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Strengthening the Councillor as a Representative and Scrutiniser: The Effects of Institutional Change on Councillors' Role Orientations in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT *In 2002 the Dutch Ministry of the Interior enacted a new Local Government Act. The introduction of the new legislation was supported by a large-scale Innovation Program. The main objective of this institutional reform in local government was to improve the responsiveness and democratic accountability of municipalities by changing the role orientations and role behaviour of local councillors. The first question we address in this paper is whether these institutional reforms have indeed changed the relevant role orientations of the councillors. Despite widespread scepticism about the impact of institutional change, on the basis of surveys conducted before and after the reforms we found that the Dutch reforms may have been successful in changing some relevant role orientations of councillors. The second question in this paper is whether such possible changes in role orientations can be explained as the result of processes of (1) socialisation of councillors and (2) their selection.*

KEY WORDS: Institutional reform, local councillors, attitudinal change, socialisation, selection

Introduction

In the Netherlands, as in many other European countries, municipal councils are a crucial link in local representative democracy. In the traditional model of representative democracy the council is pivotal in an 'electoral chain of command' (Dearlove, 1973: 25–46). As directly elected representatives, councillors are primarily responsible for the translation of

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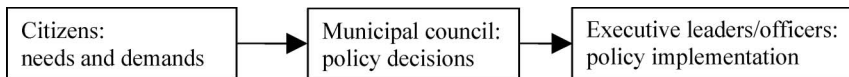


Figure 1. Traditional model of representative democracy.
Source: Denters (2005: 423).

local inputs (citizen demands and needs) into authoritative decisions to be executed by the local political executive and its officers (Denters, 2005; see Figure 1).

It is immediately obvious that in such a model the council and its members have to perform two complementary roles. On the one hand, the representative role: here the key criterion is the *responsiveness* of the council vis-à-vis the local citizenship. On the other hand the council will have to control and supervise the local political executive and the municipal officers. In this paper we will refer to the second role as the scrutiny function of the council. Here the main criterion is whether the council is capable of securing the *accountability* of the executive leadership and its administrative apparatus.

As has been argued extensively elsewhere (Denters, 2005; Denters & Klok, 2003, 2005; Denters *et al.*, 2005) both functions of the council in Dutch local government have come under pressure. On the one hand the council's *representative role* has been challenged, because of a decline in electoral turnout in municipal elections and falling party membership, and an increasing use of alternative channels for political participation. On the basis of these developments the democratic primacy of the council as the 'voice of the people' is no longer self-evident (Denters, 2005: 427–429).

The council's *scrutiny role* is equally problematic. For long years the capacity of the council to control and supervise the political executive and the administrative apparatus has been questioned. In the light of the increasing responsibilities of local government and the ensuing growth of its executive branch, it was argued that the councillors – as essentially amateur (part-time) politicians – could play little more than a marginal role in local politics. The shift from government to governance and the consequent fragmentation of the local government system have made oversight and scrutiny roles even more problematic (Denters, 2005: 425–427).

These developments are by no means specifically Dutch. Similar tendencies can be observed in other countries in and outside Europe (see Denters & Rose, 2005: 255–261). In various countries these developments have given rise to reviews of the role of the elected council in local government. Different countries have opted for different reform scenarios. In Italy, for example, the reforms implied a marginalisation of the role of the council in favour of the directly elected mayor. In other countries like Germany and Poland the formal position of the council remained the same, but the power of the council was reduced *de facto* by the introduction of directly elected mayors (see Denters & Rose, 2005). The UK and The

Netherlands on the other hand have adopted reform policies that were aimed at a reinvigoration of both the representative and the scrutiny role of the council (Berg & Rao, 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005).

In England the national government tried to increase the level of responsiveness and accountability by changing the institutional structure (Ashworth *et al.*, 2004). Here, a new Local Government Act (LGA) was implemented in 2000. This Act tries to modernise local authorities encouraging stronger community leadership and democratic renewal. Appropriate management structures were seen as crucial in making councils more responsive and accountable to local communities (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003). Councils could choose between four political management arrangements: two forms of elected mayors, the establishment of a leader and cabinet system, or (for small municipalities) alternative structures through a streamlined committee system (see John & Gains, 2005). In the first three options powers between executive councillors and non-executive councillors were separated. The executive councillors received a smaller decision making core in their task of setting policy. The new role of non-executive councillors was to scrutinise the action of the executive and become more active in their local communities. This change involved a major structural and cultural change in the organisation of local authorities, emphasising the importance of overview and scrutiny activities as key responsibilities for non-executive councillors (cf. Leach & Copus, 2004: 333).

Evaluations of the British reform show that it did achieve some of its aims. The Evaluating Local Governance (ELG) Research Team concludes that there is a consistent pattern of change with regard to the numerous outcomes of the Act (ELG Team, 2007). These results included greater citizen satisfaction, better visibility of executive councillors, but not clear higher public involvement. With regard to councillor role conceptions, the report concludes: 'The scrutiny function, although underdeveloped, is improving from a low base' (ELG Team, 2007: 16). However, developing the role of councillors as scrutinisers is difficult: 'it is clear that deeply ingrained and longstanding patterns of political behaviour and relationships (interparty and intraparty) display some considerable resilience to the redesign of the architecture of political decision making' (Copus, 2008: 601).¹

In 2002 the Dutch national legislator adopted a new Local Government Act that was, just like the British reforms, aimed at strengthening the representative and the scrutiny role of the municipal councils. Because the reformers anticipated 'some considerable resilience' to the reforms they launched an intensive campaign to support the institutional changes. In combination, the legislative changes and the campaign would have to bring about major changes in the role conceptions, ultimately resulting in a better functioning local democracy.

