since the rise to power of the MR in 1989. Despite its industrial roots, the municipality's electorate, thus, tends to be rather liberal, which is expressed electorally in the fact that the MR holds eleven out of 25 seats in the municipal council and is thus only two seats short of a majority. The other parties are the social-democratic *Parti Socialiste*, which holds ten seats, the Christian-democratic *Centre Démocrate Humaniste*, which occupies three seats and is

represented in the governing coalition, and the green party *Ecolo*, which holds one seat.

Visé is a municipality in Wallonia, Belgium. The regional governments of the three regions, Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital region, share power with the federal government and the governments of the three language communities (Dutch, French and German). The *Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation* (Gouvernement Wallon, 2004) specifies the competencies of the local authorities and the appointments of their representatives. The mayor is the councillor who received the most votes, so he is elected through preferential voting (Wayenberg, De Rynk, Steyvers & Pilet, 2012). Therefore, the mayor's power is to a large extent based on his personal authority. The local executive consists of him and the aldermen, who also remain members of the council during their tenure. In fact, the executive dominates local politics to a large extent, more so than the council (Ibid., 2012).

6.2 Description of the sample

The interviews were conducted in and around locations in town where many people were found, such as in the shopping streets, at the main square and near the railway station. We also entered some of the local shops to interview customers and shopkeepers. Those who did not live in the municipality of Visé at the moment of the interview were systematically excluded from participation in the survey. The team went out in the streets of Visé on the 22nd and the 23rd of April 2016, on a Friday and a Saturday afternoon, so that on Saturday we could interview those who were working on Friday afternoon or had other preoccupations.

In total, this analysis contains 36 interviews. The average age of the respondents to the survey was 52.5 years old. The mean age lies relatively close to the average age and equals 54.5 years old. When taken as a whole, the average age of the municipality of Visé is 41.5 years old (WalStat, 2015). This means that our sample consists of people who are considerably older than the average. However, the average age of the municipality also includes those who do not have the right to vote, such as minors, whom this paper explicitly excludes. In total, 21 men and 15 women were interviewed. This is partly due to the fact that many people, especially elderly women, did not want to participate in the research.

On average, the interviewees have lived for more than 31 years in the municipality. In short, many interviewed people had lived for over half of their lives in Visé. As a result, they know the municipality very well and have seen it developing through the years. Due to their familiarity with the

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municipality, many people know the mayor or another local politician: nearly 90% of the participants knew the name of the mayor, who has occupied that post for nearly three decades. Two thirds of them, therefore, even knew the name of at least one councillor.

6.3 Actual interaction between citizens and local politicians

6.3.1 Citizens contacting politicians

Since many inhabitants know by whom they are governed and represented, the threshold for actively seeking contact with local politicians is relatively low. Consequently, 47.2% of the inhabitants have sought contact with the mayor, an alderman or a councillor at least once during his/her period of residence. In total, 22.2% sought contact to make inquiries about problems of a more general nature, such as parking problems at the main square, the traffic situation in the centre, the cleaning of the streets, or for other issues that concern the municipality as a whole or at least part of it. 16.7% contacted a local representative for a more personal problem, for instance, because they needed to contact someone in government or because they sought a job and hoped the representative in question would be able to provide assistance. Therefore, as figure 6.1 shows, most people tend to contact a local politician for a more general problem.

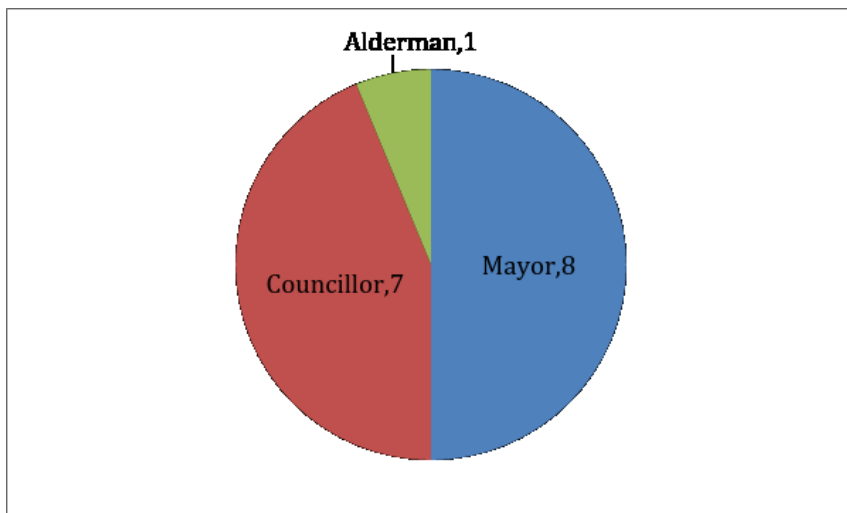*Figure 6.1 Reasons for contacting a local politician*
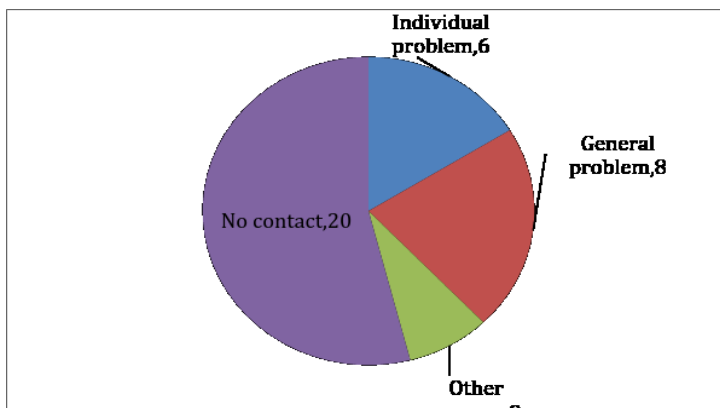
However, the line between a general problem and a personal problem is somewhat blurred, which we realized after having conducted the surveys. If someone is, for instance, experiencing problems with the parking situation in his/her street, that could be seen as a general problem, as it may affect others or if others are also experiencing the same problem and this citizen is voicing that critique, or as a personal problem, if it mostly concerns him/her. The 'other reasons' include friendly and professional relationships with a politician, which are not related to politics or governance.

6.3.2 Politicians contacting citizens

Nearly as many people who sought contact with a local politician were also contacted by one, namely 41.7%. 47.6% of those contacts were established by the mayor, and another 47.6% by council members. The aldermen were not particularly active in contacting the electorate, as only 6.7% of the respondents confirmed that they have been contacted by an alderman. In total, 15 people have been contacted by a local politician, of whom one explained that he has been contacted by both the mayor and a councillor. All others have only been contacted by one particular politician.

Figure 6.2 Citizens contacted by a local politician, sorted by office

When it comes to the reasons for local politicians to contact their electorate, they do not do so to ask for citizens' input, as Figure 6.3 shows, which in Easton's (1965) terms is defined as the citizens' demands. Justifying council decisions or other forms of output are not reasons either, as only 6.7% said they have ever been contacted about that. A third of the respondents claims they have only been approached by a local politician for election purposes, for instance, to explain the party programme for the municipal elections. All other forms of contact were for more personal issues, business and work relations (as some replied that the mayor or a councillor is their co-worker). In general, local politicians, thus, only tend to seek contact with the electorate for electoral purposes and do not see a reason for contacting them about local politics outside of election time.

Figure 6.3: Reasons why citizens were contacted by local politicians
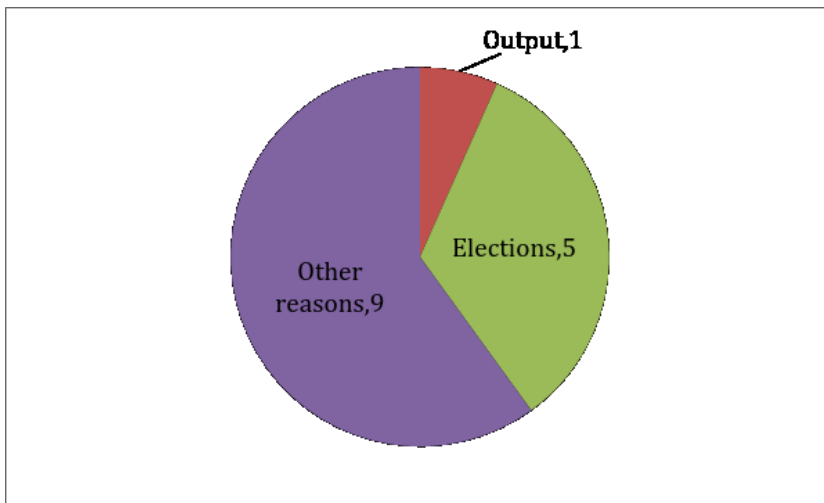
When drawing a comparison with last year's MaRBLe report, which focused on the role and behaviour of local politicians, it became apparent that most councillors find that citizens tend to contact them only for minor individual issues (Peters et al., 2015), whereas this study showed that that is not always the case. Many respondents stated that municipal politics should be aimed towards achieving a common goal for the municipality or at least a group of its inhabitants, rather than serve personal interests. However, with regards to local politicians contacting citizens, the report concluded that the majority of the interviewees argued that citizens ought to make

the first move when they want to talk about their ideas and not the politicians' (ibid.). This is in line with our research, which showed that outside of election times and personal issues nobody was contacted by a local politician. The report also showed that councillors felt an obligation to justify their decisions to the electorate, at least those councillors belonging to the governing coalition (ibid.). However, even though they feel that obligation, they do not seem to have translated that into action.

In the end, we asked the citizens how satisfied they were. On average, the citizens were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the contact they had had. 82.5% of those who contacted a local politician rated their level of satisfaction by assigning a value between 1 and 5. The remaining 17.5% did not evaluate the contact mainly because they had contacts with him or her in a domain outside politics, so they did not consider the question to be relevant. As shown in figure 6.4, the majority (five respondents) graded the contact with a 3. This means they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. As for the other results, those who were dissatisfied with the contact are only 3. Of these, nobody chose the lowest level of dissatisfaction, being 1. The number of citizens satisfied with the contact were six, of whom three were very satisfied, ranking it with the highest score, namely 5.

Figure 6.4 Level of satisfaction of citizens as regards their contact with local politicians
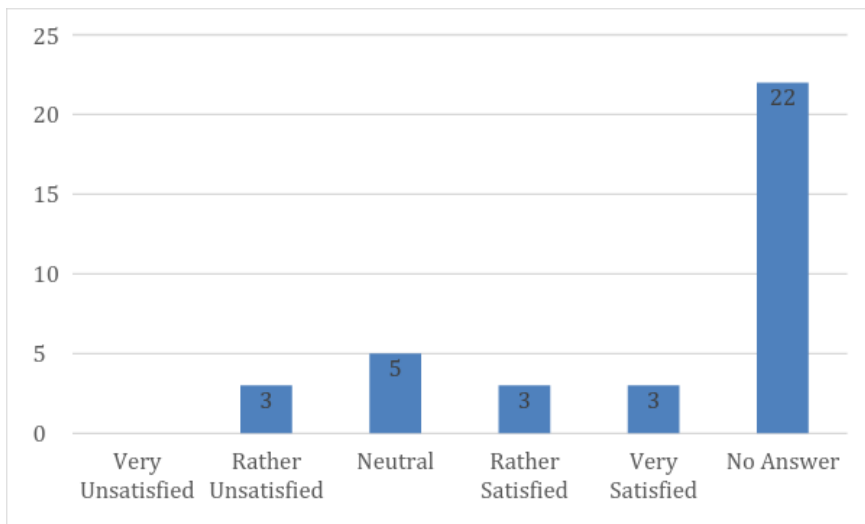
After having calculated the average satisfaction, which in our case equals approximately 3.4, we can affirm that on average the citizens were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the contact they had with their local representatives. We calculated the standard deviation and the result is approximately 1.1. With this value so close to 0, it can be concluded that the deviation from the average satisfaction (3.4) is not high, and, therefore, the responses are not excessively spread out.

6.4   Expectations concerning the interaction between citizens and local politicians

6.4.1 Expectations concerning the content of the interaction

Not only did we ask the respondents about their actual interaction with local politicians, but also about their expectations with regards to being contacted by their local representatives. By taking into account this variable, we wanted to establish a correlation between what happens in reality and what citizens expect to happen as regards their relationship with the local politicians. Measuring expectations is crucial to understand what the citizens want, and this information is, therefore, useful for politicians, as they may want to improve their relations with the electorate in order to gain their trust.

The majority of the respondents (91.6%) expect their local politicians to get in touch with citizens. This signifies that they wish a more active approach on behalf of their representatives. Only 8.3%, believe the contrary, even though they did not specify any particular reason as to why they would not want their politicians to establish contact with them. As regards the reasons why they expect to be contacted, 44.4% considered it important that politicians ask citizens for input before a decision is taken by the council.

Although 38.8% of the respondents mentioned options other than those listed in the survey, we found a correlation between the answers obtained for the category "other" and those for the category "input". In fact, all the respondents in the "other" category considered that local politicians should be aware of what issues the electorate cares about. By choosing this option, the respondents had the opportunity to elaborate on their answers and, thus, enabled us to gather more information. According to them,

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communicating actively and frequently with the citizens provides politicians with a better understanding of their problems and it ensures a more democratic conduct of the local affairs.

This practice also represents an opportunity to understand what citizens think about local politics. Ultimately, it would also improve the relations between the citizenry and the politicians. While these responses could be labeled as "general input", as they refer to the overall contribution that citizens' opinions bring to local politics, citizens' input that specifically addresses the decisions that are about to be taken by the council could be labeled as "specific input". If we add these two categories up, we obtain the percentage of those who believe that politicians should establish contact to know the citizens' input. The sum of both categories equals 83.3% of the sample, which is an extraordinarily high percentage. One in three also believed that interaction between citizens and local politicians is necessary, so that politicians are able to justify council decisions to the electorate. Another 33.3% of the citizens believed contact is necessary in election times, as they find it important that politicians be able to explain their party manifesto to the electorate. The sum of these percentages is higher than 100% as many respondents gave more than one reason.

Figure 6.5   Reasons for which citizens expect to be contacted by a local politician
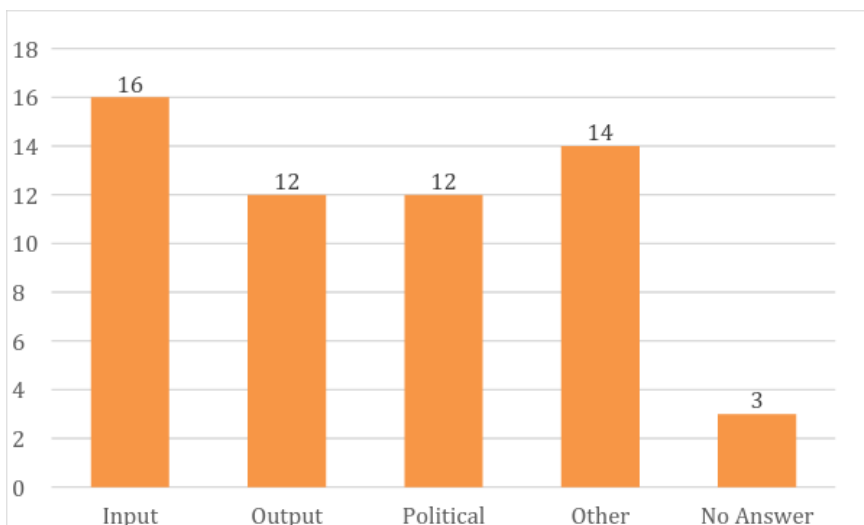
When looking at the results, one can affirm that the citizens of Visé place a lot of importance on democratic governance. One must emphasise here that the citizens demand attention from their representatives, as citizens want to have their voices heard. In order to keep council members informed, they argue that regular contact between them and the electorate should be established.

