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Scrutiny and policymaking in local councils: how parties use council tools

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ABSTRACT


In recent years, political scientists have gained greater understanding of how national parliamentary parties use their parliamentary tools: that is under what conditions they submit parliamentary questions or amendments to legislation. We know surprisingly little about how local councillors use the tools at their disposal: under what conditions do these local councillors submit questions to the local executive? When do they submit amendments to local ordinances? We examine to what extent the use of amendments and questions reflects differences between local party groups' ideologies in terms of anti-elitism and the left-right dimension, and differences between coalition and opposition parties. On the basis of an analysis 454 local council groups in 53 Dutch municipalities we find considerable evidence for differences in the use of council tools between coalition and opposition parties.

KEYWORDS Local councils; coalition; opposition; left-right politics; anti-elitism

1. Introduction

Local councils form the linchpin between local communities and local governments.¹ Therefore, the behaviour of the members of these local council is important to understand from both the perspective of political science and democratic practice. Local councillors are supposed to represent the people in their municipality, set local public policies and scrutinise actions of the local executive board. To do this, local councillors have several tools at their disposal. The present study examines the use of two of these council tools:² written questions and amendments. We know surprisingly little about how members of municipal councils use these tools: under what conditions do local councillors submit questions to the executive board? When do they submit amendments to local ordinances? Our central question therefore is: *what explains the use of council tools by members of local councils?*

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Local councils have been studied extensively, but our knowledge on the actual behaviour of local councillors remains relatively limited. The literature on local councils is dominated by survey research mostly focusing on role orientations of local councillors (Egner, Sweeting, and Klok 2013b). These suggest that local councillors attach high value to setting their municipality's main policy goals and scrutinising the actions of the local government, but that they feel less content with their actual contributions to these activities (Klok and Denters 2013). Many of these studies do not include parties into their analyses, even though the importance of political parties in local councils has been widely acknowledged (Razin 2013; Van Vonno 2019). At the same time, political scientists have gained a greater understanding of how parties in national legislatures use their parliamentary tools in recent years: that is under what conditions they submit questions or amendments (e.g., Höhmann and Sieberer 2020; Otjes and Louwse 2021).

This study aims to contribute to this literature by analysing the extent to which party groups in local councils use the tools at their disposal. Our sample includes 454 local party groups in 53 Dutch municipal councils in one council term. We combine data on the use of written questions and amendments with ideological profiles based on specific manifestos of those parties.

Based on theories and findings on party behaviour in legislatures (Louwse and Otjes 2019), we identify three factors that may affect the use of council tools by party groups. The first factor is the use of anti-elite rhetoric. Parties that use anti-elite rhetoric are more likely to be 'responsive', using the council as a bully pulpit to amplify citizens' objections to the executive's policies, for instance by asking questions. These parties are less likely to be 'responsible', using the council as a place to work on policy alternatives, for instance by submitting amendments. The second factor is the ideological distance between the party and the governing coalition. Left-right ideology may structure council behaviour: the greater the distance between the executive coalition's and a party's policy positions, the more likely that party will use council tools, as it disagrees more with the executive's policies. The third factor is the distinction between coalition and opposition. Opposition parties are more likely to use council tools as they cannot use informal channels to influence the executive's policies.

We find a substantial difference between the tool use of coalition parties and opposition parties: coalition parties submit more questions and amendments than opposition parties. The findings do not support our other expectations. Overall, we contribute to an understudied field by showing the actual behaviour of parties in municipal councils finding strong evidence for a coalition-opposition divide in local councils.

2. What we know about local councillors

Local councils perform essential functions in democracies. Just as national parliaments link the people to the national government, local councils connect citizens to their local governments. Nonetheless, our knowledge of how local councillors perform these roles in European democracies is relatively limited. Recent reviews conclude that research on local councils is ‘vastly underdeveloped’ (Downs 2014, 622), and that it ‘remains minimal, with little outside of role perceptions, councillor and ward demographic studies and local government reform critiques’ (McGarvey and Stewart 2018, 54).

Surveys of individual local councillors dominate the existing body of literature. They suggest that local councils have relatively little influence on the policies of municipal governments. From a list of twenty-three actors, councillors rank themselves as only the ninth most influential on the municipality’s activities (Plüss and Kübler 2013, 206–207). European mayors also recognise this limited influence (Egner and Heinelt 2008). Moreover, evidence suggests that local councils operate in a consensual way rather than a conflictual one (Navarro et al. 2018). Rather than directly examining local councillors’ behaviour, many studies have focused on their role orientations. This has resulted in studies on how important local councillors deem specific aspects of representation (Copus 2008; De Groot, Denters, and Klok 2010; Karlsson 2012; Rao 1998; Verhelst et al. 2014). A survey in fifteen European countries and Israel has enabled the comparative study of local councillors (Egner, Sweeting, and Klok 2013b), leading to insights into councillors’ notions of democracy (Heinelt 2013), their responsiveness (Denters and Klok 2013), and their representative style (Karlsson 2013b).

The main tasks that European local councillors see for themselves are: defining the main goals of the municipality, representing local requests, and scrutinising the executive (Klok and Denters 2013). However, when it comes to their actual contribution to these tasks, councillors experience a ‘role behaviour deficit’, in particular where it comes to setting main goals and controlling. Studies suggest that the reform of the institutional structure of local government systems affect councillors’ policymaking and scrutiny activities (Berg and Rao 2005). A repeated Dutch survey shows that after a local government reform that was explicitly intended to increase to strengthen the position of the local council vis-à-vis the executive board, local councillors attached greater importance to accountability and scrutiny (De Groot, Denters, and Klok 2010).