Against the backdrop of the English experience it is interesting to take a closer look at the results of the Dutch council reforms. In this paper our

main question will therefore be: *did institutional reforms in Dutch local government change councillors' conceptions of their representative and scrutiny role?* Did the institutional reform lead to any changes in councillors' role orientations, as in the UK? Or does the Dutch evidence corroborate the view of sceptics, who question the effectiveness of institutional reforms. Scharpf (1986: 187) for example has argued that institutional reforms 'may not be a very promising strategy', because it 'is difficult to achieve, its outcomes are hard to predict' and if there are any effects these 'are likely to be realized only in the longer term'. Likewise Putnam *et al.* (1993: 17) warned that 'designers of new institutions are often writing on water'. Therefore Putnam *et al.* (1993: 18) proclaim that the proposition that institutional reforms will alter people's attitudes and behaviour 'is an hypothesis, not an axiom'. It is precisely this hypothesis that we want to test in this research. We will do so by using data from surveys of Dutch councillors conducted before (1999) and after (2007) the introduction of the 2002 reforms. Following this line of investigation we will also ask a second question: *whether the observed patterns of attitudinal change can be attributed to the 2002 reforms.* In answering this question we will consider the impact of two change mechanisms: (1) the socialisation of councillors and (2) the selective recruitment and exit of councillors.

Role Orientations

In this paper we are interested in the consequences of the 2002 reforms for the role conceptions of councillors. These role conceptions refer to their ideas about what a *good* councillor *should* do as part of his job. With regard to the representative role the reformers hoped to improve the responsiveness of councillors to citizen demands. At the same time the strengthening of the scrutiny role should enhance the accountability of the municipal executive to the council. Responsiveness and accountability are therefore key values in defining the reformers' objectives. Changing the role conceptions of councillors accordingly constitutes an important first step on the road to improving democratic responsiveness and accountability. After all, changes in institutional rules are unlikely to have major effects if key actors are unwilling or unable to abide by the reforms (Denters & Klok, 2003: 91–93; Kiser & Ostrom, 2000).

In relation to the representative role councillors have to strike a balance between two styles of representation (Eulau & Wahlke, 1959): acting as a delegate or as a trustee (for a discussion of both positions see e.g. Thomassen, 1991). Eulau & Wahlke (1959) emphasise that representatives are constantly weighing demands made by constituents against their own judgements. Pitkin has convincingly argued that responsiveness is a key value in dealing with this dilemma. According to her the gist of democratic representation is

acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner *responsive* to them. The *representative must act* independently; *his act* must involve discretion; *he must be the one who acts* . . . And, despite the resulting potential for conflict between representative and represented about what is to be done, that conflict must not normally take place. The *representative must act* in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs an explanation is called for. He must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interest. (Pitkin, 1967: 209–210; emphasis added)

From this point of view representatives should frequently meet with constituents and undertake activities that (1) allow citizens to voice their concerns, allowing the representative to get an insight in their demands, preferences and needs, and (2) allow the representative to explain and justify his political decisions and choices to the citizens (Pitkin, 1967; Van der Kolk, 1997). In the debates about the Dutch council reforms a similar position was taken by the reformists, who argued that an increased responsiveness of local government requires that councillors strengthen their representative role by giving a higher priority to their relationship with the citizenry, emphasising the importance of listening to the concerns of voters and explaining and justifying the council's political decisions to them. It was hoped that the reforms of the relations between the council and the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (BMA) would allow councillors to spend more time outside City Hall.

In addition to the representative role, councillors also play a vital role in their relations with the executive leaders and officers (see Figure 1). This relation is crucial for the democratic accountability of local governance. In order to secure accountability the literature emphasises that 'the best way to enforce accountability is to develop institutions that vigorously monitor the actions of the public bureaucracy and punish those guilty of maladministration' (Levine *et al.*, 1990: 191; see also Finer, 1941). This implies that the council is provided with adequate means to 'monitor' and 'punish'. One of the objectives of the new LGA was to empower the council in its relation with the BMA by establishing its rights of control, its information rights and its powers of scrutiny, and improving the administrative support for the council (see Table 1). The role of councillors securing accountability requires two types of activities. First, councillors should formulate general principles and guidelines and make these known to the BMA in order to steer the executives. Second, councillors should then oversee and scrutinise the behaviour of the executive branch (Lupia, 2003). In order to secure accountability councillors should value both these activities.

The new LGA aims at increasing responsiveness and accountability. In order to achieve these objectives a number of measures were taken. We will

now first discuss the main elements of the reform and two change mechanisms (socialisation and selection) that will have to make sure that the reform measures will indeed have their intended consequences.

