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Paper proposal:

The impact of NPM on opposition councilors in Flemish city councils.

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Introduction

Local governments all over Europe have been exposed to New Public Management (NPM) reforms. Besides an administrative component, the restructurings also modernize political institutions and influence ways of organizing politics (Hansen). The role of the city council has changed and councilors have been attributed a new role as goal-steering decision-makers. The frequent occurrence of similar reforms in Europe indicates that they are often regarded as success stories (Lapsley 2009). However, there is increasing evidence that the widespread use of NPM could be a cruel disappointment for governments (Lapsley :1).

This article is built on the fundamental principle that NPM reforms do need to be evaluated with special attention for the outcome of the transformational process that occurs when the NPM discourse is implemented at the local political level. The local government field represents an interesting setting for investigating politicians' behaviour. This paper investigates if there is conformity between the objectives of the NPM- inspired Flemish Local Government Act and the realization at micro level in the city councils. It examines empirically how politicians of the opposition translate the NPM discourse concerning transparency and timeliness into tangible agenda items during the city councils' meetings. To this end, this study compares the stipulations concerning transparency and timeliness proposed by the legislator (Flemish government) with the implementation at micro level, concretized by the added agenda items of opposition politicians during the city councils' meetings.

Theoretical framework: focus on practice

The ideas and ideals that animate and articulate the NPM might be well known. However, their elaboration in political settings and their interaction with the instruments and the people that make them operational, is still of considerable interest (Lapsley et al). The NPM literature has generally focused on the expected effects of reforms but attempts at studying the actual results often found significant gaps between expected and actual changes. Therefore, NPM developments cannot be fruitfully described or explained by only focusing on the availability of new instruments (Van Helden, ter Bogt 2001: 83). What really matters is how these instruments are applied in practice. Seeds of new practice creation lie in the everyday activities of the actors (Lounsbury: 356). These activities might diverge from the intended concept of management change. Arguing that substantial attention has already been devoted to the ideological and instrumental aspects of reforms, nowadays many researchers are shifting their focus to the actual practices, the impacts and the outcomes of the implemented programmes (Windels 2007). For example, when summing up 20 years of research, Pollitt calls it mildly amazing that there are only few analyses of how elected politicians use performance information in practice (Askim).

'Practice' is indeed a complex and multifaceted concept. In the realm of action, behavior, institutions and society, all different elements interact. Human beings are always influenced by the context in which they operate. In order to genuinely understand practice variation concerning NPM reforms, we have to focus on individual actors (Lounsbury). Various authors have already showed that NPM should be studied from a more contextual, cultural and human perspective (Lapsley, Lounsbury). This more

'human' approach of evaluating a NPM reform is complicated by the fact that NPM is often simply too narrowly defined, and proposed as one singular and straight way of dealing and behaving. There is, indeed, no 'one' model of NPM at play, different elements are stressed and combined according to existing institutional structures and traditions (Hansen). Consequently, research concerning the application of the NPM idea in practice leads to an investigation of the everyday actions and behavior of the people supposed to put them at work. The closeness of politicians to the public and the actual services delivered may foster an attention to NPM instruments not seen at other levels of government (Moynihan 2010: 862). This article will focus on the opposition members in local city councils, it will be shown that their behavior is an appropriate indicator of how a NPM-like reform of Flemish local government is enacted.

Focus on politicians of the opposition

The aim of this paper is to reveal the result of the transformational process that NPM has undergone from the initial discourse proposed by the Flemish regional government to the actual practice in local councils. In order to show this translation, we consider local councilors as indicators of change (Brugué & Vallès). The councilors are political protagonists and their actions in the council may be used as a privileged indicators of result of the translation process.

In theory, the city council is considered as the center of the local democratic decision making process. However, executive politicians (members of the board of mayor and aldermen) often have a knowledge advantage and seem to overrule the council. Therefore, various elements in the Flemish local government act attempt to improve the role of the councilors. However, the discussions in the councils often relate to interventions from the opposition. Councilors of the majority are often very invisible in the council, they have to adhere to the party line. Local party associations nominate candidates with appropriate preferences, if the expressed preferences diverge too much from the party line, the candidate risks losing votes by sending mixed signals (Serritzlew: 332).