Actions and behaviour of local councillors have been rarely observed directly. Scholars have relied heavily on self-reported behaviour and perceptions of other local actors. This has given some insight into local councillors’ workload and how much time they spend on various activities such as council meetings, desk work, party summits and meetings with citizens (Egner 2015;

Koop 2016; Thrasher et al. 2015). Several qualitative studies based on interviews with, mainly British, local politicians have also added to our current knowledge on local councillors, e.g., on the experiences of councillors in leadership positions and their views on various aspects of the role and work of local council (Bochel and Bochel 2010) and the relationship between councillor's public and private lives (Barren, Crawley, and Wood 1991). Coleman et al. (2009) present a relatively rare example of a study finding out what local councillors actually do to scrutinise local public services, not only based on an impressive number of interviews, but also on direct observations and document analysis of scrutiny activities by local councillors. However, we still know relatively little about what councillors actually do inside local councils. The available evidence is scarce, often qualitative and based on case studies (Ashworth and Snape 2004).

Surprisingly, most attention in this field has focused on *individual* local councillors rather than on political parties. Parties have been acknowledged to strongly regulate their members' behaviour in local councils (Van Vonno 2019), and they 'play a substantial role in local politics' (Razin 2013, 61). When asked about how much they contribute to various tasks, councillors mention implementing the party programme as one of the top tasks, reflecting the importance of party politics (Klok and Denters 2013). This is even more surprising as scholars of national legislatures have increasingly focused on party behaviour. These studies have resulted in new insights into parliamentary voting (Louwerse et al. 2017), parliamentary debates (Proksch and Slapin 2012), and the use of parliamentary instruments (Höhmann and Sieberer 2020). There are only a few examples of applications of these research strategies in the study of local councils. Buylen and Christiaens's (2016) study references financial information in speeches in Flemish local councils. In an explorative study of 12 Dutch local councils, Kempers and Otjes (2021) find that independent local parties are less active than national parties in local councils because they are typically younger and less experienced.

3. Party characteristics and tool use

We focus on the activities of party groups in local councils defined as the extent to which local councillors use the tools at their disposal. Local councillors have an array of tools enabling them to perform their policy-making and scrutiny roles. We consider two important and commonly used council tools: written questions and amendments. To understand local party groups' use of council tools we build further on Louwerse and Otjes (2019). Their starting point is Mair's (2009) distinction between responsive and responsible party behaviour. Parties engage in *responsive* behaviour when they 'listen to and then respond to the demands of citizens and groups' (Mair 2009, 11). Parties engage in *responsible* behaviour when they 'act prudently and

consistently and (...) follow accepted procedural norms and practices' (Mair 2009, 12).

To make democracy work parties should *both* address the wishes of the citizens (responsive behaviour) and ensure effective governance (responsibility). Mair's (2009), however, observes a growing tension between responsiveness and responsibility. The weakening ties between parties and civil society, and the individualisation of the electorate have made it difficult for parties to know what the public want. Additionally, governments increasingly experience constraints due to Europeanisation and internationalisation and due to the legacies inherited by former governments. This growing tension has arguably led to a 'bifurcation' of party systems, in which some parties prioritise short-term preferences of voters (responsiveness), and others prioritise policymaking within legal parameters (responsibility).

A similar pattern may appear at the local level. Although local governments are often characterised as the government closest to citizens and experience relatively high levels of political trust (Denters, Vollaard, and van de Bovenkamp 2018), parties cannot rely on electoral loyalty. Additionally, local governments' room for policy manoeuvre is constrained. The Netherlands in particular provides little independent authority to local governments (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010). Denters and Rose (2005, 254) observe a '[f]ragmentation, departmentalisation and increased external dependencies' as 'important obstacles for effective action'. Local governments depend on centrally controlled funds, involving grants for specific purposes and have limited tax levying authority. In recent years, the central government has deconcentrated tasks: the policy implementation occurs at the local level but there is limited policy autonomy. As these new responsibilities often require inter-municipal cooperation, concerns about a new democratic deficit have risen (Boogers and Reussing 2019).

Therefore, also in local politics some parties may prioritise responsiveness and other parties may prioritise responsibility. We connect these types of party behaviour to two aspects of council behaviour: scrutiny and policy-making (Louwerse and Otjes 2019). *Responsive parties* use the municipal council as a platform to represent their voters' demands. This behaviour is typical for members of talking or arena-like parliaments (Polsby 1975). Therefore, responsive parties are likely to use scrutiny tools to put issues on the agenda or express concern about the executive board's actions. The most widely available and used scrutiny tool in local councils is the possibility to submit written questions to the executive board. They are used to obtain information, to uncover mistakes by the executive board, or to put certain issues on the political agenda. Questions have limited consequences for local policy; the executive board is obliged to answer a written question within a reasonable period, but it is not required to change any of its policies. Parties

can use questions to express their opinion on local issues and municipal policies (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart 2014).

In contrast, *responsible parties* use the municipal council as a marketplace to contribute to policymaking. This behaviour is typical for members of working or transformative parliaments (Polsby 1975). Therefore, responsible parties are likely to use their tools to change local policies. The most important of these are amendments to policy proposals. If a local councillor's amendment is adopted by the local council, it is implemented, as the executive boards cannot veto an adopted amendment.