The Dutch Reforms

Institutional Reforms

The traditional model of local democracy in Dutch municipalities has largely remained intact since it was first adopted in 1852. In this model the council was directly elected. The electoral system was based on proportional representation, where each municipality constitutes one multimember electoral district, in which all councillors are elected by the local citizenry.² The council was the head of municipal government, at least in formal terms. There were, however, two additional offices in municipal government with independent powers – the Mayor and the BMA. The Mayor – who was appointed by central government on the basis of a shortlist drawn up by a committee from the council – had several powers granted by national law in the fields of public order and public safety. The aldermen were elected by the council. Because the BMA was conceived as an executive committee of the council only elected members of the council were eligible for aldermanic office. The council also had the right to dismiss aldermen. After their election, aldermen continued their membership in the council and their party group in the council. Therefore, aldermen could not only attend and exert their influence in meetings of the BMA, but also in the plenary meetings of the council and the meetings of their party group. Moreover, they also typically acted as chairs of the council committees. This ‘omnipresence’ of the aldermen made this position very influential. The BMA, in addition to its general responsibility for the preparation and implementation of council decisions, had specific powers in executing many national policies. Both the Mayor and the BMA were responsible to the council for their use of these powers. In a formal sense, in other words, the primacy in local decision making rested with the council. In practice, however, the centre of power resided with the mayor and the aldermen. Because of their omnipresence, their information advantage, and the professional support of their staff, relations between aldermen and ordinary councillors were normally heavily tilted in favour of the former (Denters & Klok, 2005). In combination with strong party discipline the decisions of the council were therefore often more or less dictated by the board.

As has been already indicated, the traditional model came under increasing pressure and was finally replaced in 2002, when a new LGA was enacted, based on the proposals of a Royal Commission. The 2002 reforms had a twofold aim. On the one hand they were aimed at strengthening the actual position of the council vis-à-vis the BMA and creating favourable conditions for better *executive accountability* with

regard to the council. This was done by a series of measures strengthening the independence of the council and reducing the omnipresence of aldermen. The two most important measures in this respect were: (1) the provision that after being elected by the council an alderman would no longer be allowed to retain a seat on the council;³ and (2) the provision that aldermen no longer can act as chairs of council committees. Moreover, the councils were given new formal powers in order to be better able to perform their powers of scrutiny.⁴ Finally, the support for councillors to perform their duties was improved. Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the various measures.

Table 1. The 2002 reforms: most important measures

Type of measure	Short description
Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening independence by abolition double role of the Aldermen - Aldermen no longer chairs council committees
Formal powers councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delegation of all executive powers to the BMA and the Mayor - Obligation for Mayor and BMA to inform council actively on all that may be deemed relevant for the council to perform its duties - Rights of control for councillors (initiative; amendment) - Information rights (parliamentary questions; interpellation; parliamentary inquiry)
Support functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New budgetary instruments for the council - Introduction of Council Clerk - Introduction of local Court of Audit - Right of administrative support and advice

Source: cf. Denters (2005: 431).

In addition to strengthening the council's influence in the local political process, the reforms also aimed at strengthening the representative function of the councillors. In order to achieve this objective the new act implied a delegation of all executive responsibilities from the council to the BMA. This would clearly establish the BMA as the locus for political executive leadership, where the responsibility for the developing and implementing and delivering public services rests. This transfer of responsibilities should make time for councillors to devote themselves not only to their scrutiny role but also to establish closer links with their constituents.⁵ The main idea here was that the transfer of the executive tasks in combination with the establishment of support functions that would facilitate the new scrutiny role, would allow councillors to invest more time and energy in their relation with the citizenry: 'This would imply a reinforcement of their traditional representative role which would result in a more responsive municipal government' (Denters, 2005: 432).

The main ambition of the reforms was to reinstate the council as a democratic forum where (1) the major issues in the local polity could be discussed and different views (e.g. based on the ideological principles of their political party) on these issues in the community could be voiced and translated in guidelines and general policy decisions directing the executive

branch of the municipality, and (2) the local political executive (the BMA) could be held to account for its actions. Moreover, the reformers also insisted that these reforms should not only strengthen the council's position but also allow its members to combine the job of a councillor with a regular job (no professionalisation). Reviewing the 2002 reforms summarised in Table 1, the focus on accountability activities stands out: most instruments are aimed at the empowerment of councillors in their role as scrutiniser of the executive board (for instance, the right to ask questions to the board, and the introduction of a Court of Audit).

Local Government Innovation Program

The Royal Commission that proposed the legislative reforms in the new LGA 2002 was well aware that in all likelihood the institutional reforms alone would not be enough to bring about the desired changes in councillor roles. Therefore, the commission advised to invest in complementary activities aimed at providing information and stimulating reflection among councillors. Following these recommendations of the Royal Commission, the Ministry of the Interior provided a four-year budget for an ambitious Local Government Innovation Program. This program, that was developed and executed in close cooperation with the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), entailed a cooperation of several relevant actors (including the various political parties, and the professional associations of mayors and chief-executive officers in local government). The program provided for a wide range of activities, including the publication of a regular newsletter and guidebooks on the practical implications of the reforms, conferences for councillors and other target groups, training modules, facilities for counselling and advice and research to monitor the implementation of the reforms. An internet platform was introduced to re-enforce and propagate the program by providing municipalities with information and support and exchanging ideas for renewal and best practices. By use of this website current initiatives enhancing a cultural change were mapped and made accessible. Most of the activities in the program aimed at informing and educating councillors in order to make them adapt to their new organisational environment. In addition to these efforts at re-socialisation, the program also included efforts to change patterns of recruitment. An important example of the latter type of activities was the formulation of a *Recruitment Profile for Party Groups, Councillors, and Aldermen* that provided local parties with suggestions for guidelines to be used for selecting councillors and aldermen after the introduction of the new act.⁶ By changing patterns of socialisation and recruitment the program aimed to change the role orientations and role behaviour of the members of municipal councils and make them give a high priority to their representative and scrutiny functions (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2000; Royal Commission Elzinga, 2000).