Thinking globally, acting locally

This 'outcome' focus on a local government reform implies that the discourse proposed by the Flemish regional government is picked up (in one way or another) by opposition councilors and results in some kind of 'more NPM-like' behavior. In our case this means a growing attention for transparency and timeliness. Consequently, the initial idea travels from the regional government (the so called 'non-local') through agents and intermediaries within the cultural and political context to the councilors (the so called 'local'). We use the terms 'local' and 'non-local' to capture this interaction between the highly specific settings in which accounting operates and the much broader reform processes that are at work. (Lapsley et al : 1).

Recently, Kurunmäki, Lapsley and Miller (2011) emphasized the importance of examining the reciprocal relations that form between the local and the non-local. They underline the need for more empirical approach to this matter. Hood demonstrated nearly two decades ago, that there is considerable variability in the extent to which and the way in which NPM reforms embed themselves in specific national settings. According to Lounsbury (2008) (cited by Van Helden & Ter Bogt 2011: 58), the

dynamics of practice can be studied by revealing the multiple logics and tracing the changes in these logics. Especially for local government, NPM reforms cannot be evaluated without looking at the political component. Elected representatives' support and participation gives "political weight" to the reform and plays an important role in integrating NPM instruments in decision-making. Consequently, they will have to accept the needs and benefits of the NPM concept and support its implementation (Tat-Kei Ho).

Research question

This paper focuses on the outcome of the transformation that the NPM idea undergoes when it moves and translates from the regional government to the politicians of the opposition in the local councils. According to Lounsbury (2008: 351), this relation between actor micro-processes and institutions (the context) provides an important opportunity for theoretical development and empirical insight in order to open up this multi-level, meso range of research (Lounsbury: 2008: 351). NPM is a part of a greater and wider social trend, the 'economization' (Diefenbach). We live in an area of ever increasing number-orientation, measurement fever and so called 'rational' or 'neutral' concepts. However, it still remains questionable if municipalities are being managed more businesslike than before. How is the reform adapted at the heart of the public decision-making, in the city council? Do we notice an 'economization' of acting in the council by opposition members? Do the opposition members refer to elements related to transparency and timeliness? What is left of the original NPM idea concerning timeliness and transparency after it has been modeled by the political context of Flemish municipalities?

This research focuses on the gap between the ideas of the reformers (Flemish government) and the way in which opposition councilors, influenced by powers and local tactics, put them at work. How is the new public management idea, propagated by the Flemish government, carried out by councilors of the opposition in the council? Is their behavior affected by the NPM discourse? Indeed, there is no 'one' model of NPM at play, NPM can be defined as a 'shopping basket' from which reformers select certain relevant components.

As already mentioned, the NPM reform of local government introduced by the Flemish government aimed at strengthening the city council. To this end, new requirements concerning transparency and timeliness of information (financial and non-financial reporting, frequency of reports, reports relation to municipal spin-offs, ...) were implemented. This part of the Flemish local government act is of particular importance for the opposition members to fulfill their role as critical watchdog of the majority's policy. It is therefore expected that the agenda items of the opposition will contain elements referring to timeliness and transparency of municipal information, not only for internal purposes but also for external communication.

Is there evidence, from their added agenda items during the councils' meetings, that they valorize transparency and timeliness of information? Or is there, on the other hand, proof of a non-intended transformation process from the original idea? Do we find clear evidence of questions and agenda items, proposed by the opposition related to timeliness and transparency of information? Can we conclude from the analysis of these items, that the NPM idea proposed by the Flemish government concerning

transparency and timeliness is picked up by the opposition as intended ? In other words, can we evidence a match between the non-locally proposed stipulations concerning transparency and timeliness and the way in which it is enacted through the actions of the opposition members, the local implementation ? Does the NPM idea concerning transparency and timeliness-as it should be- correspond with the micro level implementation, the situation-as it is ? Consequently, how could we explain the result ?