In order to interpret these survey results, it is convenient to place the role citizens attribute to their representatives into Denters' models that specify the different roles elected representatives may seem to fulfill (2013). In particular, perceiving of local politicians as trustees appears to reflect the interviewees' answers. According to this model, local politicians are supposed to have a close relationship with the entire constituency, and not only with their supporters who elected them. They need to be impartial and behave for the sake of the common good. Moreover, they have to consult the citizens to see whether their choices reflect their demands and needs. Hence, the trustee is an active politician who attempts to involve the citizens in the political process as much as possible.

The findings can be also explained by the democratic watchdog model (ibid. 2013), according to which the elected representatives should possess a set of behavioural traits enabling them to safeguard and improve the democratic conduct of local politics. This means that they are expected to monitor the decision-making process within the local government. Therefore, in comparison to the trustee model, the role of the democratic watchdog does not entail a dynamic relation with the citizens, but it mainly serves to guarantee the respect of the democratic procedures in politics (ibid., 2013).

Since we used the categories of input and output in this question, it is also relevant to relate the findings to Easton's theory on political systems (1965). Pursuant to his theory, it can be argued that the majority of the interviewees emphasizes the importance of the "raw materials" that enter the political machine, meaning that they are aware of how essential it is to let citizens contribute to the local political process. In fact, considering their demands regularly would ensure that public life is conducted in a democratic way, respecting what citizens want. In addition to the citizens' demands, the political machine also receives popular support. Since support is gained as long as demands are satisfied, politicians should pay attention to this result in order for the political system to function and deliver effective policies that satisfy the public.

We also used this survey to determine for what reasons citizens would contact their local politicians. 58% of the respondents answered that it would be for a problem that concerns the municipality as a whole. This

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result is related to the fact that 47.1% of the interviewees contacted their representatives for issues of a general nature. Although the percentage of those who answered "individual problem" is high (33%), it is lower than those who believe it is important to get in touch with politicians in order to be informed about the council's decisions (39 %, considering both a priori and a posteriori together). Again, the sum of these percentages is higher than 100% as many respondents mentioned more than one reason.

Figure 6.6 Reasons for which citizens would contact a local politician
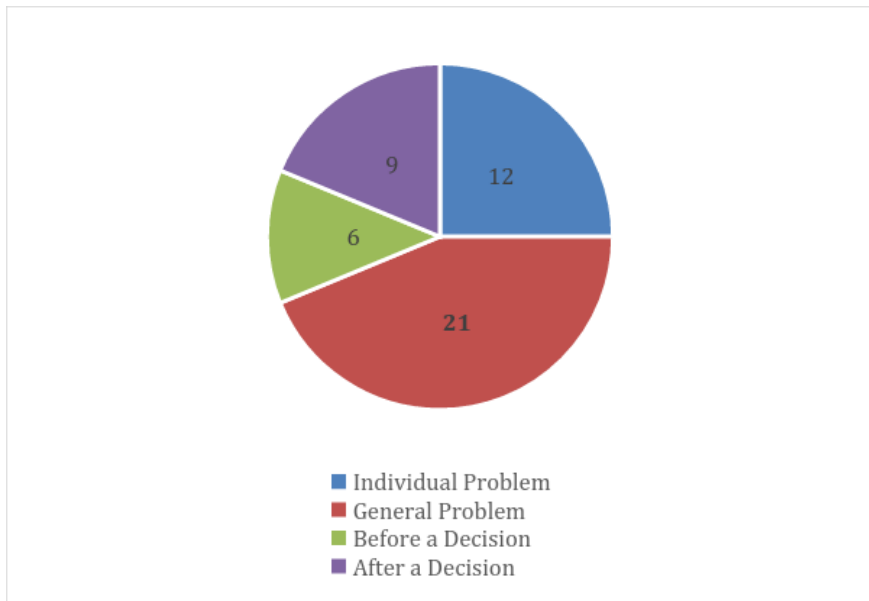
The respondents who indicated that they would contact a local politician for one of the abovementioned reasons were also asked to indicate with whom exactly they would get in touch and why. According to our findings, the local politician that is most likely to be contacted is a councillor, as this option scored 44.4%, whereas only 33.3% answered that they would contact the mayor. As for the alderman, only 8.3% would choose this political figure.

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Figure 6.7 Which local politician would you contact?
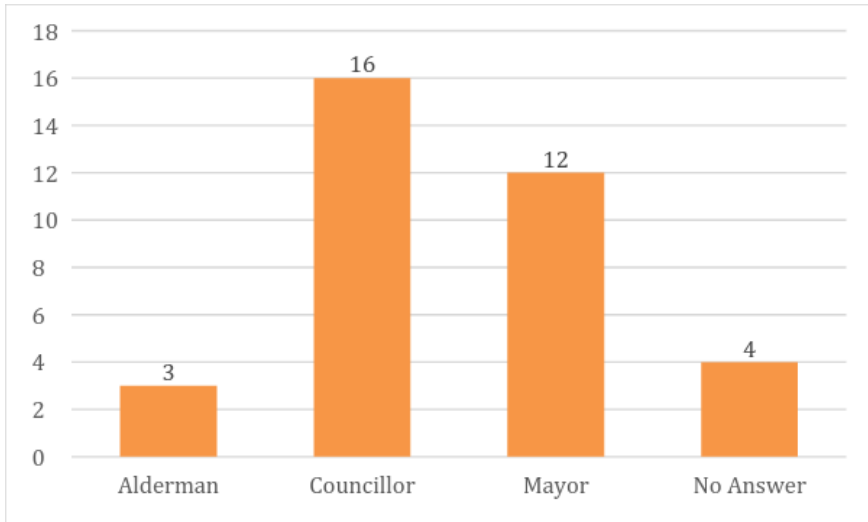
In general, citizens would prefer having contact with a councillor over the mayor. The reason mentioned by the majority of the respondents is that it is generally difficult to get in touch with the mayor and that it is unlikely he will give a direct answer to their questions. As for the mayor, he was mainly chosen (by nine respondents) for his high position in the municipality's political hierarchy. The persons who chose the alderman did so mainly because of his or her position. In fact, by being in charge of a particular policy domain, his or her response is deemed to be more effective in solving their problems. It was also mentioned that he or she would be contacted because he would be closer to the inhabitants than the mayor. Moreover, although the alderman's power basis is the college of mayor and aldermen, he or she can also exercise individual power within the local administration (Plees, 2004).

It is possible to assert that although the councillor would be the politician contacted most frequently, this is so mainly because the mayor is unavailable. This statement is also confirmed by the fact that that the Belgian local politics is dominated by the executive rather than the legislative body (Wayenberg, De Rynk, Steyvers & Pilet, 2012). Hence, citizens appear to prefer to establish a contact with the local executive rather than the members of the council, arguably because the former is

deemed to have a better oversight of the political affairs of the municipality.

Figure 6.8 Reasons for choosing a particular politician for the contact
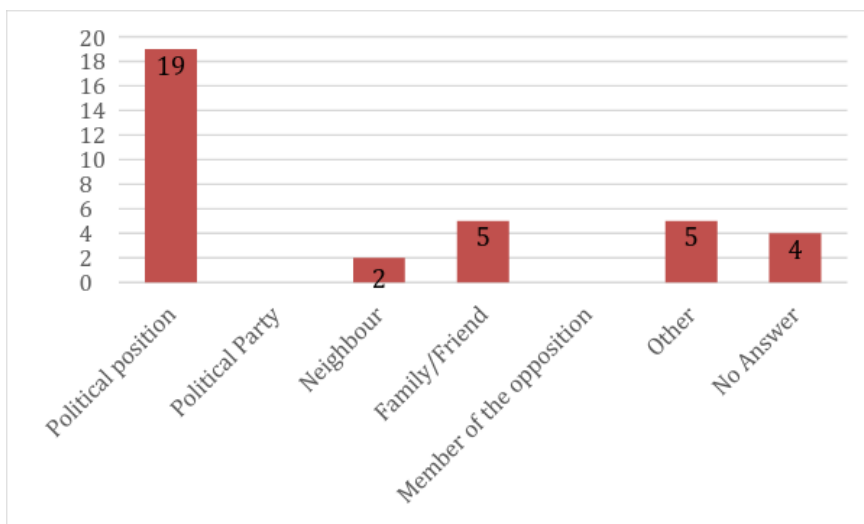
Interestingly, when interviewees were asked which politician they would like to contact, we observed that 52.7% of them considered it of primary importance to look at the political position he or she holds within the municipality. Therefore, we argue that they would choose a representative as a contact person according to the duties which he or she fulfils in local politics. None of the respondents would consider the politician's party affiliation. This result reveals that citizens in Visé do not understand local politics in terms of ideology and, thus, they do not relate the local politicians' role to Denters' category of party democracy (2013). This might be explained by the fact that nowadays political parties are losing public support in Belgium and especially in Wallonia (Wayenberg et al., 2012).

Wayenberg, De Rynk, Steyvers & Pilet (2012) relate this phenomenon to the increasing personalisation of politics in Belgium (p. 91). This expression refers to the fact that the growing mistrust that citizens nurture towards political parties is accompanied by an increasing reliance on individual political actors (Karnoven, 2010). This phenomenon might be explained by considering a general trend that affects Western societies. In fact, due to the individualisation and modernisation of social life that has been taking

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place since the second half of the 20th century, citizens primarily perceive themselves as individuals rather than part of a group sharing the same ideals (ibid., 2010). Moreover, people started to identify less with traditional parties as new social issues have come to the front nowadays (Gallagher, Laver, Mair, 2011).

Karnoven (2010) also presents other factors that could stress the role of individual politicians over parties, such as the structure of the electoral system. This could be the case of Belgium, since its political system is characterized by preferential voting. In fact, the number of preferential votes earned by the candidates is crucial in determining who will become the mayor of a municipality (Steyvers, 2004). Therefore, all these factors can explain why citizens in Visé do not rely on party affiliation when choosing a politician to contact.

It is also relevant to examine how local politicians in Visé succeed at getting votes. Although Deschouwer and Rihoux (2008) affirm that Belgian local politicians can gain notoriety by being active in the civil society and at neighbourhood level and according to his or her partisan affiliation, our findings suggest that the second criterion does not apply in the case of Visé. Instead, the first criterion seems to be valid. For instance, Mr. Neven is the president of the female handball club of Visé and he is very active in promoting sport (Connaître la Wallonie, 2014). In addition, the tendency not to conceive local politics in ideological terms might justify that the executive body has more popularity than the legislative, since the latter is characterized by the presence of different parties.

6.4.2 Expectations concerning the means of communication

This research also aims at investigating the occurrence of actual interaction between citizens and local politicians. This entailed investigating what means of communication are used in two scenarios: when citizens want to get in touch with a local politician and vice versa. Again, the sum of the percentages that are going to be presented is higher than 100% as the respondents were free to choose more than one option.

As regards the inhabitants' preferred mode of communication, 66.6% of the respondents prefers meeting politicians in person, either at a public meeting or by arranging an appointment at his or her office. The same percentages (22.2%) have been obtained for both emails and telephone calls. Only one respondent opted for the use of social media. Another one

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chose other means of communication, specifying that she would rather establish an epistolary relationship with her politicians.

Figure 6.9 Citizens' preferred means of communication for contacting a local politician
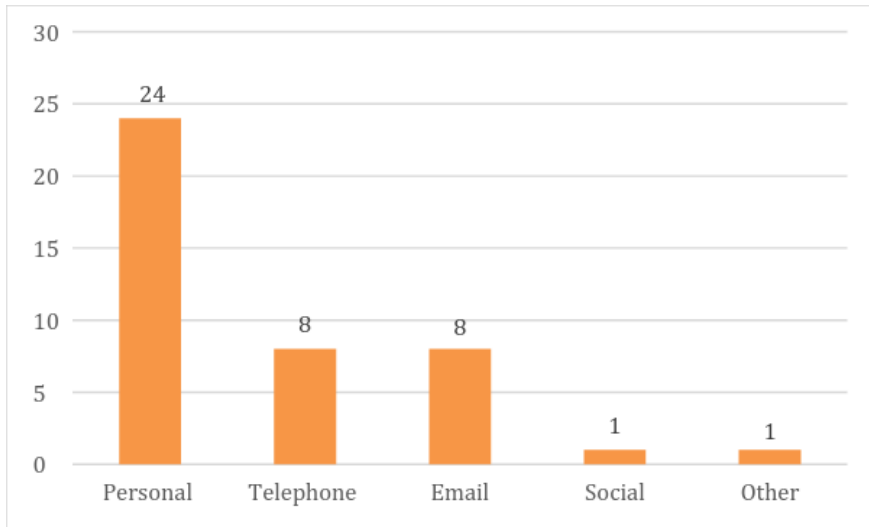
As for the means of communication that politicians are supposed to use to contact the citizens, although meeting in person remains the most preferred method of communication, there is a remarkable drop (from 67% to 50%) in the percentage of those respondents who would like to approach a politician in the same manner. This fall corresponds to an increase of interviewees who would prefer to be contacted by telephone (33.3%) and email (41.6%). Again, only one person would prefer to be contacted through the social media.

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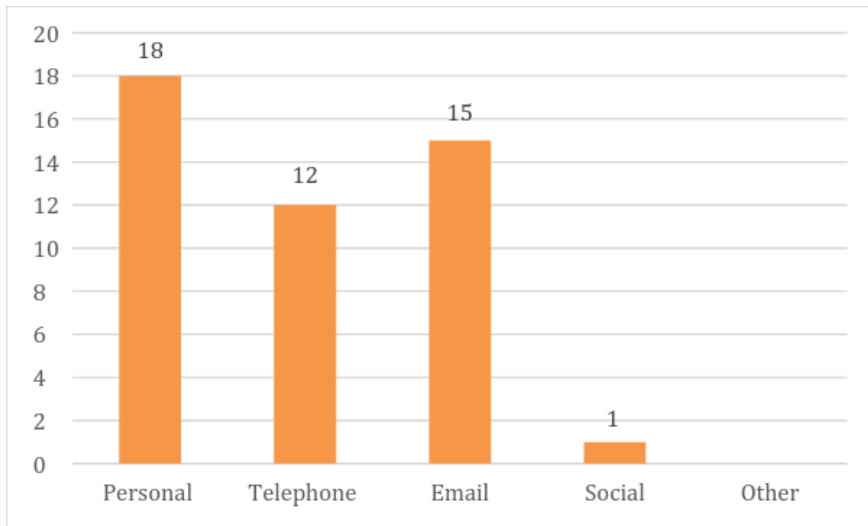
At this point, a comparison can be drawn between the results obtained in this survey and the findings of last year's MaRBLe report (Peters et al., 2015), which examined the methods of communication used by local politicians in Visé to interact with their citizens. In doing so, the authors decided to make a distinction between the means used to receive the citizens' input and those used to explain the council's output. For both categories, the results reflect the citizens' expectations. In fact, the most used method employed by politicians to approach their citizens is personal contact. In particular, meeting them in the streets was the most frequently mentioned way in which politicians establish a contact with citizens, both to get to know their opinion and to explain the decisions taken by the council. Other methods that politicians mentioned were interacting in public local meetings or at his or her party's conventions. Emails, followed by phone calls, are less frequently used. Social media were, again, the least mentioned option. In the end, it can be confirmed that politicians generally meet the citizens' expectations concerning the ways in which they want to be approached by their representatives.