It remains to be seen whether the structural measures and accompanying Innovation Program have been successful in changing the appropriate values among councillors. It has been emphasised that such value change is at least as important as formal institutional checks (e.g. Levine *et al.*, 1990: 191; see also Friedrich, 1940).

Institutional Change and its Mechanisms

To provide a theoretical background for discussing our empirical findings with regard to the changes in councillor attitudes (first research question) and possible explanations for any such changes (second research question) we now give a short overview of the relevant theoretical literature.

In their analysis of the effects of institutional change on trends in aggregate political role orientations of Italian (regional) councillors Putnam *et al.* (1993: 36–37) have pointed to the potential relevance of two change mechanisms: socialisation and electoral replacement. Likewise other political scientists (e.g. Dearlove, 1973 and Knoke, 1973) and organisational sociologists (Chatman, 1989, 1991; Oldham & Hackman, 1981) have looked into socialisation and selection as mechanisms that can explain attitudinal change. In terms of socialisation it is argued that institutional change is likely to create a new environment to which people gradually adapt and in due process develop new attitudes and habits. The mechanism of socialisation is therefore a psychological phenomenon that leads to *personal change*.

The selection mechanism on the other hand points to the effects of selective exit and recruitment. On the exit side, members of an organisation who do not feel at ease or dysfunction in a new institutional context may decide to quit or may be 'thrown' out in favour of more well-adapted colleagues. On the recruitment side, new institutional conditions may be more attractive for some aspiring new members (with different backgrounds, 'new' attitudes and habits) than for others (with a more 'traditional' profile). At the same time institutional reforms may enthuse recruiters to select 'non-traditional' new candidates rather than newcomers with a more traditional mindset. Both these selection mechanisms are resulting in a '*change of personnel*'. Although socialisation and selection should be analytically distinguished they operate at the same time and may therefore be very difficult to disentangle (Chatman, 1989: 345).

Institutional Socialisation

Socialisation takes place in numerous contexts: in families and amongst friends, in schools, voluntary associations and in a wide variety of formal organisations. All these social contexts, unintentionally or sometimes also deliberately, shape their members' views and actions. Formal organisations, in addition to informal mechanisms of socialisation, have often designed programs to stimulate the development of attitudes, skills and activities

amongst its members, in order to bring about organisational change or to make the organisation function more effectively (Biddle, 1979; Fischer, 1986; Saks & Ashfort, 1997; Van Maanen, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Municipal councils are not any different, and have a variety of formal and informal mechanisms for the socialisation of new members (Dearlove, 1973). Such socialisation programs are especially important during reorganisations. In order to make structural reforms in the formal organisation work, it is often deemed necessary to supplement the structural reforms with programs to change the attitudes, skills and behaviour of the members. For precisely these reasons the Dutch reformers have implemented an ambitious Local Government Innovation Program to support the institutional changes (see previous section on 'Local Government Innovation Program').

The aim of such programs is to re-establish the match between the priorities and values of the individual and the organisation (person-organisation fit). Such a match fosters personal happiness, and the attitudes of the organisational member towards the organisation and his work therein. The person-organisation fit also affects the likelihood that a person will continue his membership (Chatman, 1991; Meir & Hasson, 1982). The effectiveness of institutional reforms, even when combined with re-socialisation programs, however, should not be taken for granted. After all, these programs aim at reshaping *prevalent* attitudes and values (McCorkle & Korn, 1954). Established values and attitudes represent a 'cultural bias' with which actors 'view the world' (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). Changing such an established biased view is likely to be a time-consuming process with insecure results. An obvious implication of this is that the 'rhythms of institutional change are slow' (Putnam *et al.*, 1993: 60). This might even be the case if the structural reforms are backed up by a re-socialisation effort. Scharpf (1986) reached a rather similar conclusion in his theoretical analysis of the effects of institutional change. These sceptical conclusions stand in marked contrast to the more optimistic expectations of the Dutch reformers and some of the results from British evaluations of the LGA reforms there (see the introduction of this article).

The above analysis also has another, somewhat less immediately obvious, implication. Although the effects of institutional changes on individual attitudes may be a toilsome process, the theoretical literature also hypothesises that some individuals can be more susceptible to change than others. In the literature considerable attention has been given to the effects of organisational tenure, in terms of the number of years an actor is member of an organisation. In the literature we find two rival hypotheses. On the one hand, it has been argued that organisation members with long organisational tenure possess unique, valuable and non-transferable knowledge and skills not available to their less experienced colleagues (Cannella & Hambrick, 1993; Lanzara, 1998). On the basis of these resources more experienced members would be more open-minded and better able to adapt

to new circumstances. Less experienced actors on the other hand would be forced to stick to a standard action repertoire (Bergh, 2001). For our research this would suggest that longer tenured councillors have the skills that allow them to adapt to a changing environment which also makes them less change-averse than their less experienced colleagues.