Research design

This paper aims to reveal the outcome of the transformational process that the NPM idea has undergone from comparing the *input* by the Flemish government to the *output* by the opposition councilors.

The *input*, operationalized by the official stipulations concerning transparency and timeliness, will be examined based on interviews with persons in charge and field experts. Their information will be combined with the study of official documents concerning the Flemish local government act. We combine different sources in order to capture all the subtleties. Not only the legislative requirements concerning transparency and timeliness but also their intended results, not always reflected in documents, are considered.

The *output*, the putting into practice by opposition councilors, is studied by examining the councils' official reports. Indeed, the only place where opposition members' real interpretation of timeliness and transparency can be investigated empirically, is in the council itself. Indicators in official documents only point to a formal adoption of NPM instruments. Moreover, most empirical evidence on politicians' utilization of performance information stems from case studies and surveys. They have provided valuable insight and interesting hypotheses but little systematic evidence of levels and patterns of use (Askim 2007:456). Self-reporting surveys have been a widely adopted methodology, however, its reliability depends on the respondents' correct understanding and subjective interpretation of the questions (Tat-Kei Ho: 221). Any results obtained must be viewed with caution since self-reports frequently do not correspond to actual use (Schiff & Hoffman: 135). Compared to documentary analysis, the exaggerated claims of officials responding to surveys may overestimate the actual use of performance information in city government (Poister & Streib: 328). Furthermore, these studies often probe intentions or opinions concerning performance information use and measuring attitudes does not necessarily tell us something about actual behaviour (Steyvers et al: 436). Therefore, this article starts from the city council official reports, where the behaviour of politicians is reflected. They contain the literal reproduction of discussions in the council and thus perfectly reproduce the dialogue between politicians. The reports are 'living sources', reflecting real political behaviour and observing the dynamics of local politics. They are a reliable, neutral and objective source. The city manager, an impartial public servant, is responsible for the correctness of the notification. Every report has to be approved by a majority of the councillors at the beginning of the meeting. As we found several records of councillors contesting the notification of their interventions, we may conclude that councillors carefully check the correctness of the notes. They are public documents, so media attention plays an important role in this issue since politicians try to prove to citizens that their interests are well being looked after (Van Hengel et al p 15).

In order to enhance and to strengthen the position of elected representatives, councilors, opposition members included, are allowed to add own items to the councils' agenda. These added agenda items should not only be clearly described, but should also contain an explaining proposal of decision. To this end, councilors have access to all sources of information.

For several reasons these added agenda items of the opposition members are a particularly useful source for this research. Firstly, all the decisions of the 'regular' agenda are almost always voted majority against opposition and often in consensus. In other words, interventions and comments from the opposition do not influence the final decision. Secondly, the agenda itself is set up by the board of mayor and aldermen and consists of rather administrative and technical matters (eg. public infrastructure, street naming, ...). Therefore the discussions relating to the 'regular' agenda are less useful to detect opposition councilors' attitude concerning transparency and timeliness.

Consequently, the 'added agenda items' of the opposition offer the proper perspective to study opposition councilors' behavior. They can discuss all matters of concern for the municipality, as long as they are relevant for the municipality and within its authority. Indeed, these proposals almost never lead to specific or tangible decisions. However, the distinctive characteristics of these agenda items might reveal if they contain elements of NPM related to transparency and timeliness. Requirements concerning timeliness and increased transparency of information are both central features of the NPM discourse proposed by the Flemish government. They are pre-eminently concepts that would appeal to opposition members as their role is to critically control the majority. As they each refer to proofs of good management, we expect comments on this aspects from the opposition.

Besides, the basic structure of the municipalities also changed and evolved from one central decision-center in the municipality, the city council, to a multitude of semi-independent local agencies (police force, childcare, social affairs and welfare, water supply ...). Timeliness and transparent reporting concerning their activities is of paramount importance for a sound democratic control from the elected representatives.