3.1 Anti-elitism

Mair's (2009) observers that responsive parties, those parties that focus on expressing the voice of the people rather than on contributing to policymaking, use a relatively strong populist rhetoric. These parties tend towards what Mair's (2009, 17) describes as "'semiresponsible' or 'irresponsible' opposition as well as towards a 'politics of outbidding'". Populist parties have become important players at the national level. Louwerse and Otjes (2019) show that they use parliamentary tools differently than other parties. Mudde (2004, 543) understands populism as an ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people".

Otjes and Louwerse (2021) argue that populist parties' use of parliamentary instruments is not so much determined by their 'pro-people' attitude, but by their 'anti-elitism'. Anti-elitism is empirically and conceptually distinct from populism (Meijers and Zaslove 2021). Populist parties combine anti-elitism with a pro-people attitude, but parties can be anti-elitist without considering the will of a homogenous people as the most desired course of action. Consider an independent local party that represents a hamlet that has been merged with a larger town. It may be opposed to the executive board that only looks out for the interest of the larger city and neglects the needs of the hamlet. It may believe that the board is corrupt and lost touch with ordinary citizens. Yet, it does not necessarily believe that it would be better when local policies would be determined by the majority of the entire municipality, because then the needs of the hamlet would be secondary to the needs of the town.

At the local level, we see two clusters of parties using anti-elite rhetoric: Firstly, there are the national populist parties. Secondly, there are independent local parties without ties to national parties. These are often founded out of dissatisfaction with established parties (Boogers and Voerman 2010). Their members often trust national politics less than other citizens (Angenendt 2018). These parties appeal to the

electorate with an anti-elitist message (Holtmann 2008). They mobilise the groups of voters that would have otherwise voted for national populist parties (Otjes 2018). Anti-elitist parties are more likely to exhibit responsive behaviour, using the council as a bully pulpit to signal parties' opposition towards the executive board and drawing attention to failures of the 'corrupt elite', for instance by asking questions. We expect that anti-elitist parties participate less in policymaking activities, as that would require cooperation with the mainstream parties in the local council which they oppose so strongly.

Anti-elitist question hypothesis: The more anti-elitist a party is, the more questions it will submit.

Anti-elitist amendment hypothesis: The more anti-elitist a party is, the fewer amendments it will sponsor.

3.2 Ideology

Ideology is one of the main drivers of party behaviour in national parliaments (Hix and Noury 2016). At the local level, however, there are two competing notions of politics: non-partisan and partisan (Copus et al. 2012). On the one hand, political differences are supposedly small and political ideologies may play only a marginal role. Instead, local politics is said to be focused on finding 'pragmatic solutions rather than ideological diatribes' (Barber 2013, 342). On the other hand, local governments still make important political decisions (even when implementing national policies). The phrase 'all politics is local' resonates so well because local issues such as local planning can certainly produce stark differences of opinion and mobilise voters. The left-right scale has been found to be a 'valid indicator for the understanding of local councillor orientations and behaviour' (Egner, Sweeting, and Klok 2013a, 262). Right-leaning councillors tend to focus on representing business groups and are more likely to be in favour of using market-based solutions in local governance whereas left-leaning councillors tend to focus on representing the working class and minorities (Karlsson 2013a, 105–106; Klok and Denters 2013, 69; Krapp, Werner, and Egner 2013). Therefore, we examine to what extent left-right ideology play a role in the use of council instruments. We expect the ideological distances between parties and the executive board to affect the degree to which parties substantively agree with the policies that the executive board pursues. The larger the ideological distance between a party and an executive board, the more incentives parties have to criticise local policies or to try to change them by submitting questions or amendments. In addition, ideological close parties may also refrain from using council instruments

to avoid confrontation and signal trust towards future coalition partners (Otjes and Louwerse 2018).

Ideological distance hypothesis: The larger the ideological distance between a party and the executive board is, the more often that party will use council tools.

3.3 Coalition-Opposition divide

The distinction between governing and opposition parties is a crucial factor in understanding executive-legislative relations and legislative behaviour (Louwerse et al. 2017). Opposition councillors in Belgium were found to emphasise scrutinising the municipal executive much more than coalition councillors (Verhelst et al. 2014). We expect that opposition councillors use council tools more intensively than coalition councillors to scrutinise the executive board's actions. Firstly, local councillors from the opposition are more likely to disagree substantively with the executive board's policies. They will need to use council instruments, such as amendments, to change policies in the direction of their ideal policy position. Questions are also more attractive to opposition parties to highlight policy failures of the executive board, whereas governing parties have an interest in protecting the executive board against negative PR (Vliegthart, Walgrave, and Zicha 2013).

Secondly, local councillors from the governing coalition depend less on formal tools to obtain information from the executive board or to influence local policies than opposition councillors, instead of using informal routes (Louwerse and Otjes 2016). Although coalition parties may ask questions to monitor each other's members of the executive (Hömann and Sieberer 2020; Martin and Vanberg 2004), overall coalition parties are expected to use council instruments less often than opposition parties (Green-Pedersen 2010; Otjes and Louwerse 2018).

Coalition membership hypothesis: Coalition parties use council tools less often than opposition parties.

3.4 Control variables

We include three control variables. Firstly, activity in local councils is in part the result of capacity. Parties that have more local council seats are more likely to have more capacity to use more tools (Louwerse and Otjes 2019). Therefore, we control for party size expecting that *larger parties will use council tools more often than smaller parties*.