Although this argument has some merits, it ignores that – especially in a political context – action orientations and practices are inextricably bound up with vested interests and power relations. From this point of view it would be argued that although more senior members may be capable of changing their ways, they would be unwilling to do so because of their vested interest in the status quo. Moreover, long-tenured members have a tendency to rely on routine and familiar information sources that will make them inert and ill-disposed of change. Therefore we hypothesise that especially new organisation members are relatively open to change and more likely to be susceptible for re-socialisation than longer-tenured individuals (Harrison & Carroll, 1991). This is in line with research findings that demonstrate that short-tenured members pursue more innovative strategies (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Thomas *et al.*, 1991), are less resistant to change (Hambrick *et al.*, 1993) and more open-minded (Bergh, 2001), than long-tenured members. In our present context this would imply that councillors who were socialised under the rules and the prevalent political culture (with a history of 150 years) of the ‘ancient regime’ are not as likely to change as their lesser experienced colleagues.

Selection: Exit and Recruitment

The mechanism of selection is about change of personnel and implies *membership turnover* resulting from either (1) the leave of current members or (2) the recruitment of new members. According to Berg and Rao (2005: 5), changes in institutional structure, such as new structures of power and tasks, can both ‘restrain and encourage individual candidates to run for election and, consequently, affect the actual composition of the council’.

Exit. Like members of most other organisations, council members have the option to discontinue their membership. Why do some members use this option and resign, while others decide to stay ‘on board’? Harrison and Carroll (1991: 560) observe that ‘individuals leave organisations for a wide variety of reasons, including better jobs, dissatisfaction, and family concerns’. In general we can say that the more a member feels that a continuation of membership no longer contributes to or even negatively affects the realisation of his personal objectives it is likely that the person reconsiders his membership. In the context of firms and professional organisations an important consideration is the degree to which the member feels that on the basis of his personal standards (normative role conceptions)

he will (still) be able to do a proper job (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Chatman, 1991; Denton, 1999; Schneider, 1987).

When applying this general argument to the context of our research, we should realise that a reorganisation – like the Dutch council reforms – is likely to be a moment when more than a few members may ask themselves whether a continuation of their membership is appropriate. Councillors who think that the council reforms have negatively affected their capacity to do their work properly will be less inclined to stand for re-election, than colleagues who have a more positive evaluation of the reforms. Moreover, there are likely to be variations in members' willingness and ability to adapt to the reorganisation. Maladjusted members may come under pressure to reconsider their membership and this pressure might induce these members to resign (cf. Harrison & Carroll, 1991: 560; cf. Schein, 2000 [1999]: 23).⁷

Recruitment. Organisations typically have procedures to renew their membership. Municipal councils are no exception, although the recruitment of councillors (and other political representatives) is characterised by a number of peculiarities. An important difference between councils and many other social organisations is that prior to periodical elections, both current council members seeking re-election and aspiring new candidates compete in one and the same selection procedure for a limited number of (safe) positions on their party's electoral list. The challenge for selectors is to find suitable council candidates. As discussed in other research, this might be difficult (cf. Aarts, 2008; Boogers, 2007). Such differences notwithstanding, recruitment procedures in social organisations have important similarities. Throughout various recruitment procedures selectors make decisions about how to fill available positions. Selectors typically want to select candidates whose profile matches the organisation's desired or current culture (Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997: 546; Cable & Parsons, 2001; Chatman, 1989, 1991). Through careful search and selection, it is possible to improve the person–organisation fit in the organisation (Harrison and Carroll, 1991: 554). The selection of candidates for legislative assemblies fulfils a similar function. Selectors (e.g. party commissions) are responsible for selecting suitable candidates. The candidates are characterised by a particular motivation to stand for office and by specific personal resources. The responsibility of the selectors is to determine, based on the needs of their party and its political culture, which candidates have the appropriate motivations and possess the required qualifications (Budge & Farlie, 1975; Meadowcroft, 2001; Schwartz, 1969). It is a two-sided process: on the one side self-selection of candidates, on the other side selection by the organisation. Hence, political recruitment like other forms of organisational recruitment is about matching motivations and resources of (new) members with organisational needs.

We can conclude that both sides share an interest in the provision of adequate information about the implications of membership (cf. Chatman,

1991: 481) and use this information in their decisions to apply (on the candidates' side) and in the selection of aspiring candidates (on the selectors' side). In the context of our research, this implies that in the process of selecting candidates for council membership, both selectors and candidates will try to make an assessment of the chances that the aspiring (new) council members will be able to perform adequately under the new legislative regime. Hence, the recruitment process is likely to be selective in the sense that councillors who (think and) are (thought to be) able to do a satisfactory job after the reforms introduced with the new LGA, are more likely to be selected than other candidates (cf. Oldham and Hackman, 1981: 66–67, 78).

Implications

This theoretical analysis provides a number of hypotheses on the likelihood of attitudinal change after the local government reforms reorganisation (cf. our first research question) and the mechanisms that might produce any such changes (cf. second research question). First, our analysis has indicated that especially if the change process has to rely solely on socialisation mechanisms, the institutional reforms and the supporting Innovation Program, in the short run are not likely to be effective in bringing about major changes in councillor attitudes. Second, we have also concluded that although the effects of institutional changes and subsequent socialisation processes on individual attitudes may take considerable time to emerge, the theoretical literature also hypothesises that shorter tenured councillors can be more susceptible to change than more experienced others. Third, we have concluded that selection process may be an effective vehicle for change. Both the process of self-selection amongst aspiring councillors and the selection made by the party selectors of both incumbents and new councillors are likely to sift out councillors who (think and) are (thought to be) able to do a satisfactory job under the new LGA.