We were also interested in establishing a relation between citizens' preferred means of communication and their age. This information will be

helpful to local politicians if they wish to effectively target a particular age group, as they will know how to approach them in the way they expect to be contacted. Figure 6.11 shows that people who are older than 65 clearly prefer to communicate face-to-face. As regards the other age groups, little variation is registered for those aged between 55 and 64 years and those aged between 44 and 54 years when they were asked to express a preference between different means of communication. In fact, almost the same number of persons belonging to these age groups mentioned personal contact, telephone and email. On the contrary, for those aged between 18 and 34 years old email clearly represents the best way to be contacted.

Figure 6.11 Citizens' preferred modes of communication for being contacted by a local politician (sorted by age)
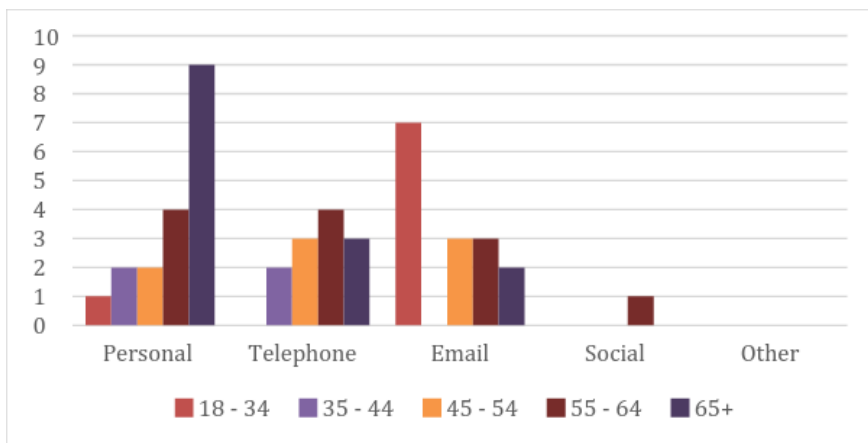
Overall, from these results it can be concluded that the citizens of Visé tend to prefer traditional means of communication. Having a personal conversation is the most popular choice in both cases, followed by emails and telephone calls. The fact that only one respondent would use social media in both scenarios demonstrates that modern methods of communication are not considered an appropriate way, neither to contact, nor to be contacted by a local representative.

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6.5 Expectations and actual interaction

As mentioned above, the vast majority of the respondents (33 out of 36) would expect local politicians to get in touch with them mainly (83.3%) because they would like their input to be taken into consideration, either before a decision is taken or in general in local politics. However, the findings about their actual interaction between the two sides reveal that politicians mainly seek contact with the citizenry for election purposes. By looking at these data, there is clearly a contrast between expectations and reality. Moreover, another difference between these two dimensions is that neither of those who contacted a local representative (47.2%) did so as regards an upcoming decisions taken by the council.

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter seeks to inform the local politicians of Visé on what their constituency expects from them in terms of interaction. The recommendations are especially aimed towards the councillors, because they are the representatives who are more likely to be searched for by the citizens. Hence, councillors should engage with citizens more often and not only during election times. It is evident that the electorate is more concerned with their participation into local politics in terms of input. Taking into consideration this fact would increase the possibility of being elected again because politicians would demonstrate to be what the citizens expect them to be: both democratic watchdogs and trustees (Denters, 2013).

Chapter 7 Übach-Palenberg: empirical findings

7.1 Introduction

This chapter aims at providing an overview of the empirical findings on the interaction between citizens and their local politicians.

Übach-Palenberg is a small city in the German *Bundesland* North Rhine-Westphalia and very close to the Dutch border. It has approximately 24.000 inhabitants and belongs to the administrative district of Cologne (Information und Technik Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2011). The leading party in Übach-Palenberg is the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a democratic and liberal centre-right party. The second strongest party is the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which is politically positioned in the centre-left. The remaining parties having seats in the city council are the Green Party (GP), the Free Voters (FV)[5] and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), in descending order. In addition, one seat in the city council of Übach-Palenberg is granted to the Union of Social-Political Democrats (USPD)[6], which is a coalition of party fractions of the CDU, FDP and USPD. The following pie chart shows the distribution of the 32 seats among the parties in the city council of Übach-Palenberg:

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[5] Free Voters (FV) is a German concept, in which an association of people participates as candidates in an election without having the status of a registered political party.

[6] Not to be confused with the *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (USPD), which existed in the German Empire (1871-1918) and the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), until 1931.

Figure 7.1 Party seats in the city council of Übach-Palenberg
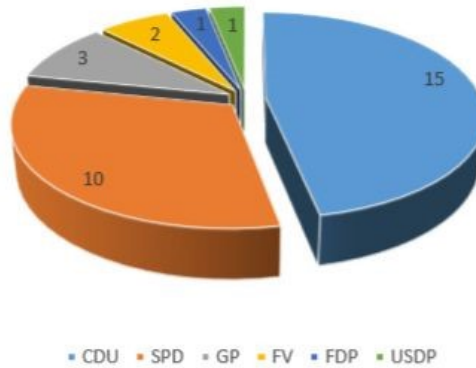
The mayor of Übach-Palenberg, Wolfgang Jungnitsch (CDU), was elected in October 2009 and his first deputy mayor (or "vice mayor") is Peter Fröschen (CDU).

7.2   Description of the sample

The German sample consists of 50 respondents, of which 16 were men and 34 were women. The average age of the interviewees amounted to almost 65.5 years. From the following histogram it becomes visible that the German sample is skewed both by age and by gender.

Figure 7.2 Age-sex pyramid
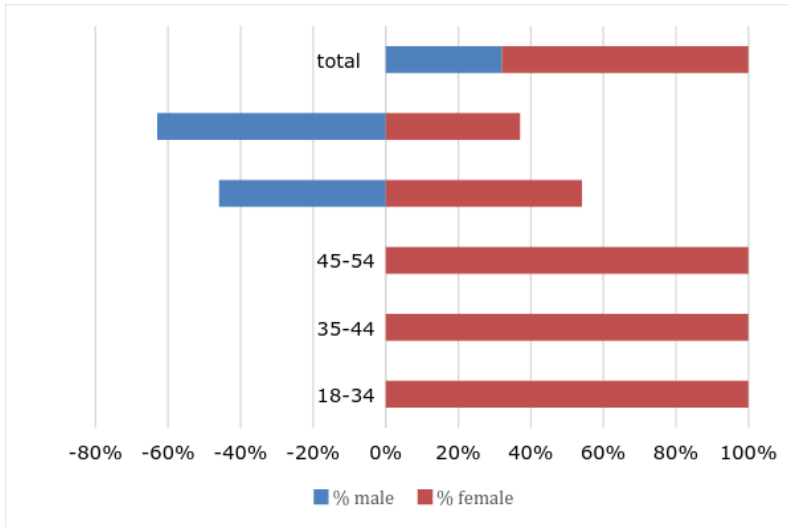
On average, the interviewees had lived in the municipality for approximately 52 years. Except for six people, everyone had lived in Übach-Palenberg for more than five years, but most at least for more than twelve years.

The majority of interviews were held on the "Rathausplatz" in Übach-Palenberg, on April 14, 2016. The remaining interviews were conducted in the shopping-center park area "Am Wasserturm" on the same day. A team of two interviewers was in charge of this survey.

7.3 Actual interaction between citizens and local politicians

In this section, information on the Übach-Palenberger citizens' interactions with local politicians will be provided.

From the dataset obtained based on the 50 structured interviews done in Übach-Palenberg, it results that only 16 citizens had ever contacted a local politician. Of these 16, 80% (13 people) had contacted either the mayor, Mr Jungnitsch, or the vice mayor, Mr Fröschen. Precisely one person contacted the vice mayor. The remaining three people had contacted a councillor.

The reasons for contacting the mayor(s) or a councillor were mainly for 'individual' issues (≈ 62%). Only one person addressed a 'general' problem (≈ 25%) when contacting a local politician and another one was seeking contact to discuss a 'past decision' (≈ 6%). No one of the 16 people under consideration was looking to speak with a local politician about an 'upcoming decision'. One interviewee had contacted a local politician for 'other' (by the interviewees individually specified) concerns and requests (≈ 6%). One of the people having contacted a local politician regarding an 'individual' issue mentioned that his matter may be of general concern[7]. This one person is counted into the 'individual' category. The following pie chart (-in absolute numbers-) represents the categories of the reasons for which the 16 Übach-Palenberger contacted the mayor(s) or a councillor.

Figure 7.3   Reasons for contacting a local politician
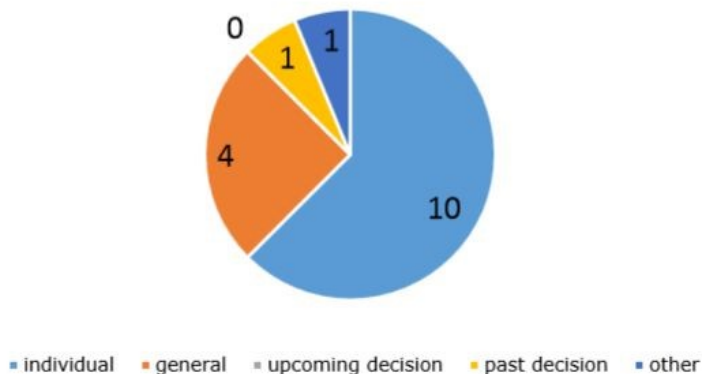
When necessary and to facilitate the interviewees' choice of a 'reason-category', the interviewers gave the following descriptions of each of the five above-mentioned categories:

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7 Unfortunately, the interviewee was not willing to specify the problem he had addressed.

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- "An 'individual' reason is of personal nature and could be, for example, you or one of your family members looking for a job or a place to live."
- "A 'general' problem is something that concerns or disturbs you in the municipality. For example, speeding."
- "An 'upcoming decision' by the council or the municipality could address the building of a new refugee camp, for instance."
- "A 'past decision' by the council or the municipality that has come to upset you may be 'higher taxes'."
- "The 'other' category incorporates any other reason you can think of and feel like does not fit into the above-mentioned categories of reasons."

In order to offer a deeper insight to the topics citizens in Übach-Palenberg are concerned about, we present the examples people gave of topics they contacted a politician about (see below).

Figure 7.4 Examples of reasons for contacting a local politician

Category	Reasons
Individual	▪ problems with the landlord and the other inhabitants of his apartment building ▪ wants the municipality to commission a monument from a family member ▪ seeking information for (opening) a shop
General	▪ seeking contact because of a construction site ▪ seeking contact for a local club/association ▪ preventing the closing of a local school
Upcoming decision	Not an issue (see Figure 7.3: value 0)
Past decision	No reason specified
Other	Not enough police (issues with speeding are very common) and police station closes too early (4pm)

The reasons written in red represent the most prominent local problems, for which Übach-Palenberger citizens have contacted a local politician.

The average satisfaction of the 16 citizens who had contact with a local politician hovers around 3.56. As measured on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "not satisfied at all" and 5 being "very satisfied", this number (3.56) can be considered a decent/positive result. With a standard deviation (SD) of approximately 0.96, one can say that people in Übach-Palenberg are

generally satisfied with their contact with a local politician: the range, in which most people's level of satisfaction lies, has a lower margin of 2.5 and an upper margin of 4.5. Only one person has rated his contact with a local politician a 2/below 3 and can, thus, be considered an outlier.

Figure 7.5 Satisfaction of citizens with their contact with a local politician
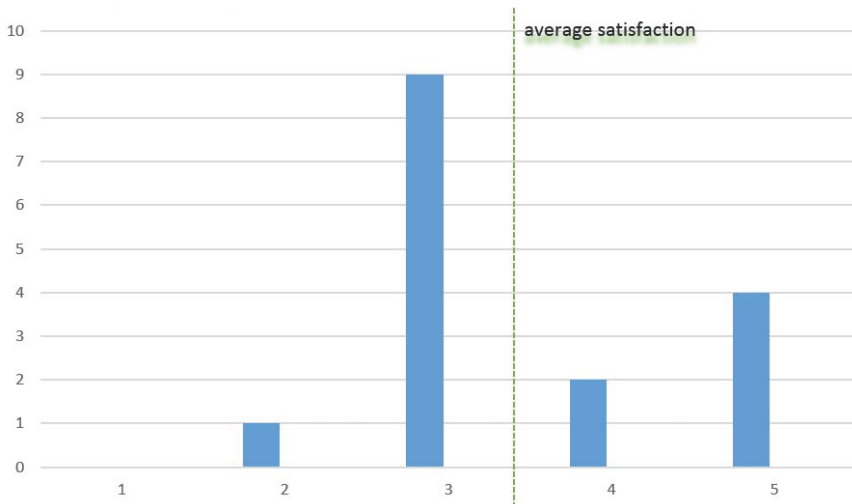
To attain a more complete idea of the interactions between the German citizens and their local politicians, the Übach-Palenberger have been asked whether any local politician had ever contacted them and, if so, for what reason. It turned out that 15 of the 50 interviewees had been contacted by a local politician. Eleven of these 15 were contacted by the mayor, Mr Jungnitsch, or the vice mayor, Mr Fröschen, and the remaining four by a councillor.

Figure 7.6 Reasons for which citizens have been contacted by the local politicians
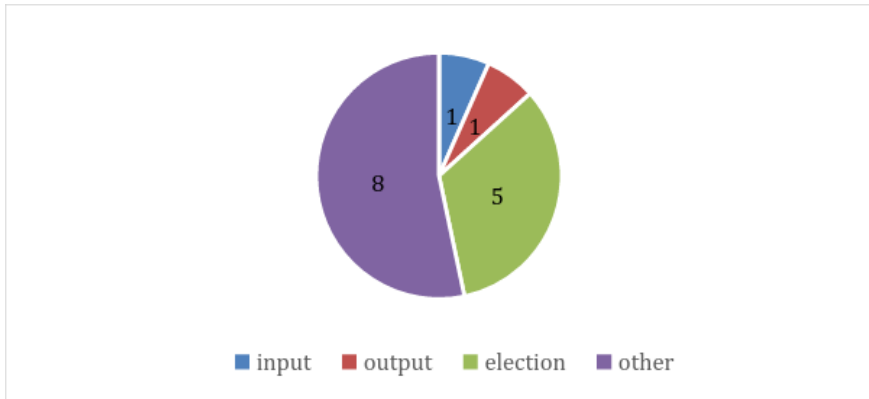
When necessary and to facilitate the interviewees' choice of a 'reason-category', the interviewers gave the following descriptions of each of the four above-mentioned categories:

- "An 'input' reason would be a local politician contacting you in order to gather information about municipality aspects before taking a decision."
- "An 'output' reason would be a local politician contacting you to explain a past/taken decision."
- "An 'election' reason would be a local politician contacting you (maybe even via post) to present his/her election program or campaign promises."
- "The 'other' category incorporates any other reason you can think of and feel like does not fit into the above-mentioned categories of reasons."

In order to offer a deeper insight into the reasons for which local politicians in Übach-Palenberg have contacted their citizens, the 'categories of reasons' have been transformed into a short list of topics people mentioned they had been contacted about by local politicians (see below).

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Figure 7.7 Examples of reasons for which citizens have been contacted by local politicians

Category	Reasons
Input	citizens assembly (mayor)
Output	No examples
Election	No examples
Other	- local economy (councillor), - vaccines (mayor), - social welfare (mayor), - club/association (mayor), - meetings (mayor), - birthday and 50-years wedding anniversary (councillor), - problems with neighbours (mayor)

The red highlights represent the most prominent reasons, for which Übach-Palenberger local politicians have contacted their citizens. The blue remarks indicate which type of local politician has contacted a citizen for which reason.