Secondly, we include whether parties are independent local parties. These are important players in local politics in the Netherlands but also in Belgium, Austria, and Germany (Otjes 2018). These only participate in the elections of

a single municipality (Otjes 2021). In contrast to national parties, independent local parties do not receive any form of subsidies, do not have a national organisation for recruitment and education of local councillors, and do not benefit from a national network to share best practices. Therefore, local party councillors sometimes lack legal and policy expertise, and skills that are necessary to do the work of a local councillor (Van Ostaaijen 2018). Thus, we control for independent local parties expecting that *independent local parties use council tools less often than national parties* (Kempers and Otjes 2021).

If organisational strength is a key factor, older independent local parties should be as active as older local branches of national parties (Kempers and Otjes 2021): their expertise has been built up and can be transferred between party members. Therefore, we control for age expecting that *the older parties are, the more often they will use council tools*.

4. Dutch local councils

This paper analyses the use of council tools by party groups in Dutch local councils. The Netherlands mostly copied its national parliamentary system of government to the local level. Functionally equivalent to a national parliament, local councils consist of between 9 and 45 members depending on the population size and are directly elected in a semi-open PR list system in municipality-wide districts every four years (Hendriks and Schaap 2010). Functionally equivalent to a cabinet, the executive board consists of a mayor and two to nine aldermen (dependent on the population size). Mayors have a non-partisan role. The national government appoints mayors for a six-year term, following the local councils' advice on the applicants. Mayors do not have a confidence relationship with the local council. After local elections, a governing coalition of multiple parties is formed that agrees on the nomination of aldermen and a set of policies in a coalition agreement. The council elects the aldermen. A person cannot be a councillor and an alderman at the same time.

Constitutionally local councils are the highest body within Dutch municipalities. Council members have several tools at their disposal: they can initiate local ordinances, amend local ordinance proposals, submit (non-binding) motions, force the council to make promises or send errata concerning local ordinances. They have a right to information including written questions, oral questions, holding interpellations, investigations, and hearings. Out of these, we focus on two: amendments and questions. These reflect responsible policymaking (amendments) and responsiveness to local issues (questions). The initiation of local ordinances, interpellations, investigations, and hearings is rare and therefore not structurally catalogued by councils. Oral questions, errata and promises are common, but they are also not

tracked structurally. Motions are often tracked by municipal councils, but these can serve divergent functions: they can ask the executive to pursue certain policies or express dissatisfaction with the executive's performance. We disregard motions to focus on tools clearly related to either policymaking or scrutiny.

We focus on the Netherlands is for pragmatic reasons: Dutch local councils use a council information system to share information about their proceedings. These systems are provided by a few companies. We downloaded information on local council activities from municipalities that used the most accessible system: NotuBiz. We have information on 53 of 393 local councils and 454 of 2791 council groups. Not all municipalities offered data for the two tools: data on questions were available for 50 councils and 267 council groups and data on amendments for 27 councils and 187 council groups. Our sample includes only 13% of the municipalities in a relatively small European state, but to our knowledge, this is the largest collection of data on tool use in local councils and even the largest comparative dataset of tool use.³

Our sample is not perfectly representative of all municipalities in the Netherlands. Municipalities in our samples (either with questions or amendments) have twice as many inhabitants as the average municipality (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). The average population size of municipalities that share useful information online is significantly higher than that of the municipalities that do not. Even though small municipalities are underrepresented, our sample includes municipalities from every size class (see Table A.2 in the Appendix). Table A.3 and A.4 in the Appendix show that this has implications for the type of parties that are represented.

5. Methods and data

5.1 Dependent variable

We focus on the use of council tools by council party groups. Our dataset includes the number of questions and amendments per council group per municipality. That means that we can look at explanations at the party (and municipality level).⁴ Above we already hinted at our data collection strategy. We downloaded all available information on tool use in all municipalities that use NotuBiz. Next, we cleaned these data.⁵ Subsequently, we counted the use of amendments and questions in every local council in the four-year term between the 2014 and 2018 municipal elections for all parties that participated in the 2014 municipal elections. We disregarded council groups that formed during the term.

5.2 Independent variables

We look at three theoretically motivated variables in this paper and three controls. Two of the theoretically motivated variables are based on parties' 2014 election manifestos. When a party's 2014 manifesto was not available, we used its 2018 manifesto instead. We discuss the manifesto collection in Appendix 2.

To measure *anti-elitism*, we used the dictionary of anti-elitist words developed by Pauwels (2011). This measure has been validated by Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) by showing its correlation to another (more qualitative) measure for populism in the Netherlands and by Otjes (2021) who shows that party (sub)families that are expected to be more or less anti-elitist indeed use this rhetoric more or less.⁶ We applied this dictionary to the parties' manifestos using the *R*-module *Quanteda* (Benoit et al. 2018). To measure *ideological distance*, we combined the information on coalition participation with the left-right position of every party. We measured parties' left-right positions with *Wordscores*. This is a method of scoring election manifestos based on their word usage on a priori dimension (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003). *Wordscores* has been successfully applied to Dutch provincial party branches (Klingelhöfer and Müller 2015), and German party branches and independent local parties (Gross and Jankowski 2020). *Wordscores* employs the relative use of words in reference texts. As reference texts, we used all local manifestos of national parties from the 2018 municipal elections (the entire 'bag of words').⁷ We assigned the left-right positions of the national parties from Polk et al. (2017) to the words of every party's local branches. We used the transformation of Martin and Vanberg (2008) to make the distribution of parties' places based on word scores more similar to input data. We calculated the left-right positions of the executive boards as the seat-weighted mean of the left-right positions of all coalition parties. We excluded data when at least one manifesto of the coalition parties was not available. We calculated the ideological distance between a council party and the executive board as the absolute distance between the party's and the coalition's left-right position. We calculated these distances taking into account coalition changes over time.⁸