Methods

In order to test these expectations we have used repeated surveys on mixed panels in order to measure changes in councillor's attitudes towards responsiveness and accountability activities as a result of the new LGA (which was implemented in 2002). In 1999 there was a pre-measurement (wave 1),⁸ in 2007 a post-measurement (wave 2).⁹ In 1999 a two-stage sample was used: first a systematic sample of 150 municipalities was selected from a list of all 538 Dutch municipalities (ordered according to population size) and then all councillors in these municipalities received a self-administered questionnaire. The 1999 survey had a response rate of 61 per cent; and the respondents were a good representation in terms of municipal size and political parties (for details about this survey see: Royal Commission Elzinga 2000). In 2007 we conducted a second survey in the

same municipalities (excluding seven municipalities which did not exist anymore due to amalgamation); again all the councillors received a self-administered questionnaire. The 2007 response rate was 41 per cent and the response group formed a good representation of the population in terms of municipal size, political parties, regions, age and gender.

Unfortunately, because of privacy legislation, we were not able to merge the 1999 and 2007 data at the level of individual councillors. Therefore we are unable to analyse attitudinal changes over time of individual council members, which makes it difficult to disentangle socialisation and selection effects. Nevertheless, these two surveys will allow us to analyse patterns of attitudinal change by comparing the attitudes in the two samples of councillors (e.g. by comparing means) and also test some hypotheses regarding the mechanisms behind possible changes.

Results: Changing Role Orientations?

Is there Attitudinal Change?

Our first research question is whether the role orientations of councillors have changed if we compare 1999 and 2007. In order to establish changes in the importance of the representative role, we have used two indicators for establishing the importance councillors attach to 'representing citizens' and 'explaining council decisions to citizens'. For assessing changes in the importance of scrutiny activities we have used indicators indicating the importance councillors attach to 'formulate general principles and guidelines for the BMA' and 'controlling and scrutinising the political executive and its bureaucratic apparatus'. Our results are presented in Table 2. The results indicate that councillors in these two years consider both representation and securing accountability as important tasks. The scores in both years for all four items are in the range between 0.65 and 1.00 (*important to very important*). More detailed analyses of the 2007 data show that councillors of coalition parties feel it is more important to explain decisions to citizens than their colleagues in the opposition. On the other hand, councillors of opposition parties feel it is more important to control and scrutinise the board (de Groot, 2009). This confirms Copus' observation (2008: 602) that there is a political dynamics that also impacts upon (changing) councillor role orientations.

The similarities between the role orientations of the councillors in 1999 and 2007 notwithstanding, we can make two important observations. First, considering activities of responsiveness and accountability, there is a shift towards accountability activities. This becomes especially clear by looking at the ranking figures: in 1999 responsiveness activities are perceived as more important than accountability activities, in 2007 this pattern is reversed. Second, this change is not so much the result of a decrease in importance of responsiveness activities (2007 scores not deviating much from the previous

Table 2. Comparing councillors' role orientations in 1999 and 2007

Attitude towards activity	1999		2007		Sign.
	x (sd)	ranking	x (sd)	ranking	
Responsiveness					
'representing'	.75 (0,26) N = 1478	1	.81 (0,18) N = 1290	3	P < 0.01
'explaining'	.71 (0,24) N = 1478	2	.76 (0,20) N = 1288	4	P < 0.01
Accountability					
'defining main goals'	.69 (0,17) N = 1455	2*	.90 (0,14) N = 1288	1	P < 0.01
'controlling'	.70 (0,25) N = 1468	2	.84 (0,17) N = 1290	2	P < 0.01

Notes: Scale: 0–1 (not important to very important). *significant at $p < 0.01$ compared to 'explaining'.

scores, there is even a small increase), but more the effect of an increasing importance of accountability activities.

These results are noteworthy in at least two respects. First, with regard to our first research question, the results show a rather marked degree of attitudinal change in the period between 1999 and 2007. Whereas some academics have been sceptical about the effects of institutional change, our results indicate that at least some of the effects that the reformers had hoped for were achieved. Second, we observe that the asymmetric results for responsiveness and accountability do not reflect the dual normative case for the reforms that emphasised the importance of both responsiveness and accountability. Apparently local actors have prioritised the accountability goals of the reforms. This is not a big surprise, since, most measures in the reform package (see Table 1) were targeted at an improvement of the position of the council vis-à-vis the BMA and not to the external orientation of the council in its relation to the citizenry.

It is also interesting to put these results in the perspective of a council survey conducted in 2004 by a private consultancy (Berenschot, 2004). This survey, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, included the same attitudinal questions as in 1999. Unfortunately the low response rates (17 per cent), the method of data collection and the sampling procedures employed in the Berenschot preclude a rigorous comparison. But is nevertheless informative to see how the results of this survey compare to the 1999 results. In two respects the findings of the 2004 survey confirm our findings. In comparing the 1999 results with the 2004 data we observe a small increase in importance for representing activities (for $p < 0.05$), and a large increase for controlling activities (for $p < 0.01$).¹⁰ On the other hand, the 2004 results did not show a major change with regard to 'explaining' and 'defining main goals'. This suggests that the changes reported in Table 2 concerning these role aspects only took place some considerable time after

implementation of the LGA 2002. In the next section we will deal with the impact of socialisation and recruitment.