7.4 Expectations concerning the interaction between citizens and local politicians

This section offers insight into the expectations citizens have towards their local politicians, such as whether citizens expect local politicians to actively seek contact with them, and the reasons, for which citizens in Übach-Palenberg would contact a local politician, and who would be their preferred contact person in the municipality. The questions were asked, whether a citizen had contacted a local politician before or not.

To start with, figure 7.8 shows the categories of reasons for which Übach-Palenberger citizens would contact a local politician. It shall be noted that the interviewees could select multiple categories of reasons, depending on where they considered their potential concerns and requests to fit best. Six out of the 50 German respondents have stated that they would not

consider contacting a local politician for any of their problems. One person has been reluctant to answer this questions and another one was not able to imagine any reasons, for which she would contact a local politician but did not exclude the option of doing so. Hence, the following graph is based on 42 answers.

Figure 7.8 Reasons for which citizens would contact a local politician
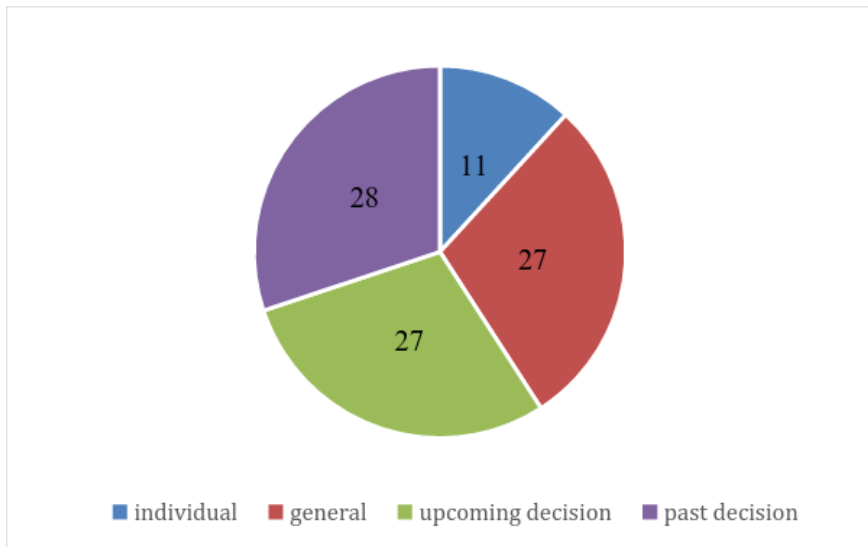
To facilitate the interviewees' choice of a 'reason-category', the same descriptions as for figure 7.3 of this chapter have been used[8].

As it follows from Figure 7.8, the main reasons for which a citizen in Übach-Palenberg could imagine contacting a local politician, fall into the categories 'general', 'upcoming decision' and 'past decision'. Looking at the categories of reasons, for which citizens in Übach-Palenberg have actually contacted a local politician (see Figure 7.3), the results obtained in Figure 8 show an almost opposite image: 'general', 'upcoming decision' and 'past decision' are the smallest categories, and the 'individual' category is the largest. A plausible explanation for the citizens' tendency to "rule out" the

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[8] In contrast to the categories used for Figure 7.3, in this question, no 'other' category was offered.

'individual' category could be that it is not part of the German political culture to contact a local politician to "[find] a job or a place to live". This could be a topic worth investigating further. Alternatively, one could explain this observation of citizens "rejecting" the 'individual' category as stemming from the category-descriptions provided by the interviewers. Thus, the citizens' selection may be biased. For example, people may have an 'individual' problem, but may perceive it to better fit in the categories 'general' or 'upcoming decision', based on the description they were given for the 'individual' category ("An 'individual' reason is of personal nature and could be, for example, you or one of your family members looking for a job or a place to live"). Also, citizens may have chosen the 'general' category over the 'individual' category, because they considered such reasons implicitly being the more socially desirable answer, as they put interest in the common good above more 'egoistic' concerns. Moreover, as the interview encouraged/reminded citizens to think of (local politicians in) their municipality as a venue to promote contact and exchange, and as a forum, in which participating gives them the ability to induce change, the categories 'upcoming decision' and 'past decision' may have become more attractive to them.

To get a step closer to the Übach-Palenberger citizens and their thoughts, a short list of reasons, for which they could imagine contacting a local politician, has been compiled (see below).

Figure 7.9 Examples of reasons for which citizens might contact a local politician

Category	Reasons
Individual	to find a place to live
General	not enough police (although not a municipality responsibility)
Upcoming decision	▪ to build more *functioning* refugee camps ▪ to improve the pension policy
Past decision	about kindergardens and schools

The reasons "to find a place to live" and "to build more *functioning* refugee camps" may have been mentioned as a reaction to the category-descriptions provided by the interviewers (see Figure 7.3). However, these two topics were generally prominent, even when not providing any category-descriptions.

In order to find out which local politician Übach-Palenberger citizens would prefer to contact and why, they have been asked to provide the name of a

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local politician (whether mayor(s) or councillor)[9] and a reason, choosing from the following options: his/her specific position in the municipality (1), his/her political party (2), he/she lives closeby/is a neighbour (3), he/she is a family member[10]/friend (4), he/she is part of the opposition/coalition (5), or 'other' reasons (6). Only 30 people have replied to this question. Some people have selected more than one option: this was mostly the case for the reasons (1) and (3) in relation to the mayor(s). Hence, most people who would contact the mayor(s) would do so both because of his position and because he is a neighbour or lives closeby. The following bar chart illustrates which local politician Übach-Palenberger citizens would chose to contact and why:

Figure 7.10 Which local politician citizens would choose to contact and why
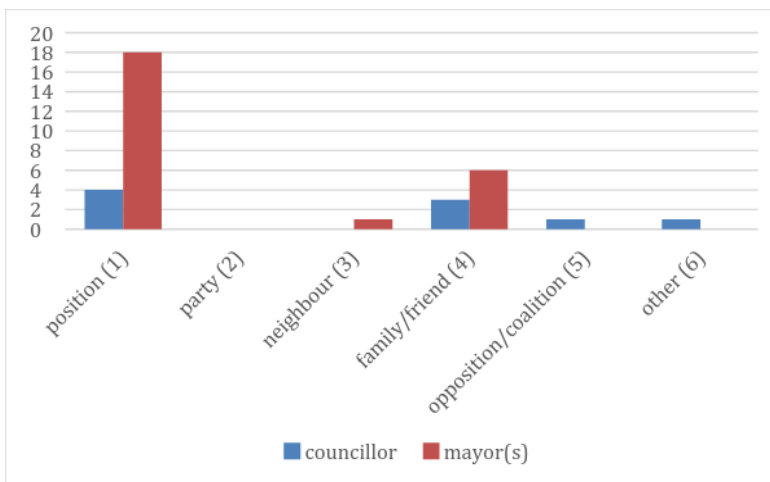
It becomes very clear from Figure 7.10 that the great majority of people would seek contact with the mayor to discuss municipality issues. The reasons for choosing to contact a mayor are mostly because of his/her position. The second most prominent reason for this choice is that the mayor is a friend/family member. This result is in line with the findings obtained when investigating about the actual interaction between citizens

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[9] 22 respondents named Mr Jungnitsch as their preferred contact person, one person would contact Mr Fröschen, and seven other citizens would chose a councillor. Only one of the latter actually mentioned the name of the councillor he/she would chose to contact: Mr Weißborn.

[10] Spouses are included in the family-category.

and local politicians in Übach-Palenberg: 80% of the people had contacted the mayor.

By going back to the dataset and comparing the actual interaction of the respondents with a certain local politician next to who of them they would potentially prefer to contact and how satisfied they have been with the actual contact, the following becomes visible: 50% of the 30 respondents for the question represented by Figure 7.10 would chose the mayor(s) as their first contact person in the municipality. These 15 people have not ever contacted a local politician before. Another almost 25% (8 people) have had contact with the mayor(s) before and would chose him as their contact person again. Three people have had contact with the mayor(s) in the past, but would not contact them again/have not replied to this question (related to Figure 7.10). However, they have rated their contact with him a 3, a 4, and a 5, which leads to the assumption that their problem had been solved and/or they could not think of any reason to contact a local politician at present[11]. One person who has had contact with the mayor in the past would chose a councillor this time/as his next contact person in the municipality. This person had rated his contact with the mayor a 3 on the satisfaction scale and may have been advised to better contact a councillor by the mayor or come to this conclusion himself. Another three people have had contact with councillors in the past and would contact them again. Three other people would chose a councillor as their first contact[12]. These findings stress the importance of the mayor in local politics and that he should be close to his citizens, as well as available for them.

In order to complete the analysis on the expectations Übach-Palenberger citizens have from their local politicians, the interviewees have been asked whether they expect local politicians to actively seek contact with them. The result was that 90% of the respondents (45 people) expected local politicians to actively seek contact with them. 10% of the respondents would not expect their local politicians to actively seek contact with them or were indifferent. The same categories and category-descriptions as for Figure 7.8 have been used for this question, and, as for Figure 7.11, the citizens had the option to choose more than one of the reason-categories provided: 'input', 'output', 'election' and 'other'. The following pie chart shows for which reasons citizens in Übach-Palenberg expect to be contacted by the local politicians.

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[11] Also, this question may have seemed repetitive to some people and, thus, they have not provided any answer to it.

[12] Some of them emphasized that it would not be of any help to contact the mayor(s) as he would not retain any power vis-à-vis the councillors, but only be a "showpiece". This might be an issue worth investigating further.

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Figure 7.11 Reasons for which citizens expect to be contacted
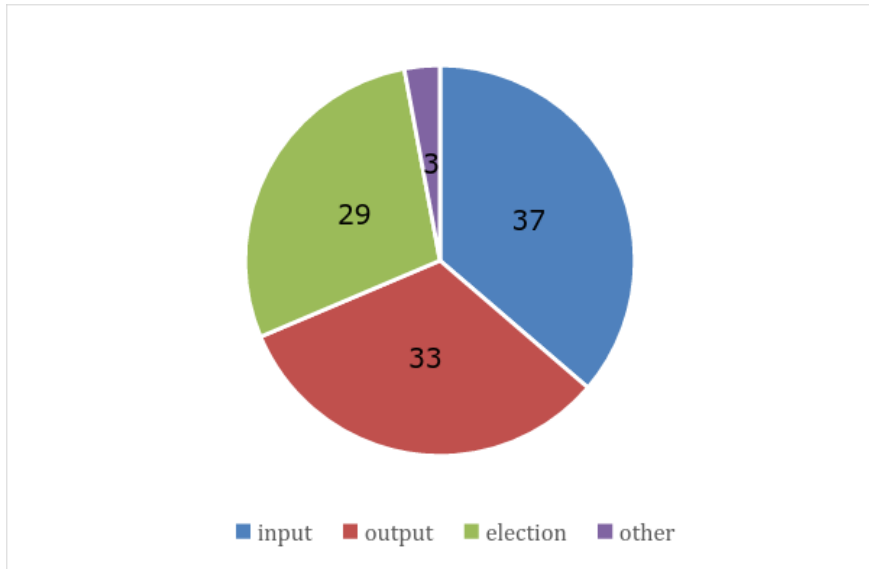
Having compared the reasons, for which Übach-Palenberger citizens have actually been contacted by local politicians (see Figure 7.6) to the reasons, for which they expect to be contacted (Figure 7.11), it is striking that the four categories used show an opposing trend. As illustrated in Figure 7.11, people expect to be contacted mainly for 'input' and 'output' reasons. To a lesser extent, they expect to be contacted for 'election'-related topics, and, finally, for 'other' reasons. In stark contrast, in reality, the main reasons, for which local politicians have contacted Übach-Palenberger citizens, have been election'-related and 'other' reasons. The least prominent reasons for local politicians to have contacted citizens in Übach-Palenberg fell into the 'input' and 'output' categories.

What could be an explanation for these differences? Taking into account the results obtained in Figure 7.8 (*Reasons for which citizens would contact a local politician*), especially in regards to the share of the 'upcoming decision' and the 'past decision', a simple explanation for the opposing findings in the Figures 7.11 and 7.6 would be that citizens do not know when decisions are taken and can, thus, not act upon an 'upcoming decision' in time. In fact, when looking at Figure 7.3 (*Reasons for contacting a local politician*), the value term for 'upcoming decision' is 0. Hence, there is an information mismatch, but the citizens would expect

their local politicians to inform them when decisions are (about) to be taken. With respect to the 'output' categories, it is reasonable to assume that citizens expect some kind of feedback-mechanism to be implemented for the municipality of Übach-Palenberg. Except for one case, none of the citizens had been contacted by a local politician regarding a 'past decision' (see Figure 7.6), however, they would expect politicians to do so (see Figure 7.8) and they would also want their voice to be heard/give feedback (see Figure 7.6), although only one of the interviewees had actually contacted a local politician concerning a 'past decision' (Figure 7.3). One could speculate that citizens might be frustrated about not being involved earlier into the decision-making process, which makes local politics non-transparent and untrustworthy for them. Therefore, they do not take the initiative to contact local politicians to discuss a 'past decision'.

The last part of this section is dedicated to the means of communication and the preferences of citizens in that respect. A distinction is made between citizens contacting local politicians on the one hand and citizens being contacted by politicians on the other hand. The following two graphs show the citizens' overall preferred means of communication for contacting a local politician and the citizens' preferred means of communication for contacting a local politician by age group. Drawing from Burstein's (2015) article "Marketing Research Chart: Do different age groups prefer different channels?", the following age groups have been established for this research: 18-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65+.

Figure 7.12 Overall preferred means of communication by citizens for contacting a local politician

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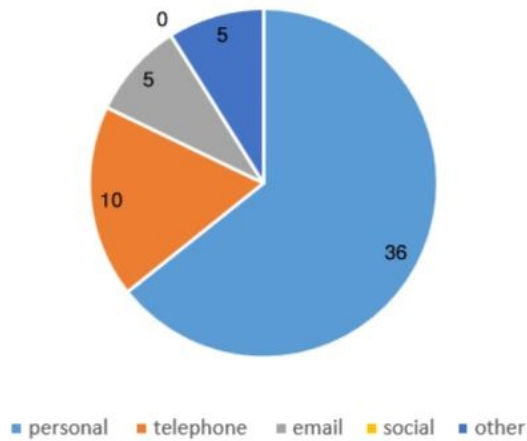
Figure 7.13 Preferred means of communication of citizens for contacting a local politician, by age group
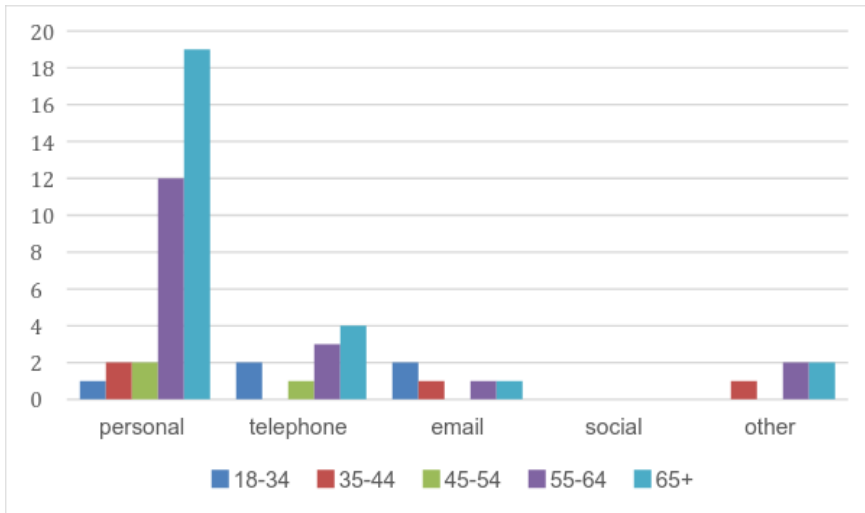
As Figure 7.12 displays, the overall preferred mean of communication by citizens for contacting a local politician is the 'personal' contact, followed by 'telephone' contact, then 'e-mail' correspondence and 'other' means. With 'other' communication means, people were mostly referring to postmail. One person refused to answer this question[13], thus, the charts are based on the answers collected from 49 respondents. For this question, people were allowed to select multiple options. None of the Übach-Palenberger interviewees would like to contact a local politician via social media.[14] From Figure 7.13, it becomes visible that besides the age group 18-34, all age groups prefer seeking contact with a local politician face-to-face. The age group 18-34 prefers 'telephone' and 'e-mail' contact.