To measure *coalition membership*, we used information on coalition agreements (data from the Open State Foundation 2021). We coded every party that signed a coalition agreement as a coalition party regardless of whether it supplied members of the executive board. Governing coalitions can also be replaced by a new coalition. To account for this, our measure reflects the share of days the party was a coalition party. Data on prematurely ended coalitions and new coalitions were drawn from Bouwmans (2019). Such changes occurred in 15 municipalities.⁹

As control variables, we included a dummy for local parties. Local parties are defined as parties that run in only a single municipality (data from Otjes 2021). We also included the age of council parties, looking at whether parties continually participated in the elections of a local council (from *n1verkiezingen.com* 2021). To ensure comparability we have divided yearly scores by the maximum age.¹⁰ Finally, we included indicators of party size: the number of seats a party had won at the 2014 election, both in absolute terms (data from the Kiesraad 2021).¹¹ Table A.6 in the Appendix lists the descriptives of these variables.

5.3 Model specification

Because we have overdispersed count data clustered by municipality, we ran multilevel negative binomial regression models. The random municipality intercepts take away differences between municipalities.¹²

Since we have count data, a poisson model or a negative binomial model is advised (Lawless 1987): poisson regression assumes that the distribution of variables follows the Poisson distribution. This has one free parameter. Therefore, it does not allow for the variance to be adjusted independently of the mean. If the data have greater variability than the poisson distribution assumes (it is overdispersed), a regression model with a second parameter is necessary. The negative binomial regression has separate parameters for the mean and the variance. As our data are overdispersed we used a negative binomial model.¹³ In Appendix 5, we examine several robustness tests, including municipality size and coalition type. The former is the municipalities' population.¹⁴ The latter is whether the coalition is minimal winning or not.¹⁵ We also include interaction terms of population size and coalition distance, and population size and coalition membership.

6. Descriptive results

Before we turn to the result of the regression analyses, we examine the data descriptively. Figures 1 and 2 present histograms of the use of council instruments in the whole dataset. Tables 1 and 2 list the parties' use of amendments and questions in the local councils of respectively Maassluis and The Hague. Maassluis is a town of 32,985 inhabitants. We selected this municipality because the tool use by the parties here is most similar to the tool use by their party families in our whole sample. The Hague is the third-largest municipality in the Netherlands with 505,856 inhabitants. We selected this municipality because it has the most active parties in our dataset.

Questions are used regularly by local council groups. The 404 parties in our dataset asked on average 31 questions during the four-year term (less than one per month). This distribution has a clear left-skew. The median party

asked 16 questions; 35 (8%) parties asked zero questions. In Maassluis the most active party in terms of questions is the Labour Party and the least active is D66. Questions were asked on topics as diverse as bike paths, church tower renovations and noise pollution. Most questions are related to local politics, but sometimes questions concern national news topics with parties asking how those influence local politics. The most active party in our dataset is the opposition party Group De Mos from The Hague, which submitted more than 600 questions in four years. Compared to Maassluis, there are two differences in the questions asked in The Hague: some questions concerned big public events and 'getting them to The Hague' and more questions targeted specific neighbourhoods. Many questions in The Hague concern transport or public parks.¹⁶

Amendments are used less often than questions. The 207 parties in our dataset submitted on average 19 amendments (less than one per two months). These data have a clear left-skew. The median party submitted 16 amendments; 12 (5%) parties submitted zero amendments. In Maassluis, the

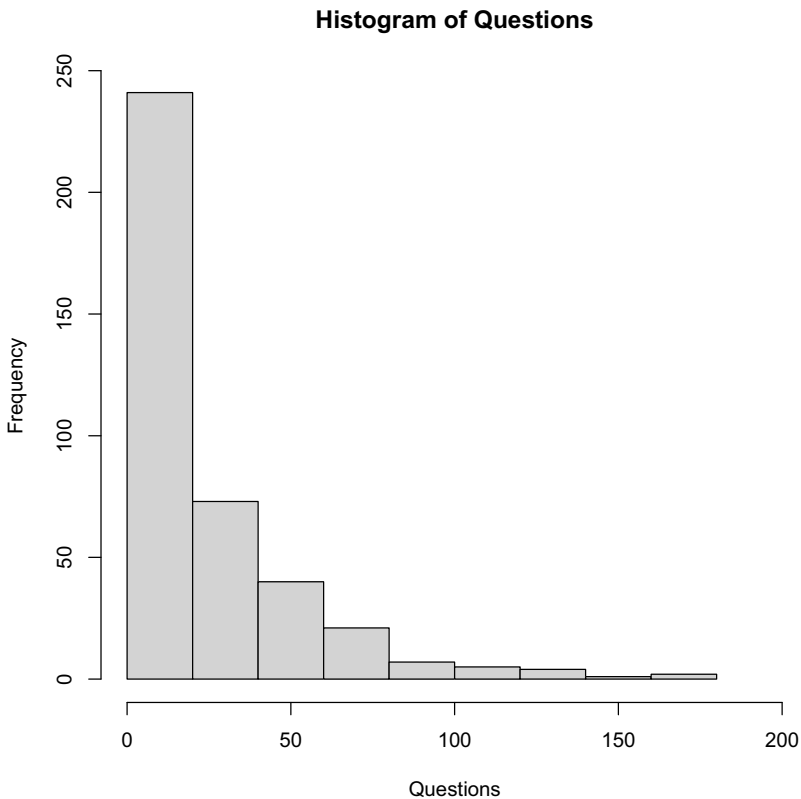


Figure 1. Histogram of Questions. Note: [Figure 1](#) excludes 10 outliers.