Change Mechanisms

It is now time to turn to our second research question: how are we to explain this selective attitudinal change? In the first part of this paper we discussed two possible explanations: the socialisation mechanism, and the selection mechanism. Unfortunately our data does not allow to test rigorously whether individual attitudes of councillors have changed over time. Therefore it is impossible to establish whether socialisation of individuals under the new legislative regime has resulted in personal change (in terms of changing attitudes of an individual between t_0 and t_1). Nevertheless, to get some insight in these change patterns, this section looks at the extent to which socialisation can explain the observed attitudinal changes. First, on the basis of the 2007 data only, we compare the cohorts of councillors. As we have seen in the theoretical section it is to be expected that tenure is likely to affect the effects of re-socialisation efforts. In our analysis we will distinguish between cohort I which is composed of the newly elected councillors in the most recent municipal election (2006), cohort II which comprises of the councillors who in 2007 served for a maximum of one term (these councillors had no experience under the pre-LGA 2002 regime), and cohort III being the 2007 councillors who have more than five years experience and therefore have also experienced local government under the old institutional regime.

If *only* the socialisation mechanism would be responsible for the aggregate level changes that we observed in the previous section, we would expect that for the 2007 respondents the importance attached to responsiveness and accountability would co-vary with organisational tenure. Based on socialisation theory we would expect that the reform values (accountability and responsiveness) would be most effectively inculcated in cohort II – councillors with one term experience, under the new legal regime. The freshmen (cohort I) have yet to be fully socialised, whereas in cohort III – councillors with experience under the previous institutional structure – the socialisation process is likely to be less effective because it has to undo the results of previous socialisation under the old legislative regime. Therefore, we expect to see a curvilinear relationship between tenure and value change. In order to see if our expectation is right we compare the three previously distinguished tenure cohorts (see Table 3).

Table 3 shows that there are no (real) and consistent differences between the three cohorts in terms of the saliency scores for the responsiveness and accountability activities. Therefore we conclude that the tenure hypothesis based on the socialisation argument is not corroborated. One explanation is that possible results of organisational socialisation have been attenuated by the selection mechanism. As a result of the selection process (as a

combination of self-selection and selection by recruiters) all three cohorts of councillors elected in the 2006 elections – *irrespective of their different socialisation histories* – could have taken on a similar attitudinal profile. The ‘selection-sieve’ – by selecting and recruiting some and turning down and pushing out others – could bring about a ‘change of personnel’. And this, in turn, might have its impact on patterns of role orientations (e.g. in terms of changes in the means of our sample of councillors in 1999 and 2007), even if there is no change in role conceptions at the individual level (‘personal change’). In order to probe this option we have subsequently tried to isolate a selection effect. On the basis of our data it is possible to isolate a possible selection effect (and minimise possible confounding effects by institutional socialisation of councillors while in office) when we compare new recruits in 2007 with their equals in 1999.¹¹ We expect that in comparing these two groups we will witness an increase in the saliency of both the responsiveness and accountability activities. After all, both the 2007 candidates and their selectors were making their decisions in a new era, in which the LGA and the supporting Innovation Program emphasised the importance of these concerns.

Table 4 shows that if we compare 1999’s freshmen with their equals of 2007, we find the expected increase in importance for the two accountability activities. This confirms the hypothesis of a substantial selection effect in the case of these activities. The freshmen of 2007 on the eve of the 2006 elections went through a screening process (see section on ‘Selection: Exit and Recruitment’) that was different from traditional selection criteria employed for the freshman of 1999; putting heavier emphasis on the accountability values than before.

Our conclusion is that the aggregate changes observed in the previous section on ‘Is there Attitudinal Change?’ are at least for a part to be

Table 3. Comparing councillors’ role orientations between three cohorts of councilors in 2007

Attitude towards activity	Cohort I: 1 year: x (sd)	Cohort II 1–5 years: x (sd)	Cohort III > 5 years: x (sd)
‘representing’	.81 (0,17)	.80 (0,19)	.81 (0,18)
‘explaining’	.76 (0,19)	.77 (0,20)	.76 (0,20)
‘defining main goals’	.89 (0,16)	.90 (0,14)	.90 (0,14)
‘controlling’	.84 (0,16)	.84 (0,17)	.84 (0,17)

Notes: Cohort 1 N = 400; Cohort 2 N = 319; Cohort 3 N = 453.

Table 4. Comparing councillors’role conceptions between newly elected councillors (Cohort I: 1 year experience) in 1999 and 2007

Attitude towards activity	1999: x (sd)	2007: x (sd)
‘representing’	.76 (0,28)	.82 (0,17)
‘explaining’	.69 (0,25)	.76 (0,19)
‘defining main goals’	.68 (0,18)	.89 (0,17)
‘controlling’	.70 (0,26)	.84 (0,16)

Notes: 1999: N = 520, 2007: N = 400.

understood as the result of a selection effect. On the basis of our data it is hard to tell whether there is also a socialisation effect. We were unable to corroborate the organisational tenure hypothesis, and have argued that this might mean that there is no clear socialisation effect. An alternative explanation for our findings, however, might be that the possible results of organisational socialisation have been attenuated by the selection mechanism.