The ways people in Übach-Palenberg want to be contacted by a local politician is illustrated below (both "overall" and "by age group"). Two

[13] See description leading up to Figure 7.7: some people would not consider contacting a local politician.

[14] As opposed to what some local politicians in Übach-Palenberg may believe being an attractive communication channel for citizens, such as Facebook pages and groups, citizens do not find appealing at all. See last year's MaRBLE report (Peters *et al.*, 2015), for comparison.

people did not answer this question[15], thus, the following graphs are based on the replies given by 48 respondents. Again, people could choose multiple options.

Figure 7.14 How citizens want/expect to be contacted by a local politician, overall
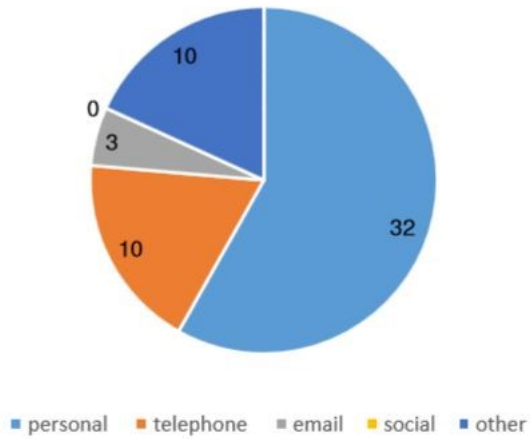
[15] These two people stated that they would not want any contact with a local politician (unless they contact them). See also the description leading up to Figure 7.9: some people would not consider contacting a local politician.

Figure 7.15 How citizens expect/want to be contacted by a local politician, by age group
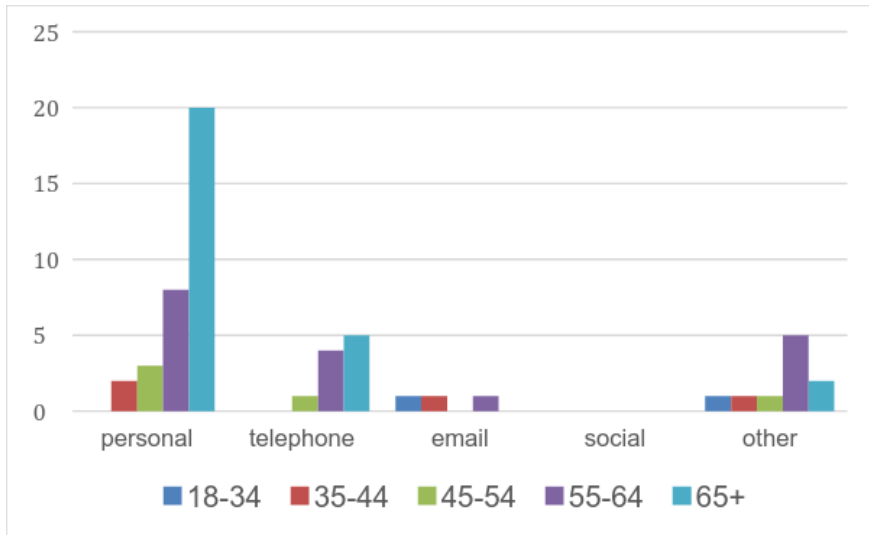
The results obtained in the Figures 7.14 and 7.15 almost fully correspond to the findings from the Figures 7.12 and 7.13. This means that the same way citizens in Übach-Palenberg would contact local politicians, they expect to be contacted by them. Minor differences are that the overall preference of how to be contacted varies for the categories 'e-mail' and 'other'. Postmail is more popular than e-mail. Again, none of the respondents would want to be contacted via social media, but the top two preferred means of communication are the 'personal' contact and the 'telephone' contact, in descending order. This result is also reflected by the age-groups graph. For all age groups, except for 18-34, the ranking of the preferred means of communication-choices looks as follows: 'personal', 'telephone', 'e-mail', and 'other', in descending order. The age group 18-34 equally prefers to be contacted either via e-mail or via post.

7.5 The literature on local politics

From the literature on local governance, Denters (2013) article "What people think about municipal councillors as citizens' representatives" offers

a very interesting discussion on political trust, the normative expectations citizens have from their elected representatives and the degree, to which citizens are 'currently satisfied with the actual performance of the representatives in light of their beliefs' (p.1-2). Denters (2013) research was based in the Netherlands, but develops four models for the role of elected representatives that can be applied to any representative democracy in Europe[16], depending on the criteria he set out for each.

These four models are the reflection/descriptive representation model (1), the trustee model (2), the party political model (3), and the democratic watchdog model (4). Relevant to the context of the research at hand are the trustee model and the democratic watchdog model. In the trustee model, the representative is someone who is in close touch with the grass roots and aware of the happenings at ground level. A trustee acts on behalf of the grass roots and, hence, must consult them about his choices. He shall stay impartial and 'keep an eye on the common good' (p.3).

This particular role of *trustee* seems to clearly apply to the German mayor. The analysis following Figure 7.7 identifies the trustee model as the model Übach-Palenberger citizens attach the most importance to. According to Denters (2013), political trust exists, where the actual performance of elected representatives meets the citizens' expectations of how they should behave. In regards to the Übach-Palenberger citizens' general satisfaction with and the positive evaluation of their contact with a local politician one could say that there is an established degree of political trust in the municipality. However, as follows from the analysis of Figure 7.11, there seems to be an information mismatch between citizens and local politicians in Übach-Palenberg in terms of decision-making. The citizens want to be involved before and after decisions, but they barely are, which can make local governance untrustworthy, as well as untransparent.

Here, Denters' (2013) democratic watchdog model fits very well. It sees elected representatives as acting on behalf of their electorate by creating more 'openings for direct input and self-governance by citizens and tighter monitoring of the democratic quality (openness, transparency and equality) of government processes' (p.4-5). Denters and Klok's (2013) study on the role municipal councillors think they should fulfill and the expectations citizens have towards them can be considered an expansion of both the trustee model and the democratic watchdog model. It shows that the five most important tasks municipal councillors in Germany shall fulfill are: defining goals (3.63), represent (3.4), controlling activity (3.26), explaining decisions (3.25), and publish debate (2.92 - slightly below three but still of importance). As measured on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being

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[16] Switzerland, being a direct democracy, is an exception here.

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"unimportant" and 5 being "extremely important", the tasks with a value greater than three have been selected here (Denters & Klok, 2013, p.69). Defining goals and being democratically representative fit within the trustee model, while the other three tasks can be seen as part of the democratic watchdog model. Explaining decisions is part of both models.

Looking now into the contribution to different tasks as perceived by the municipal councillors in different countries, Denters and Klok's (2013) find a discrepancy of almost -0.7 for *explaining decisions* and of -1.14 for *defining goals* (p.75). This means that the elected representatives consider these two tasks, especially, as being of lesser importance than they actually are to citizens. This has also been shown by the study at hand, which underlines that there is a mismatch between the time when citizens actually receive information and the time they would want to receive it.

7.6 Conclusion and recommendations

By merging the results from the survey with the findings obtained by applying the trustee and the democratic watchdog models presented by Denters (2013) to the case of Übach-Palenberg, two important conclusions can be drawn in this regard. Firstly, the mayor in Übach-Palenberg mainly fits into the trustee model, which sees him as representative of the grassroots and possibly in close contact with the citizens (see section 7.3 and Figure 7.10). He is seen as the person directly responsible to the citizens. The second conclusion related to Denters (2013) is that councillors fit into both the trustee model and the democratic watchdog model. Councillors are expected to be available for citizens and to safeguard their opinions.

The biggest problems mentioned by the citizens of Übach-Palenberg were that there is not enough police. Even though the citizens knew that this is not a municipality issue, they did not know who else to contact. Furthermore, they mentioned problems with construction sites in the municipality and the accessibility of documents regarding information such as what is needed to open up a local shop. We would strongly recommend to look further into these issues. With regards to the first problem (too little police), a dialogue with the police would be helpful, so that the opening hours can be prolonged and more staff can be made available. For the construction sites, a discussion in a "Bürgerversammlung" (citizens assembly) would make sense in order to get to know the details of the issues. For the third problem, relaunching the city hall's website and adding information on how to access important documents, such as

information on what is needed to open up a local shop may be desirable. This would also structure the municipality's work more efficiently.

The empirical analysis provided by this chapter has identified an information mismatch between citizens and local politicians in regards to when decisions are taken and what about. Nevertheless, Übach-Palenberger citizens expect local politicians to inform them in a timely fashion. As a solution for the problem of citizens feeling left out of the decision-making process, this research proposes a combination of involving citizens into matters that are up for decision-making and employing a feedback-mechanism for decisions already taken. Both of these measures require effective communication.

For this, we would propose using a combination of three different communication modes. For the people that are 35 years old and older, we propose a quarterly-held/biannual "Bürgerversammlung", in which the citizens can exchange thoughts with and further their requests to the mayor(s) and the councillors. For the age category 18-34, we would propose a newsletter via email, in which important upcoming decisions are announced and past decisions can be evaluated. Furthermore, we would propose to also send this newsletter via post to households (especially of elderly people) who subscribe. In this way, citizens who cannot attend the assembly, stay informed about municipality news and incentives, and can communicate their opinion both before and after a decision is taken. In fact, although the German sample is relatively old and the interviewees may, thus, supposingly be less distant from local politics than a younger sample, many respondents considered themselves to be too old to be valuable and getting involved. Only a small fraction of the interviewees mentioned to have lost trust in politics[17]. Hence, involving older people closer into local politics would be a great initiative in Übach-Palenberg. (Some of the elderly also pointed out that they would be willing to talk to the mayor about municipality issues "over a coffee" but feel too "tired" to visit the city hall for that purpose or do not feel comfortable approaching the mayor on the street and "waste his time"[18].)

In regards to the strong preference of citizens to either contact the mayor or the vice mayor, having a process that allows the councillors to take over some of the citizens' requests may be very valuable. The mayor and the

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[17] Political disenchantment has not been a topic when interviewing Übach-Palenberger citizens. People have not have the negative (TV-) images of national politics in their minds when being asked about local politics, for example. This occurred to be different for the other three municipalities presented in this research: Valkenburg, Visé and Riemst.

[18] Of course, this excludes citizens that related/married to local politicians or have been friends with them for a long time.

vice mayor are limited by human capacity and sharing the workload with the councillors could additionally improve the quality of the contact between Übach-Palenberg citizens and their local politicians. To realize this, online/offline information brochures about which councillors are responsible for which local policy area in Übach-Palenberg and in which municipality sections they are specialized could be a great tool. An introduction of the topic at the "Bürgerversammlungen" would make sense too. Moreover, a flyer with such information at post-election time may be a great idea as well. Usually, elected representatives present themselves to citizens' with a postmail after the elections and adding an information flyer about councillors and their local municipal responsibilities may be very much appreciated by the Übach-Palenberger citizens.

Chapter 8 Valkenburg: empirical findings

8.1   Introduction

Valkenburg aan de Geul is a municipality situated in the south of Limburg. It consists of 16 villages, which are called kernen. Valkenburg aan de Geul is inhabited by 16,707 people (Gemeente Valkenburg aan de Geul, 2016a). For the comparative research conducted for this report, Valkenburg aan de Geul serves as a case study of a Dutch municipality. This chapter answers the research question, "What do citizens in Valkenburg aan de Geul in the Netherlands expect from their local politicians (including the mayor) in terms of interaction? What can politicians learn from this to strengthen the ties with citizens and stimulate citizen participation?" It claims that the interaction largely focuses on personal matters and is of good quality although the frequency of contact along with the approachability and availability of local politicians can be improved.

Firstly, the chapter introduces the municipality, as well as its city council and the College van Burgemeester en Wethouders. Secondly, it discusses the specificities of the sample formed by the respondents of the survey. Thirdly, the paper analyses the actual interaction citizens have with local politicians. Fourthly, it examines citizens' expectations of the interaction between them and their local politicians. Finally, a comparison is made between the actual interaction and the citizens' expectations, before drawing a conclusion.

## 8.2   The Case Study of Valkenburg aan de Geul - a Dutch Municipality

Valkenburg aan de Geul is a municipality situated in the south of the province of Limburg in the Netherlands, in between the cities of Kerkrade, Heerlen and Maastricht. It consists of 16 villages: Berg, Broekhem, Geulhem, Houthem, Oud-Valkenburg, Schin op Geul, Schoonbron, Sibbe, Sint Gerlach, Strabeek, Strucht, Terblijt, Valkenburg, Vilt, Walem and

IJzeren. Overall, the municipality has a total number of 16,707 inhabitants. (Gemeente Valkenburg aan de Geul, 2016a).

The municipality is led by the College van Burgemeester en Wethouders, which consists of six men. Drs. Martin Eurlings, who belongs to the CDA, has held the position of mayor since January 2008. He is responsible for communication and PR, the municipality's human resources, strategic projects, services and permits, as well as public safety and order.
Furthermore, the College consists of four aldermen: Bert Dauven, Carlo Vankan, Remy Meijers, and Jan Vermeer. Firstly, Dauven is responsible for the fields related to social policy. His portfolio consists of youth care, the Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning, the participation law, education, (public) health, the library services and the Heuvelland-agenda Sociaal. Secondly, Vankan's portfolio consists of spatial planning, public housing, infrastructure and water management, public transport, the public area, public horticulture, public supervision, the WABO permits, and the Heuvelland-agenda Fysiek. Thirdly, Meijers's portfolio consists of six policy fields, namely: sports and recreation, sustainability and environment, the quarries, monuments, finances and zelfsturing. Finally, Vermeer's portfolio consists of economics and tourism, art and culture, (incidental) subsidies, event (management), the parking policy and the policy considering parking permits, and the Heuvelland-agenda Economie. Furthermore, he is responsible for the Bedrijvencontactcentrum. The College is completed by Louk Bongarts, who is the municipality's secretary (Gemeente Valkenburg aan de Geul, 2016b).