Histogram of Amendments

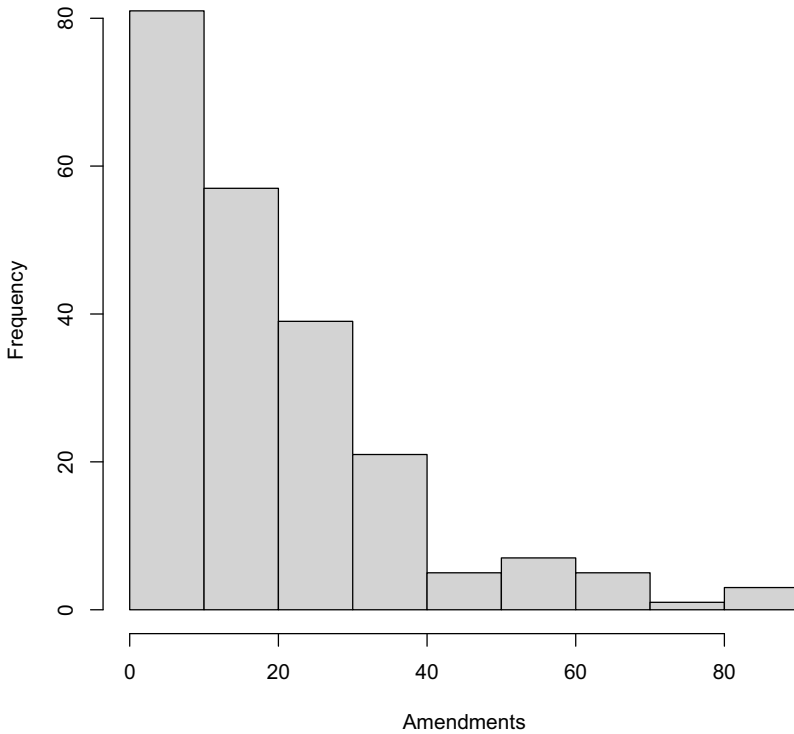


Figure 2. Histogram of Amendments. Note that the scales of the x- and y-axes of the two graphs are different.

Table 1. Tool use in Maassluis, 2014–2018.

Party (Dutch)	Party (English)	Questions	Amendments	Seats	Anti-elitism	Distance	Coalition
<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i>	Labour Party	56	6	4	0.01	2.98	Coalition
<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i>	Christian-Democratic Appeal	40	6	4	0.03	0.67	Coalition
<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i>	Liberal Party	23	5	4	0.06	1.61	Coalition
<i>Verenigd Seniorenpartij</i>	United Seniors' Party	26	3	4	0.08	0.69	Coalition
<i>Democraten 66</i>	Democrats 66	15	4	1	0.03	0.35	Opposition
<i>ChristenUnie</i>	ChristianUnion	16	3	2	0.02	0.23	Opposition
<i>Maassluis Belang</i>	Maassluis Interest	18	3	4	0.13	0.38	Opposition

Table 2. Tool use in the Hague, 2014–2018.

Party (Dutch)	Party (English)	Ques- tions	Amend- ments	Seats	Anti- elitism	Dis- tance	Coal- ition
<i>Groep De Mos</i>	Group De Mos	601	74	3	0.05	0.80	Opposition
<i>Haagse Stadspartij</i>	The Hague City Party	291	81	5	0.04	1.47	Coalition
<i>GroenLinks</i>	GreenLeft	164	84	2	0.02	2.23	Opposition
<i>ChristenUnie- Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij</i>	ChristianUnion- Political Reformed Party	97	82	1	0.02	1.26	Opposition
<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i>	Labour Party	269	45	6	0.03	1.18	Coalition
<i>Partij voor de Dieren</i>	Party for the Animals	119	64	1	0.10	9.64	Opposition
<i>Democraten 66</i>	Democrats 66	263	41	8	0.00	0.23	Coalition
<i>Christen-Democratisch Appel</i>	Christian-Democratic Appeal	254	38	3	0.06	1.99	Coalition
<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i>	Liberal Party	287	40	4	0.02	2.57	Coalition
<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i>	Freedom Party	236	46	7	0.29	20.96	Opposition
<i>Socialistische Partij</i>	Socialist Party	125	69	2	0.07	3.71	Opposition
<i>Islam-Democraten</i>	Islamic Democrats	28	28	2	0.01	1.26	Opposition
<i>Partij voor de Eenheid</i>	Unity Party	93	17	1	0.06	1.61	Opposition

Table 3. Multilevel Regression Analyses.

Model DV	1 Questions	2 Amendments
Anti-elitism	0.36 (0.28)	0.18 (0.18)
Coalition Distance	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Coalition Membership	-0.42*** (0.09)	-0.32*** (0.08)
Local Parties	-0.04 (0.11)	0.01 (0.10)
Seats	4.33*** (0.64)	1.63*** (0.54)
Party Age	0.17 (0.14)	0.12 (0.12)
Intercept	2.10*** (0.25)	2.41*** (0.23)
AI	2907	1415
N _{Council Groups}	367	202
N _{Municipalities}	47	26
Random Intercept	2.07 (0.48)	1.00 (0.31)

Multilevel negative binomial regressions; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

parties submitted between three and six amendments, the Christian-democrats and social-democrats being most active. The most active parties in our dataset come from The Hague: opposition party GreenLeft submitted more than 80 amendments. Most amendments are technical as they concern specific formulations in local ordinances.