The local council is the one and only democratic forum where the opposition can question the majority and make suggestions for policy improvement in presence of the (local) media and interested citizens. This public nature is also the reason why discussions in separate committees are often overdone in the public meeting of the council. *It is par excellence the sphere of action of the opposition members.* Their role is to be able to comprehend a subject from different points of view, to consider them, to compromise conflicting interests and to judge what is most reasonable and appropriate in a given situation (Hansen).

In a stratified sample (according to size) of 75 municipalities, we select agenda items added by the opposition. They are representative for the councils' meetings, (some meetings generate more items than others) and for the different political parties in opposition. The year selected is 2008, all the reports were available at the moment of data collection. They were obtained by downloading from the municipalities' website. The remaining reports were sent by email after a simple request.

Flemish municipalities as an empirical setting

As in many other European countries, the Belgian municipalities underwent several changes during the last decade. In 2002, the Belgian authority over local entities was regionalized, as a consequence Flanders and the Walloon provinces in Belgium followed a different reform track. Every Belgian region (the Flemish, the Walloon and the Brussels region) now has its own Local Government Act. The Flemish local government act is the most innovative. Fitting with NPM attention was given to a more businesslike and professionalized management of local government. The reform relates to aspects such as organisational culture, financial management, human resources and result oriented policy planning and evaluation. The introduction of budget-holding, a management team, modern financial management and delegation to administration suggests a base for more horizontal power relationships and separation between politicians and administration. Most of the stipulations are compulsory, for example the establishment of a city management team, while others such as the implementation of budget ownership are optional. Because of the principally mandatory character of the Decree, the context in which Flemish municipalities operate is largely homogeneous. This homogeneous empirical setting enhances the comparability of empirical findings (de Buijn & van Helden: 410). Dependent on the number of inhabitants, Flemish councils have between 7 and 55 members, who are elected every six years. Most Flemish local councilors have ordinary jobs and are only part-time politicians. The local councilor without an executive mandate spends an average of 7.63 hours per week on his task as councilor and this for a very limited monetary compensation (Olislagers & Ackaert).

Discussion (to be completed)

The NPM discourse emphasizes the utilization of specific, measurable and transparent information and results. It focuses on performance indicators, contract-based decisions, planning and control instruments, objective and tangible results and outcomes. Transparency and timeliness of information are of crucial importance. Especially for opposition members whose primary role is to control and critically supervise the majority. If the opposition members are positively influenced by this NPM discourse as proposed by the Flemish government, they will refer to transparency and timeliness of information in the added agenda items or use it as an argument in the following discussion.

Otherwise, there may be a clear decoupling between the intended and the actual concept, as emphasized in myth theory and the theory of double talk and hypocrisy (Christensen & Lægreid: 5). There are indeed reasons to believe that this economic thinking does not fit the political logic, focused on reelection and responding to citizens' demands. Therefore, it could be that they ignore the NPM discourse and continue to work in the 'old way'. In this case, the 'transformational policy' of the Flemish government failed because the centrally managed plans did not capture the subtleties of political interactions at the local level (Lapsley 2009).

Between these two extremes we have the partial and pragmatic implementation of reform ideas, brought about by mechanisms such as 'rational shopping for reform elements' and 'editing or translating of reform ideas' (Christensen & Lægreid: 5). The result in this scenario is that opposition members do refer to transparency and timeliness but not in the intended way. They argue purely for political and opportunistic purposes. Such variation is typically conceptualized as stemming from actors acting strategically to resist institutional pressures or otherwise pretending to act in accordance with

institutional demands while instrumentally pursuing their own agendas (Lounsbury 353). This is confirmed by Oliver (1991) organizations or individuals do not always blindly mimic or acquiesce institutional pressure (regional government, other pressures, ...), but they can also try to manipulate institutional demands (Lounsbury 352).

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