Figure 8.1 Distribution of seats in the council of Valkenburg aan de Geul
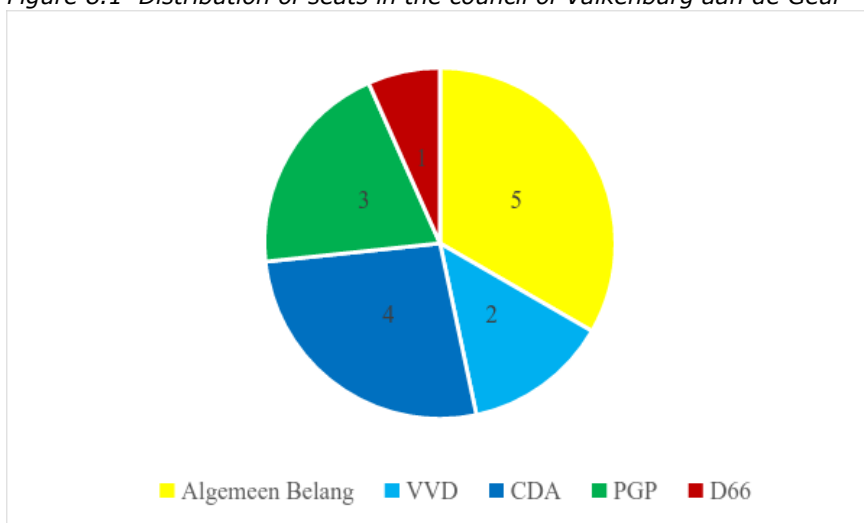
The city council consists of representatives of five parties: Algemeen Belang (AB), VVD, CDA, PGP and D66 (Figure 8.1). The VVD, CDA and D66 are three national parties, while the other two are local parties. The VVD is a liberal party, the CDA a Christian-democratic party and D66 a social-liberal party. Firstly, seven men represent AB: H.W.J.M. Hardij, W.H.M.E. Weerts, J.H. Römling, H.M.J.G. Cobben, R.P.G.M. Schurgers, N.J.M.M. Dauven, and H.W.P. Bemelmans. Secondly, the VVD is represented by one male: H.W.P. Trimbos, and one female: B.M.J.F. Eurlings. Thirdly, the CDA represents four seats in the council, with three males: M.M.N. Knubben, J.E.J. Blom, and J.L.M. Lebouille, and one female: G.G.J.M. Silverentand-Nelissen. Fourthly, PGP holds three seats, being represented by one male: H.J.M. Aussems, and two females: C.M.J. Fulmer-Bouwens, and J.M. Savelsbergh-Auf den Kamp. Finally, D66 represents one seat, which is held by A. Hidding (Gemeente Valkenburg aan de Geul, 2016c).

8.3 Description of the Sample

This section of the chapter elaborates on the sample used in the research in Valkenburg aan de Geul. The interviews were held in the streets of Valkenburg aan de Geul by three interviewers on April 19 and May 2, 2016. Most of the respondents were interviewed in front of the Albert Heijn, a supermarket on the Berkelplein in Valkenburg. In addition, interviews were held on the Theo Dorrenplein and in the village of Berg.

The sample consists of 45 respondents of which 27 were female and 18 were male. The average age of the sample is 58.2 years, while the average number of years of living in the municipality is 43.3. The Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek does not provide an average age of the municipality. However, the age group between 45 and 65 years is the most prominent one with 32.4% (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2011, p. 11). Therefore, the sample is not atypical although a certain bias needs to be considered. On the one hand, the fact that only people of at least 18 years were considered in the survey led to a higher average age as children were excluded. On the other hand, the periods and locations chosen for the interviews showed a certain bias because the proximity to a supermarket as well as conducting the interviews in the morning and early afternoon led to a large share of elderly and female respondents.

8.4 Actual Interaction between Citizens and Local Politicians

The first part of the questionnaire dealt with the contact between citizens and local politicians. The responses to these questions are presented in this part of the analysis to show what the interaction between citizens and their elected representatives at the local level looks like in Valkenburg.

8.4.1 Citizens Contacting Local Politicians

The respondents in Valkenburg aan de Geul can be considered politically rather active, as more than one-third (37.8%) of the sample actively contacted a local politician, i.e. the mayor or a councillor, themselves. An equal number of eight respondents (respectively 17.8% of the whole sample and 47.1% of those who had contacted a local politician) established this contact for private and for general reasons, the former referring to issues related to their families and the private sphere, while the latter includes problems in the public sphere, such as speeding in a residential area (Figure 8.2). Only one person had contacted a local politician about an upcoming decision of the city council. The fact that no one had established contact with their local representatives concerning a decision which had already been taken by the city council confirms the finding of last year's report that councillors do not experience a lot of output-oriented requests by citizens (Peters, et al. 2015, p. 50).

Figure 8.2 Reasons for contacting a local politician
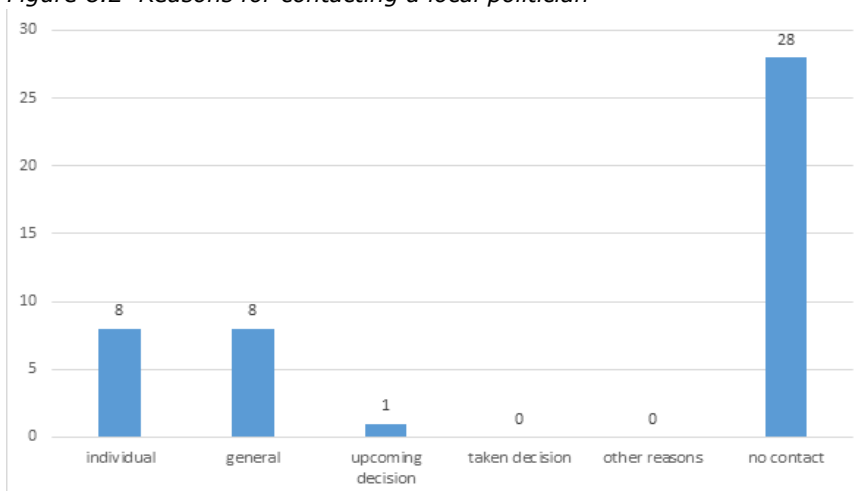
Overall, the answers given during the street interviews indicate that citizens had contacted local politicians for a wide range of issues. These included city planning, problems in the neighbourhood, trees in front of houses, work-related issues, as well as building permits.

In addition to the reasons behind the contact, the quality of the interaction was examined. Here, the answers reveal that local politicians in Valkenburg aan de Geul usually meet the citizens' needs to a satisfactory extent as almost two-thirds (64.7%) stated that they were rather or very satisfied with the outcome (Figure 8.3). The average satisfaction of 3.59 underlines these positive results. However, it was sometimes unclear whether the respondents confused the idea behind the question, i.e. rating the quality of the actual interaction, with rating the quality of the outcome. Some respondents mentioned this dilemma explicitly by stating that they were very happy about the contact with the local politicians but in the end the problem was not resolved, thus leading to a lower score of overall satisfaction.

Figure 8.3 Citizens' satisfaction with the contact they sought themselves
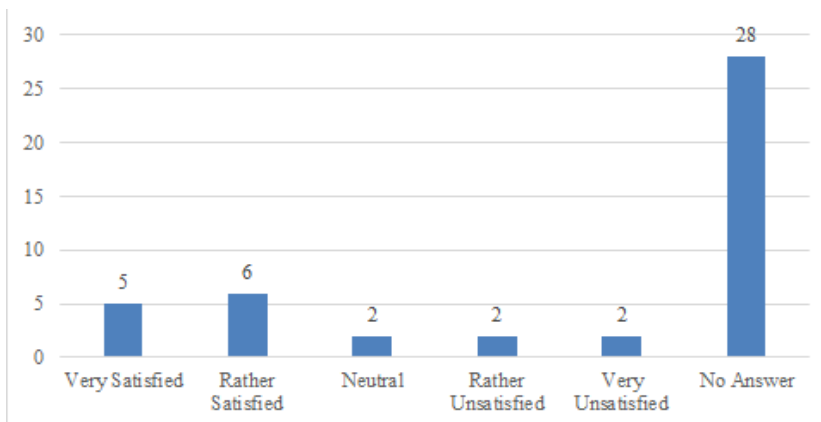
8.4.2 Local Politicians Contacting Citizens

The second question examined how active local politicians were in contacting citizens. The results collected in Valkenburg aan de Geul show that, overall, citizens had more often been in contact with mayors or

councillors upon their own initiative as only 27% had been contacted actively by their local representatives (Figure 8.4). Here, councillors (16%) were more present than mayors (11%), which confirms the overall impression we got during the interviews in that councillors were presented as slightly more approachable.

The reasons for this contact varied significantly as only 2% of the sample were contacted in relation to both input, i.e. asking for their opinion, and output, i.e. explaining decisions taken by the council (Figure 8.5). Moreover, the contact during election times seems to have been rather scarce since local politicians contacted only 2% of the respondents in this context. For the largest share of those who had been contacted, the reason was categorized as "other". Again, the range of issues discussed was rather extensive but some examples include flooding, wedding anniversaries, selling property and taking part in a cultural project for young people in the municipality.

Figure 8.4 Citizens contacted by local politicians, sorted by office
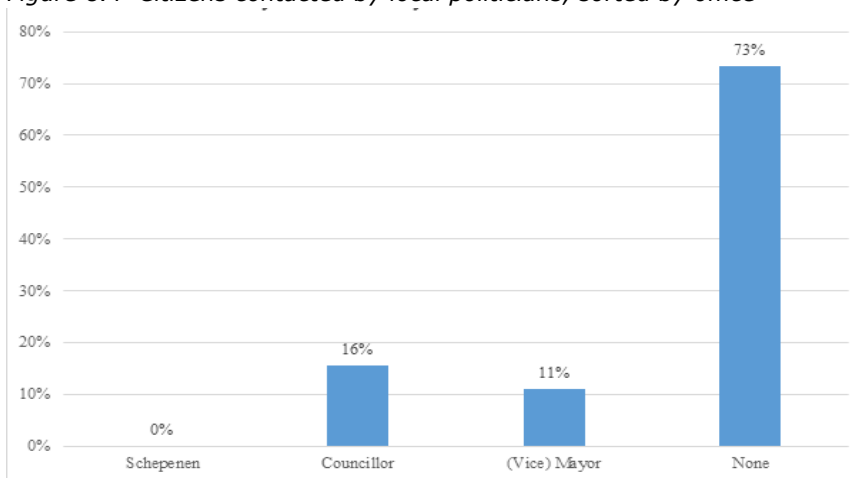
Figure 8.5 Reasons for being contacted by local politicians
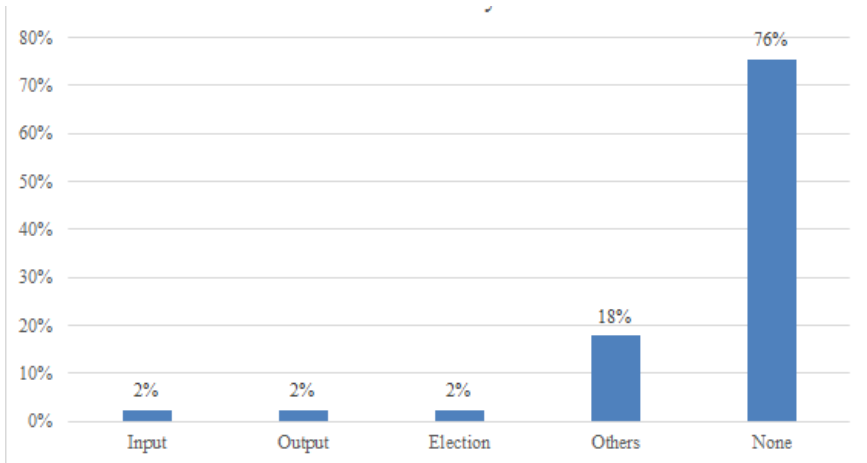
Compared to the results of last year's MaRBLe report, which focused on the local politicians' side of the relationship (Peters et al., 2015), these results reveal that the impression the councillors had concerning their contact with citizens largely fits with the information provided by the respondents. The councillors stated that the input they received was largely issue-related and that citizens focused on their personal sphere (Peters et al. 2015, p. 47). Our respondents claim to have contacted local politicians mainly about individual or general problems, although the latter were often connected to their personal situation. Almost no contact was established concerning upcoming decisions or those already taken. It can, thus, be assumed that the input by citizens is, indeed, largely very specific and not related to political discussion but rather to personal issues.

8.5   Expectations concerning interaction between citizens and local politicians

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the respondents' ideal conception of their interaction with local politicians. Here, again, the focus laid on both sides of the dialogue and respondents were asked to elaborate

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on their expectations for contacting and being contacted by their representatives: the results are presented in this part of the report.

8.5.1 Expectations of contacting local politicians

In addition to the *de facto* contact, the questionnaire also covered the expectations citizens have concerning their interaction with local politicians. The respondents could express when, regardless of their previous experience, they would potentially contact the mayor or a councillor. As the chart below illustrates, the majority of our sample would not contact a politician for any of the reasons presented by the questionnaire (Figure 8.6). This matches the overall impression that a large share of the population has never contacted their local representatives.

Figure 8.6   Reasons for which citizens could imagine contacting a local politician*
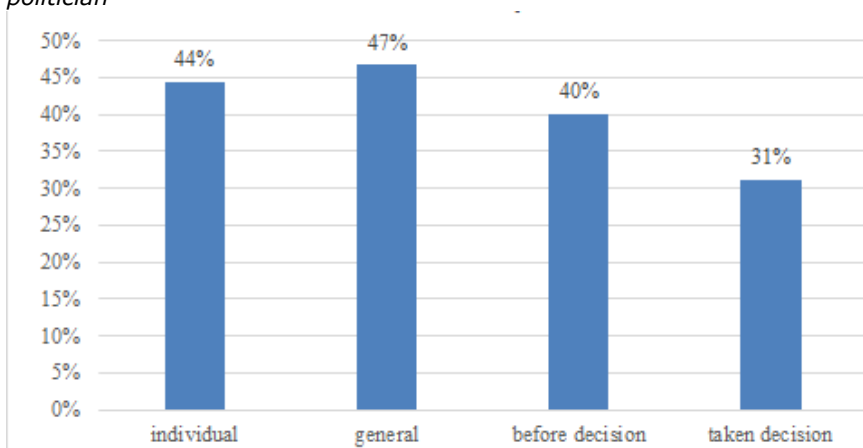
*yes/no answer per category possible

As can be seen in Figure 8.6 the first two options, contact for individual or general reasons, which refer to an input-related exchange, are the most popular choices. This matches the results presented above, according to which citizens usually seek contact about issues concerning their private spheres with the aim to provide politicians with input on things which need to be changed in the municipality. The latter two options, which are

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support-related and refer to contacting the mayor or a councillor about an issue on which a decision is about to be taken or has already been taken by the city council, are less popular. Especially the possibility to express one's support (or one's opposition) about a past decision did not appeal to many respondents with a standard answer being, "Why would I do that? That won't change anything.".

Those respondents indicating that they would, potentially, contact a local politician for one of the abovementioned reasons were asked to reveal whom exactly they would contact and why. As the table below shows, aldermen were by far the most popular choice of contact person for citizens (Figure 8.7). The mayor was usually picked because the respondent knew him personally, whereas other politicians seemed to appear more approachable to the public.

Figure 8.7 Frequency of mentions of local politicians as citizens' potential contact person

Name of the Politician	Position	Number of Mentions
M.J.A. Eurlings	Mayor	6
H.M.L. Dauven	Alderman	11
C.P.J.L. Vankan	Alderman	4
R. Meijers	Alderman	6
J.M.M. Vermeer	Alderman	9
M.M.N. Knubben	Councillor	1
H.J.M. Aussems	Councillor	1
A. Hidding	Councillor	1
J. Kleijnen	Councillor (former)	3

The reasons for choosing a certain person varied, although the largest share of the respondents, who would contact a politician in principle, stated that the politician's position would be the decisive factor for their decision (Figure 8.8). This could also explain why the aldermen Dauven and Vermeer were mentioned especially frequently since their portfolio (or: responsibility) might be more important or relevant from the citizens' point of view.