These findings suggest a strong correlation between the two measures of tool use, as the parties from the same municipalities are most active. This is indeed the case: there is a clear correlation between the number of amendments and the number of questions submitted (Pearson's $R = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$).

The differences between Maassluis and The Hague also indicate a major difference between larger and smaller municipalities. In Appendix 5, we examine the relationship with size in greater detail. Although larger councils ask questions more frequently than smaller councils, our theoretically derived variables presented above offer a markedly better explanation than population size. These patterns only give a first glimpse into the data. In the following section, we will investigate them in greater detail using multilevel regression analyses.

7. Regression results

In Table 3 we present the results of multilevel negative binomial regressions of the number of questions and amendments party groups propose.

We expected parties to use questions more often and amendments less often, the more anti-elitist they are. We find that anti-elitism does not have a significant effect on the number of questions submitted or the number of amendments sponsored. For coalition distance, we expected that those parties which are ideologically further from the coalition ask more questions and submit more amendments. Here, we find no significant effects of ideological distance between a party and the coalition on the sponsoring of amendments or submission of questions.

We finally expected that coalition parties would be less active in submitting amendments and questions than opposition parties. Here, we find a strong and significant effect: coalition parties ask 34% fewer questions and propose 28% fewer amendments than opposition parties do. Of our control variables, only the number of seats showed a significant and substantive effect, with larger parties submitting more questions and amendments than smaller parties.

In Appendix 5 (Tables A.7 and A.8) we test the robustness of the results by looking at several alternative specifications for some independent variables. Models A1 and A11 includes all the same variables as in Table 3 but looks at only the coalitions formed at the start of the term. Models A2 and A12 only look at coalition parties. Models A3 and A13 exclude data from The Hague and Rotterdam, where parties are far more active than elsewhere. Models A4 and A14 model are a fixed-effects negative binomial models which more rigorously controls for inter-municipality differences. Models A5 and A15 include municipality size only. Models A6 and A16 include municipality size and all the theoretically motivated variables. Models A7 and A17 add an interaction between population size and coalition related variables. Models A8 and A18 are linear multilevel regressions that look at the logged number of questions/amendments. Models A9 and A19 are multilevel ordered logistic regression. Models A10 and

A20 only look at cases where we have both questions and amendments. In all the models, the coefficient for coalition membership is significant. This provides solid evidence for the strength of this outcome. In all but one of the models,¹⁷ the coefficient for seats is significant. We also find that in larger municipalities, councillors ask more questions (but do not necessarily table more amendments) and that in larger municipalities the difference between coalition and opposition is (slightly) weaker than in smaller municipalities. Although one may expect that politics in larger municipalities is more ideological than it is in smaller municipalities, the coefficient of the interaction term of population size and coalition distance is not significant.

8. Conclusion

We presented a comparative analysis of council behaviour in 53 Dutch local councils, focusing on parties' use of council instruments. We collected the number of written questions and amendments that parties submitted during the 2014–2018 term and measured several party characteristics through automatic text analysis. We revealed that the use of different kinds of council tools is positively correlated at the party-level: the parties that seek to hold the executive board accountable through questions also make policy using amendments. We found that the coalition-opposition divide drives party behaviour in local councils: coalition parties are far less active than opposition parties in using council tools. Opposition parties submit more written questions and amendments to signal disagreement with the executive board, whereas coalition parties do not need formal tools to monitor and influence the executive board. These findings confirm that oversight of executive actions in local councils is mainly left to opposition parties rather than governing parties. The key roles of opposition parties are criticising the executive and scrutinising its actions. This study replicates this finding from national parliaments in local councils.

Contradicting findings on national parliaments, we found no evidence, however, for our expectations that link the ideologies of parties to their activities in local councils (either in terms of anti-elitism or the left-right dimension). It may be possible that the specific measures of anti-elitism and left-right ideology do not reflect actual differences on these dimensions accurately enough. For instance, we use anti-elitism to tap into the distinction between responsive and responsible. It may be that other measures such as niche and mainstream or challenger and established parties tap into these better (Meyer and Miller 2015; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). To examine these alternative party typologies more information on parties' manifestos and their history of coalition participation is needed than is currently available.

Moreover, this non-finding does not preclude that ideology matters, we may simply need more nuanced measures of ideology than the left-right

dimension. Concrete conflicts over zoning (for environmental protection or home construction) and over the budget (money for services or lower taxes) may not follow a neat division between left and right. Additionally, the saliency of the issue at hand may matter more than general ideological distances (Höhmänn and Sieberer 2020). We therefore strongly encourage future research in this area.

Substantively, ideology may simply play a smaller role in local politics than it does in national politics. As mayor LaGuardia once stated, there is no Republican or Democratic way to clean the road (Garrett 1961, 274). There is a pervasive image of local politics as depoliticised and non-ideological (Boogers et al. 2018; Schaap 2019; Navarro et al. 2018). As councillors seek pragmatic solutions to specific local problems instead of fighting ideological battles. Alternatively, the two pressures that are creating a difference between responsive and responsible parties at the national level (lack of councillors' rootedness of parties and increasing external constraints) may be less relevant at the local level, where the contacts between politicians and citizens are more direct and where the local level has *always* been constrained by the national level.

Our study has some limitations. We only have information on local councils in a single country and only for 53 of 393 municipalities. These cases were not randomly sampled but selected on the basis of data availability. Although several smaller municipalities are included in our sample, they are under-represented. In particular for questions, we lack information on the smallest municipalities. First and foremost, this means that we can make more certain claims about within-municipality differences than between-municipality differences. Our multilevel model specifically focused on this. Given the lack of random sampling, patterns in the entire population patterns may be different. Future research may want to explicitly examine a representative sample of municipalities to study municipality characteristics in greater detail.

This study is to our knowledge, the first study to systematically look at the behaviour in councils in a European democracy. We strongly favour further work in this field. As the main representatives of citizens in local government, the behaviour of local councillors should be of central interest to those interested in local democracy. There is more to local council work than submitting written questions or amendments. Analyses on what happens inside local councils could also focus on other aspects of local council behaviour, such as votes on proposals and floor debates. Whereas our analyses were limited to the explanations at the party level, future endeavours could focus on councillor and municipality characteristics.

When it comes to the councillor characteristics, one could examine their ambition for the re-election or higher office which may make them more active. Prior political experience may also increase tool use. This would require more information on the motivations and background of councillors that could only be

gained by holding a survey parallel to the data collection. Secondly, future research could bring issue competition into the study of local councils (Green-Pedersen 2010): one could analyse whether parties focus their council work on the issues they prioritise in their manifestos. This would require more information on the issues addressed in questions, amendments, and manifestos than currently available. Studying the questions would also allow us to see whether councillors direct their questions to specific members in the executive board, for instance, those that are ideologically distant or electorally close. When it comes to questions, it might be interesting to see under what conditions members of the executive respond slower or faster. Furthermore, the study of local councils in other countries could give more insights into the effects of local councils' institutional framework. We hope to have inspired others in pursuing these endeavours, because local councils are political arenas that deserve our attention.

Notes

1. A previous version of this paper was presented at the ECPR Virtual 2021 General Conference. The authors want to thank the reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions.
2. We introduce the term 'council tools' to refer to the constitutional rights local councillors have, such as submitting written questions and submitting amendments. Council tools are the equivalents of 'parliamentary tools' or 'parliamentary instruments', which have been popular research objects in legislative studies.
3. The comparative country study of Otjes and Louwerse (2021) covers not more than 10 parliaments.
4. Because of this data structure, we cannot look at variation at the individual level, at the level of the executive member (e.g., who is questioned), or the issue that the question/amendment concerns.
5. We removed double entries, in particular for questions with and questions without answers. In addition, some data were incomplete, for example because for a submitted question the party was not included in the information system. Such entries are not included in our dataset. We also created a uniform structure.
6. Pauwels intended his dictionary to measure populism. All the words in the list, however, refer to the anti-elite component of populism and not to its pro-people component. The words used in this dictionary are: *bedrieg**, **bedrog**, **verraad**, **verrad**, *absurd**, *arrogant**, *belof**, *beloof**, *belov**, *capitul**, *kapitul**, *consensus**, *corrupt**, *direct*, *elite**, *establishm**, *heersend**, *kaste*, *klasse*, *leugen**, *lieg**, *maffia*, *meningsuit**, *ondemocratisch**, *ondemokratisch**, *oneerlijk**, *particrat**, *politic**, *propaganda**, *regime**, *schaam**, *schand**, *toegeven*, *traditio**, *volk*, *waarheid*x. The translated terms are: **deceit**, **treason**, **betray**, *absurd**, *arrogant**, *promis**, *promise**, *capitul**, *corrupt**, *direct*, *elite**, *establishm**, *ruling**, *caste*, *class*, *mob*, *expression*, *undemocratic*, *particrat**, *politic**, *propaganda**, *regime**, *shame**, *scand**, *admit*, *tradition**, *people**, *truth*.
7. We removed very common words like 'we'.

8. In Appendix 5, we also look exclusively at coalitions formed at the start of the term.
9. We use the variable based on the first coalition only in Tables A.7 and A.8 as a robustness test. In those cases, we applied the same logic to the Ideological distance.
10. Disruptions can come from parties no longer participating or municipalities amalgamating. Which is 33 of the number of years since the first election in that municipality if it was a newly created municipality as a result of the merger of a couple of municipalities into a single new municipality.
11. Alternative models include the share of the entire council.
12. One of the issues we had in data collection is that we downloaded all the metadata on questions and amendments that was entered in the council information systems by the clerks between 2014 and 2018. If for some reason they did not put in any data for a period, we do not necessarily register that. It is impossible to know whether the absence of data for say the summer of 2015 is because there were no questions or amendments submitted or because the clerk did not put in the data. This is problematic if the goal of the analysis is to understand between municipality differences. Our goal is however to understand within municipality differences. In that case multilevel regression analysis compensates for this: if there are structurally less questions in a municipality because a specific period was not covered, this will be reflected in the random intercept. The only assumption we make is that such missingness is not biased towards specific parties. If the missingness is time-based then this should not be an issue. Note that we have no reason to believe that data is missing. It is a 'known unknown'-issue that our model deals with.
13. The dispersion is 90.6 for questions and 14.1 for amendments, which is higher than 7.5 the rule of thumb generally used to allow for Poisson regression.
14. Divided by 100,000 for reasons of comparability.
15. The latter cases are all oversized coalitions.
16. Appendix 3 contains an example question and amendment.
17. That is model A18. This is the model that looks at the logged number of amendments. This excludes all cases where zero amendments have been proposed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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