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Figure 8.8 Reasons for choosing a particular politician for the contact
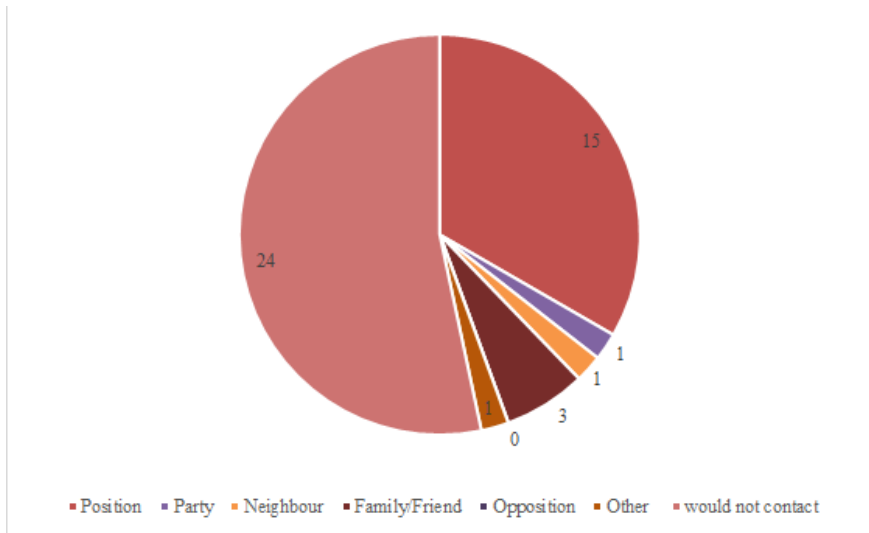
Another factor is personal ties with the politician through family or friends, which, of course, makes them more approachable. Only one respondent would make the choice based on the criterion that the politician should be from their kern, the neighbourhoods in Valkenburg aan de Geul. This finding seems to somewhat contradict last year's MaRBLe report, which stated that the kernen play a significant role in the political life of the municipality (Peters et al, 2015, p. 47). Unfortunately, the street survey did not confirm this impression even with regard to remarks made during our conversations with the respondents.

8.5.2 Expectations of being contacted by local politicians

Overall, the majority of the respondents favoured a more active approach by local politicians, as almost two-thirds indicated that their representatives should seek contact with them (Figure 8.9). Those 38% who did not agree with the idea of more interaction in local politics often mentioned that their ideas "would not change anything anyway" or wondered what politicians were supposed to do "with all those different opinions; that would not enhance the process at all". Therefore, the significant share of respondents not wishing to be contacted more

frequently does not necessarily think that the exchange with local politicians is completely undesirable but rather inefficient. The general impression conveyed during the interviews supports this idea of citizen input being impractical and not beneficial for the political process. Furthermore, a problem which was commonly identified is the reconstruction of an old hotel. This decision has recently been taken by the city council and many respondents claim that they were very unhappy with the outcome as "we already have enough hotels" and "the money would better be spent on different projects". Here, some respondents also mentioned that this decision serves as an example of how little their input would be considered and, consequently, that they could not change anything, even if local politicians would contact them more.

Figure 8.9 Citizens' expectations on being contacted by local politicians
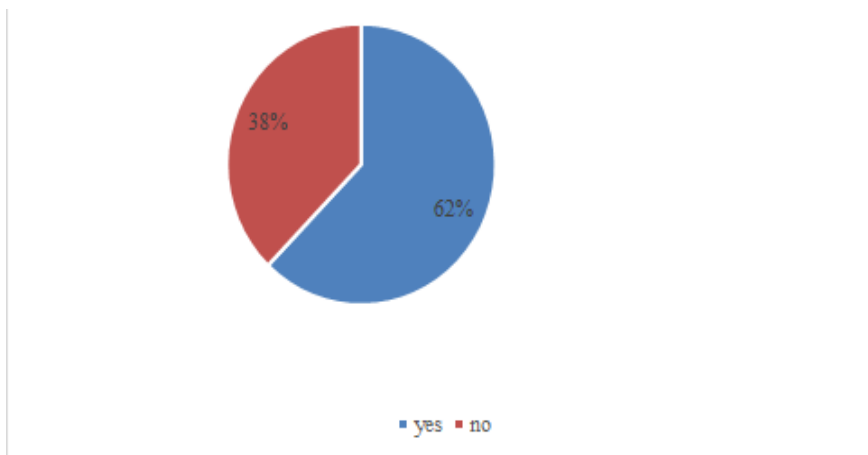
Those respondents in favour of more contact initiated by local politicians were further asked in which context this contact should take place. For each of the three categories (input, output and elections), they could answer "yes" or "no", thus, leading to an overall score above 100% (Figure 8.10).

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Figure 8.10 Reasons for which citizens expect to be contacted by local politicians
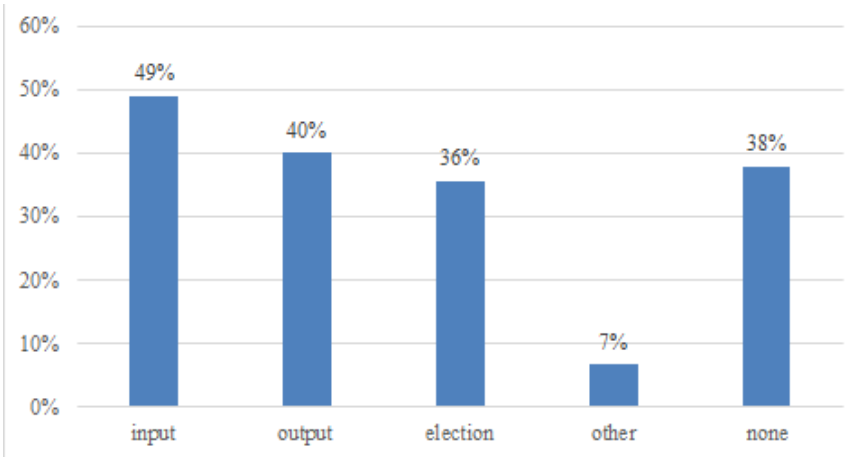
Almost half of the respondents are interested in being contacted more actively for providing politicians with their input. Despite the abovementioned disenchantment with this type of interaction, this category proved to be the most popular option in this survey, with output and elections scoring 40% and 36%, respectively. Some people also mentioned additional ideas, such as the possibility for politicians to communicate with citizens through the local newspaper and other media channels.

8.5.3 Means of Communication for the Interaction between Citizens and Local Politicians

The last two content-oriented questions of the questionnaire asked the respondents to name the means of communication they would prefer for their interaction with local politicians. In general, personal contact, which could take the form of office hours or meetings around town, was the most popular choice. Citizens across all age groups seem to value the face-to-face approach, as it allows for an immediate reaction and, thus, promises to be very effective.

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When contacting citizens, local politicians should, thus, try to do so in a personal meeting. However, phone calls (15 mentions) and communication via email (11 mentions) were also rather popular (Figure 8.12). Those answers falling into the "other"-category were either people who did not want to be contacted at all or who preferred regular mail to any other means of communication. The same specifications hold for the question about how citizens would prefer to contact local politicians (Figure 8.11).

The only major difference between the preferences for being contacted by politicians and actively contacting them is that phone calls gain in popularity (18 mentions) and while that of emails declines slightly (9 mentions) (Figure 8.12). Strikingly, only one person would establish the contact through social media, despite some rather young respondents among the sample.

The analysis of the responses by age group is based on an article by Burstein (2015) who created the five age groups used in this report for an examination of customers' preferred means of communication with companies. Overall, personal contact is significantly more popular in a political context. Burstein's findings show that middle-aged people prefer contact via email while social media and other recent forms of communication are more popular among the youngest segment of the population. The sample from Valkenburg aan de Geul partially confirms these marketing-related findings in that traditional means of communication are more likely to be used (with the exception of regular mail) than rather modern forms, such as Facebook. The only mention of social media was made by a young citizen between 18 and 34 years of age. However, email is a means of communication which is employed by and appeals to the very young and the older age groups rather than the middle-aged segments of Burstein's study.

Figure 8.11 Citizens' preferred means of communication for contacting local politicians, displayed by age group
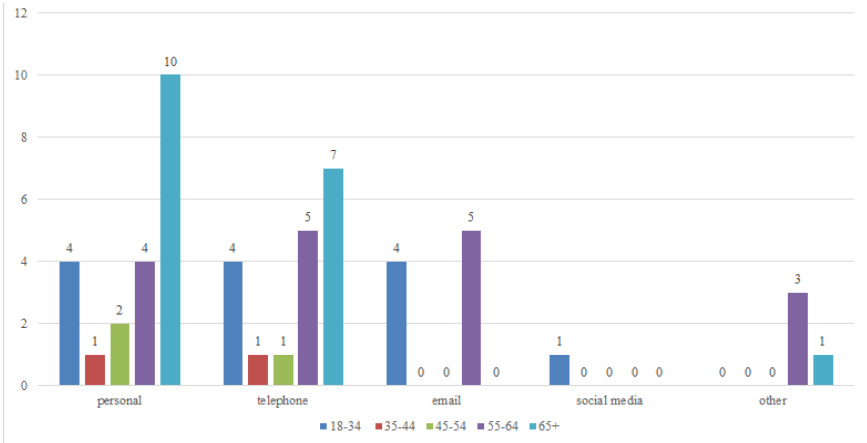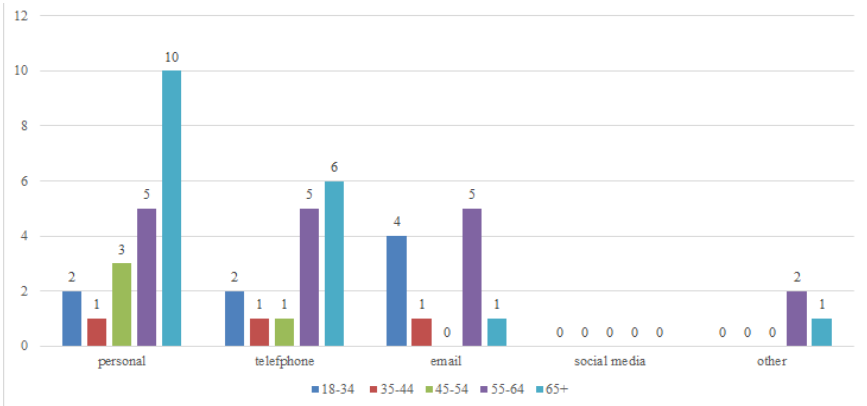

Figure 8.12 Citizens' preferred means of communication for being contacted by local politicians, displayed by age group

All in all, these results reveal that local politics have remained a largely personalized sphere, where communication should be easy and fast but where the person contacted is never outside of the reach of the person contacting which should be reflected in the type of communication chosen. The overall impression gained during the interviews underlined this preference for an accessible and approachable attitude towards local politics and politicians. Nevertheless, a well-working link with the citizens cannot be established without the possibility to contact the local representatives via email. Therefore, a constantly updated website containing personal contact details of councillors and aldermen as well as of the mayor are important.

Further, these findings confirm the councillors' perception of citizens' preferred means of communication presented in last year's report. Here, personal contact was ranked highest, followed by email, social media, and telephone (Peters et al., 2015, p. 47). A clear difference is the emphasis on communication channels such as Facebook and Twitter. While councillors perceived these as third most important for receiving input, the respondents of this study did not mirror this account. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the age composition of the sample as the number of respondents in the age groups of 18-34 and 35-44 years was rather low. Consequently, local politicians in Valkenburg aan de Geul should not neglect the aspect of social media in creating their public profiles.

8.6   Expectations and Actual Interaction

This section analyses the differences between the actual interaction and the expectations citizens have about interaction with local politicians. It does so by drawing a comparison between the actual contact citizens had and their wishes to be contacted or to contact politicians.

When comparing the actual contact which has been established upon the initiative of citizens to their expectations of contacting local politicians, a striking difference is that a large share of the respondents (40%) claims that they would contact their representatives about an upcoming decision, while only one person actually has done so. This discrepancy might be based on a biased answer as the interviewers used a centre for asylum seekers as an example for this category, which usually raises more concern than a decision on another city planning project. However, this result also indicates that a difference exists between actual citizen participation and their ideas about how committed they should be to political life at the local

level. Further, this shows that citizens wish to make their voice heard more often but may shy away from doing so in reality. The same discrepancy occurs for taken decisions, where 31% of the respondents claim they would contact a politician, while none has ever done so.

The differences are even more striking when it comes to citizens being contacted by local politicians because discrepancies occur in all categories. Firstly, despite 62% of the respondents wishing to be contacted, only 27% have actually ever experienced this type of interaction upon the politician's initiative. This indicates that local politicians in Valkenburg aan de Geul may be more active in approaching citizens without having to fear being too invasive. Secondly, 49% of the respondents expressed their wish to have a say in input-related issues while 40% mentioned the same for output-related matters, and further 36% wish to receive more election-related information from local politicians. However, for all three issues respectively, only 2% of the respondents have ever been contacted.

Hence, there is a strong tendency in the population to yearn for more interaction and contact with their local representatives. This desire is mainly based on the perception of politicians as being equals, rather than superiors. The findings of this study, thus, confirm Denters' (2013) research in multiple aspects. First, party democracy and descriptive representation do not seem to play a decisive role in Dutch citizens' preferences for local politics. When asked about their motives for choosing a certain politician to contact, the respondents did not mention any characteristics which would be relevant for descriptive representation, such as gender, age, or ethnicity. At the same time, only one respondent would choose their contact person based on their political party affiliation. In addition to being in line with Denters' (2013) study, this finding also confirms the councillors' perspective presented in last year's report where local politicians stated that they did not have the impression of political party affiliation playing a decisive role in citizens' considerations before contacting them (Peters et al., 2015, pp. 49-50).

Secondly, the two other roles, trustee and democratic watchdog, appear to remain essential in Dutch local politics. Citizens wish to be more engaged in and considered by the political process, as confirmed by a large share of the sample. On the one hand, this desire hints at the perception of local politicians as democratic watchdogs who should monitor the functioning of the democratic process and ensure that citizens can provide input through the established communication channels. On the other hand, the impressions gained during the interviews hint at a stronger tendency to favour the trustee model as respondents want for politicians to not merely enable them to give more input but to respect the input given and to turn towards a more citizen-oriented approach to politics. Therefore, they expect a closer tie between the local electorate and their representatives

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who are fully trusted and equipped with more than just a mandate to represent.

8.7   Conclusion

After analyzing the answers to the questionnaires, the expectations of citizens in Valkenburg aan de Geul towards their local politicians become apparent. Citizens tend to have a great overall interest in local politics. On the one hand, the majority of them tend to contact politicians concerning personal matters. When asked about their impression of the politicians' (inter)actions, citizens tend to be very satisfied. Generally, citizens consider councillors more available than the mayor. On the other hand, citizens are mainly contacted by local politicians for reasons other than input, output or elections, such as wedding anniversaries, birthdays, and participation in cultural projects. Hence, individual reasons, which concern the citizens themselves, tend to be a reason for contact with local politicians instead of current political decisions.

Additionally, respondents were asked to choose their favoured mode of interaction and their preferred contact person among their local politicians. In line with the small amount of previous interaction, the sample shows that the interest to get in contact with local representatives is similarly low. The overall impression reveals the political disenchantment of respondents concerning them taking action to influence politics. Respondents would contact local politicians for individual reasons mainly. If so, their politician of choice would rather be an alderman instead of the mayor unless the respondent knew him personally.

In conclusion, the interest in becoming engaged in local politics for input other than personal matters is low due to political disenchantment or simply a lack of interest in local politics in general. The belief of ineffective interaction and a stagnant political situation decrease citizens' interest to take action. However, in return, 62% of the respondents want to be contacted mainly for input. This is in line with the two roles formulated by Denters (2013): the democratic watchdog and the trustee model. These roles already proved to be significant in Denters' research. Thus, this research confirms his findings. The means for being contacted by and contacting politicians should be in person, via telephone or email. Keeping in mind the findings presented above, politicians are encouraged to create incentives for citizens to communicate their interests. Not only should they establish locations that are easily accessible and where they become more approachable for citizens, but they should not be afraid to actively seek personal contact. This could be achieved by having a stand at local markets

and fairs, or visiting community projects and work places. Additionally, incorporated ideas of citizens should be promoted and published via local media in order for citizens to see the impact of their ideas.

In comparison to last year's report, a surprisingly small amount of politicians (27%) actively contacted respondents. This stands in stark contrast to the MAELG survey presented in last year's report which collects data on Dutch councillors' perception of their role. Overall, 46.9% stated they contacted citizens "a few times a week" while 44.7% claimed to be in contact with citizens "a few times a month" (Peters et al., 2015, p. 13). This discrepancy can potentially be explained by a negative bias of the sample of this study or by a misconception on the citizens' part. In the latter case, citizens, for example, might not perceive a brief conversation in the street as "being contacted" by a politician while the politician counts this encounter as an interaction with a citizen.

Councillors do not see themselves in the role of explaining council decisions to citizens (Peters et al., 2015, p. 13). The results of this report seem to indicate that citizens do not feel a greater need to get involved or see themselves as partly responsible for policies. The aim of the Dutch governments with the enactment of the LGA in 2002 is zelfsturing which implies the responsibility and existing possibility of citizens to engage into politics and change them in their interest. The concept allows citizens to have an impact on politics but simultaneously implies the condition that citizens are interested in and willing to interact with councillors on existing contact points. This study finds that more points of interaction need to be established for successful participatory local governance within the Netherlands.

Chapter 9 Conclusions

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

> **What do citizens in four municipalities in Flanders, Wallonia, Germany and the Netherlands experience and expect from their local politicians (including the mayor) in terms of interaction, and what are significant differences?**

Where useful, we will relate our findings to the conclusions of our research project of last year, when we focused on the experiences of local councillors in their interaction with citizens (Peters et al 2015).

In the final section we will focus on the second part of the research question:

> **What can politicians learn from this to strengthen the ties with citizens and stimulate citizen participation?**

Citizens contacting politicians

In most models of representative democracy, it is considered valuable when citizens can approach politicians. We asked the citizens whether they had ever contact a local politician. In Riemst and Visé, almost half of the citizens we interviewed had contacted a politician in their municipality. In Valkenburg and Übach-Palenberg, it was a bit less than in Belgium: one third of the citizens we talked to had approached a local politician.

What reasons do citizens have for contacting a local politician? Based on Easton's model of the political system and last year's results of this MaRBLe project (Peters et al 2015), we distinguished between several categories: individual or general/collective problems or issues (input), an upcoming decision (agenda-related input), a decision that was taken by the council (output-related) or 'other'. Most citizens contact a local politician about a problem that they experience. We made an attempt to distinguish

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between individual problems and problems of a more general nature, but it was not always easy to make that distinction, we realized. We found clear examples of individual problems – to ask for a job, for example – and also examples of more general nature - like parking or traffic problems in the municipality -, but sometimes the reasons people mentioned were difficult to categorize. Examples of that are parking or speeding problems in people's own street, or people trying to prevent the closure of a local school their kids go to: is that an individual or a collective problem?

That being said, we found that in all four municipalities having an issue or problem is the main reason for contacting a politician, and it is both individual and collective issues. Only in Übach-Palenberg it was mostly individual problems that made people getting in touch with politicians; in the other three municipalities it was more or less equally divided. Based on our research of last year, we expected that Belgian citizens would mostly have individual reasons for contacting a local politician, but that is apparently not the case. At least, not more than in Übach-Palenberg.

We asked the citizens of the four municipalities how satisfied they were with the contacts with local politicians, but we were somewhat disappointed with the results and the meaning of the findings. On the one hand, it is remarkable how similar the findings are: the average satisfaction is between 3,17 and 3,59 in all four municipalities, on a scale from 0 to 5. But we realized that it is very difficult to interpret this finding: what does it say about the relationship between politicians and citizens?

That doubt is reinforced by the realization that people have difficulty distinguishing between satisfaction with the result versus satisfaction with the contact itself. The satisfaction results are probably strongly related with the extent that people got what they wanted, and not so much with the quality of the contact itself.

Politicians contacting citizens

In last year's MaRBLe project we found that most local politicians leave the initiative for interaction to the citizens (Peters et all 2015). But the politicians also do their share, as we found out this year. In all four municipalities, some of the citizens we talked to were approached by a local politician. In Belgium, more citizens are approached than in Germany and the Netherlands: around 40% of the citizens in Riemst and Visé were contacted by a local politician; in Übach-Palenberg and Valkenburg it was less: around 30% and 25%.

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What reasons do politicians have to contact citizens? Based on Easton's model of the political system, we assumed it would either be to ask them for input, to ask for their support in an upcoming election, or to explain municipal output to them. When we asked people about it, we found surprising similarities between the four municipalities. First of all, most people are approached for 'other reasons'. These are all kinds of things, often more in the personal sphere, for example, the mayor bringing congratulations for a wedding anniversary.

Election-related interaction is the second most mentioned reason for a politician to contact a citizen. The citizens we interviewed were approached more often for this reason – politicians handing out party brochures for example – than for the other possibilities we asked about. It is important to note that we suspect that the number of people mentioning election-related reasons should probably have been even higher. People often forget about this kind of interaction or communication, we noticed. When we checked, people said things like: 'O yes, of course, I forgot, during election time I was indeed approached by politicians…'.

Politicians approaching citizens to ask for their input, or to explain council decisions (output) are not a very common thing in the four municipalities we did our research in. We already noticed this in last year's research, because councillors told us they do not often take the initiative to contact citizens for these purposes (Peters et al 2015), and this result is mirrored in this year's report. In all four municipalities, there were only a few citizens that were asked for their input, and few people were approached with explanations of decisions of the council.

Expectations of citizens concerning the interaction with politicians

In the section above, we reported on the actual interaction between citizens and politicians in the four selected municipalities. For our research project, we were also interested in the normative expectations that people have about interaction with local politicians. What is it that people in Riemst, Visé, Übach-Palenberg and Valkenburg expect from the representatives that were elected to the municipal council?

First of all, it is very clear that citizens in all four municipalities expect the local politicians to get in touch with them. A large part of the citizens - in Visé and Übach-Palenberg, more than 90% - want politicians to contact them. In Valkenburg, this percentage is the lowest (62%). The 38% percent of the people who don't want politicians to contact them mostly

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give reasons that can be formulated as: 'Why would I want that, it wouldn't change anything'.

The reasons people want politicians to get in touch with them is mostly for giving input. In all four municipalities, this is the reason that is mentioned most. Other reasons are explaining council decisions (output), and election-related communication. Explaining output comes second. People have different reasons for not mentioning this often: on the one hand, they feel that explaining decisions after they are taken comes too late ('nothing can be done about it anymore, right?') and, on the other hand, they sometimes point out to us that the municipality (i.e. not the politicians) already informs the citizens about new policies and rules. Election-related communication is mentioned the least. People sometimes made it very clear to us that they don't want this kind of interaction.

Citizens also mentioned other reasons for expecting politicians to contact them. Interestingly, we found that some citizens would like their politicians to get in touch with them simply to get to know each other a bit more. Especially in Riemst, people mentioned this remarkable reason several times. It is the ultimate example of the trustee perception of a representative: a politician that is in close contact with his grass roots and who knows what his voters want and do.

Citizens also consider taking the initiative to get in touch with local politicians. We asked them whether they would do this, and for what reason. The results show that, in all four municipalities, citizens have different reasons for possibly contacting a politician, but there is no real pattern: individual problems, general problems, before a council decision will be taken, and after a decision is already taken, all these situations are mentioned by people when asked why they would approach a local politician. Based on the earlier research (Peters et al 2015), we might have expected Belgian citizens (in Riemst and Visé) to mention individual problems most, but that is not what we found.

Finally, we present some figures on the different types of local politicians that citizens would contact. The mayor is definitely on top of the list for citizens in the municipalities where we did our research. In Übach-Palenberg, about ¾ of the people mention the mayor when we ask which politician they would go to if they needed one. In Riemst, a bit more than half of the people refer to the mayor when asked which politician they would go to, often adding comments like 'the mayor, of course'.

As the mayor is either directly elected as mayor (Germany) or the leader of the largest party in the elections (Belgium), we were not very surprised by these findings: the mayor is the most visible politician in the local political

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system in both countries. It is surprising though that in Visé more people would go see a councillor, rather than the mayor. It seems that the distance between the mayor of Visé and the citizens we talked to is somewhat larger than in Riemst and Übach-Palenberg, as people explained their preference by saying that it is generally difficult to get in touch with the mayor and that it is unlikely he will give a direct answer to their questions.

In Valkenburg, the aldermen were the most popular choice for people when planning to contact a local politician. The reason people gave was that the aldermen are the ones in the position to actually do something for them, and they often mentioned that they would choose the one with the relevant portfolio.

The position that the politician occupies is by far the most important reason for people to approach a certain politician, whether it is the mayor, the alderman or a councillor. Having a personal relationship with a specific politician (friendship or family) is also often mentioned as a reason. The political party the politician is representing or the fact that he/she belongs to either the coalition or the opposition is seldom mentioned. That fits with the image that local politics are not very 'politicized', at least not in the Netherlands (Denters c.s. 2011). To our surprise, contacting a politician from your own neighborhood or village is not a common thing amongst our respondents. This finding seems to somewhat contradict last year's report, which stated that, in Valkenburg and Riemst, the villages (dorpen or kernen) play a significant role in the political life of the municipality (Peters et al, 2015, p. 47).

Recommendations for local politicians

This study finds that many citizens would like to be contacted by local politicians to make sure that their opinions on matters are heard. The vast majority of the respondents would expect local politicians to get in touch with them, mainly because they would like their input to be taken into consideration, either before a specific decision is taken or more in general.

Hence, councillors should engage with citizens more often and not only during election times, for it is evident that the electorate is concerned with their participation into local politics in terms of input. Taking into consideration this fact would increase the possibility of being elected again because politicians would demonstrate to be what the citizens expect them to be: both democratic watchdogs and trustees.

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As a solution for the problem of citizens feeling left out of the decision-making process, we propose a combination of asking citizens for their input, involving them into matters that are up for decision-making and employing a feedback-mechanism for decisions already taken. Each of these measures requires effective communication.

Contrary to what we might have expected, most citizens want to be contacted in person. Email and telephone are popular too. Using social media for this is not popular at all amongst the citizens we talked to. That might be caused by an overrepresentation of older people in our interviews, but the message has to be taken seriously, of course. But we believe that using social media to contact or inform citizens is time efficient, and could be a great way to involve the younger generations. Nevertheless, the results show that so far most citizens are either not aware of this option, not familiar with social media, or simply not willing to use it. Therefore, if local politicians decide to do so, it is important to make the citizens aware of this option.

We would propose using a combination of different communication modes: meetings, email newsletters and social media, depending on the message and the target groups.

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Annex 1

Questionnaire for street interviews 'Inside local democracy'

Introduction
- I am a student from Maastricht University
- We are doing research into your municipality
- Can I ask you some questions about that?
- I have 10 questions. It will take about 5 minutes

Before we start, I need to check:
- Do you live in this municipality?
If not: thank you, but our research focuses solely on this municipality

- Are you allowed to vote for local elections?
If not, thank you, but our research focuses on the relationship between local politicians and their voters

OK, let's start.

Question 1
[*A, B and C might overlap if people start talking. Try not to annoy them at the start of the questionnaire and skip the remaining questions if they have told you the answer already*]

A. Did you ever contact the mayor or a councillor of your municipality?

> Mark the answer:
> NO: …
> YES: … with mayor/councillor

     B. If yes, what was it about?

> Write the answer down in a few words, and mark the right answer category (without discussing the categories with the respondent):
>
> 1. An **individual** problem for you or your family (like a family member who needs a job or a house)
> 2. A problem you experience that is of a more **general** nature (like people speeding in your street)
> 3. An **upcoming decision** of the council or the municipality (like a new refugee center outside the town)
> 4. A **decision** that has been **made** by the council or the municipality (like higher taxes)

     C. On a scale between 1-5, how satisfied were you with the contact? 1 = not satisfied at all, 5 = very satisfied)

> Mark the answer:
> 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

Question 2
     A. Were you ever contacted by the mayor or a councillor of your municipality?

> Mark the answer:
> NO: …

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YES: … with mayor/councillor

B. If yes, what was it about?

Write the answer down in a few words, and mark the right answer category (without discussing the categories with the respondent): 1. To ask your opinion/input about municipality matters before they decide 2. To explain council decisions 3. Election-related (to explain their program or promises for the elections) 4. Other

Question 3

A. Do you expect local politicians to actively get in touch with citizens like you? (we specifically mean <u>politicians</u>, not the municipality as a whole)

Mark the answer: NO: … YES: …

B. If you said YES, for what reason should they get in touch with citizens like you?

Let me give you a few options, and then please tell me if you feel local politicians should contact citizens about:
- o To ask your opinion/input about municipality matters before they decide: YES/NO
- o To explain council decisions: YES/NO
- o To explain their **election** program and promises for the elections: YES/NO

o   (Other)

> If people said NO and give an explanation, you could write it down here:

Question 4

For what kind of problem or demand would you consider contacting a local politician? (and again we specifically mean politicians, not the municipality as a whole)

Please indicate the likeliness of this:

- An individual problem for you or your family (like a family member who needs a job or a house): YES/NO
- A problem you experience and that is of a more general nature (like people speeding in your street): YES/NO
- An upcoming decision for the municipality that concerns you (like a merger with another municipality, or a new refugee center outside the town): YES/NO
- A decision that has been made by the council or the municipality: YES/NO

Question 5
A. If you answered YES on at least one of the options in the former question, which local politician would you contact?

> Write down the first name:
> ….

B. [*if they gave you an name*] Why would you choose this politician?

Mark the right answer category (without discussing the categories with the respondent):

Because:
- o of his/her specific position (for ex.: mayor)
- o of his political party
- o he/she lives in the same village/neighbourhood/street
- o he/she is a family member or friend
- o he/she belongs to the opposition/coalition
- o other: …

Question 6

Which means of communication do you prefer to contact a local politician?

Mark the right answer category (without discussing the categories with the respondent):

- In person: Office hours (spreekuur)/at a social event/in the street/other: …
- Telephone
- E-mail
- Social media
- Other: …

Question 7

Same question as Question 6, but now the other way around:
With which means of communication do you want local politicians
to contact *you*?

Mark the right answer category (without discussing the categories
with the respondent):

- In person
- Telephone
- E-mail
- Social media
- Other: …

Finally, we have a few closing questions:

Question 8
Do you know the Mayor's name? [*let them say it*]

Write down the name:
….

Question 9
Do you know a councillor's name? [*let them say it*]

Write down the name:
….

Question 10

Finally, for our statistics:
- May I ask your age? ….
- How long do you live in this municipality? ….
- Gender?

<u>To conclude</u>

- Do you have any questions or remarks? [*don't promise to send them the results!*]
- I want to sincerely thank you for your time and effort

Notes for the interviewer:
….
…
…

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