Conclusions

In this paper we aimed at (1) establishing and (2) explaining the attitudinal effects of a Dutch reform to strengthen the councillor as a representative and a scrutiniser. The Local Government Act 2002 was supposed to improve the responsiveness and accountability of the municipal council. This study's results show that the reforms have resulted in a change in councillor role orientations (first research question). We have shown that in line with the reforms' objectives, councillors consider their scrutiny activities substantially more important than before the reforms. With regard to the representation function, we did find an increase in importance though not as strong as for the accountability activities. The reforms therefore appear to have been mainly successful in strengthening the councillor's focus on their control and scrutiny functions. These findings are more or less in line with similar experiences in the UK where evaluations also indicate that the recent LGA reforms have also resulted in some modest changes in the role orientations of councillors (e.g. Copus, 2008; ELG Team 2007). These results imply that claims that institutional reform may not be a very promising strategy (e.g. Putnam *et al.*, 1993; Scharpf, 1986) need to be qualified. Even in a relatively short period of time the Dutch reforms did have an effect, especially with regard to the orientations towards the scrutiny role of the council. It was precisely in this domain that was covered most extensively in the reform package.

Two change mechanisms have been linked to the institutional reforms: socialisation and selection (cf. second research question). We have shown that the Innovation Program tried to activate both mechanisms to bring about the desired changes in the attitudes and the behaviour of councillors. On the one hand the program provided information and education for councillors to better equip them for their new roles in local government (socialisation). On the other hand, it also tried to change patterns of selection, e.g. by formulating a Recruitment Profile for Councillors and Aldermen

The data presented in the section on 'Change Mechanisms' indicate that the '2006 sieve' (i.e. the recruitment and (s)election process around the council elections of that year) played an important role in producing the observed attitudinal changes. Analyses (comparing newly elected councillors in 2007 with their counterparts in 1999) confirmed the hypothesis of a substantial recruitment effect. These findings highlight the importance of selection and recruitment mechanisms that typically operate during election periods.

But what do our findings tell us about the relevance of socialisation as a mechanism of change? Our analyses do not provide evidence for major attitudinal differences between different cohorts of councillors. This is not what we expected on the basis of the organisational tenure hypothesis that indicates that different socialisation histories will lead to different socialisation results. Of course this might mean that organisational socialisation is relatively unimportant in shaping councillor role orientations. But there is also the possibility that socialisation did have effects, but that any such effects were 'washed away' by subsequent recruitment effects. After all, every cohort of councillors (irrespective of their socialisation histories) had to go through the same 'sieve' (i.e. the recruitment and selection procedures at the eve of council elections). Similarities between these cohorts therefore may have been the result of this filtering.

Anyhow, our findings clearly point to the relevance of selection and recruitment as a major mechanism in furthering institutional change. Although socialisation may also be important, the process of selection and self-selection provides a mechanism that guarantees that only the councillors who are best adapted to the new council system 'survive'. In the context of political assemblies, where all members are periodically obliged to go through a nomination and election procedure, the impact of this mechanism is bound to be more important than in other types of organisations. On the basis of this finding it is tempting to conclude that selection and recruitment are potentially important mechanisms for promoting political change. But we should not forget that it may be difficult to control this process. After all, selection and recruitment are among the main functions of political parties. And for good reasons state authorities in a democratic society are typically most reluctant to intervene in the internal affairs of these political associations.

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Notes

- 1 In England it seems to be the case that party loyalty and discipline affected the development of the councillor as scrutiner (Copus, 2008: 602). Therefore, changing the councillor's roles should not only involve new structures, but also a review of political interaction and processes (Copus, 2008: 602). Besides the party political dynamics, also the fact that their task in political accountability was completely new, made a change difficult (Copus, 2008: 602). As a result 'councillors continue to struggle with the new role of mayoral scrutiner' (Copus, 2008: 602).
- 2 There are therefore no electoral wards and there is no tradition of ward councillors to whom residents of a particular district can turn with their problems. Constituents with problems can therefore take on any councillor.
- 3 In fact the new legislation also newly created the option that non-councillors could be elected to become aldermen. If, however, the council would elect one of its members to become alderman, this member according to the new legislation would have to resign from

the council. Therefore, henceforth, both aldermen recruited from inside and outside of the council would no longer have a seat on the council.

- 4 Of course the question remains how effective these measures are: the fact that the council receives more powers of scrutiny does not tell us anything about its effectiveness.
- 5 According to the reformers this transfer of formal powers would be more than compensated for by: (1) a more independent position of the council; (2) new instruments for scrutiny and control; and (3) new support functions for the council and its members (see Table 1). Therefore the reformers argued that the delegation of powers to the executive would not go at the expense of the primacy of the council.
- 6 The new profile pays attention to several councillor attitudes and competences that would be crucial for the council to adopt its new representative and scrutiny roles. In terms of responsiveness the councillor should reserve enough time for contacts with the local public and should be willing to justify his political choices to his constituents. On the other hand he should also be capable of using the new scrutiny and control instruments provided by the new act and be able to define general principles and guidelines to steer the behaviour of the executive branch (Vernieuwingsimpuls Dualisme en lokale democratie, 2001).
- 7 Obviously there are also forces working in the opposite direction. Incumbents may be reluctant to withdraw because the councillor's job may be financially rewarding and prestigious. Moreover, parties and party groups may be reluctant to push 'maladjusted' incumbents out if they are popular amongst (segments of) the electorate.
- 8 In the 1999 survey the responsiveness dimension was measured by two items 'How important is it for you as a councillor to represent citizens in your municipality?' (listening) and 'How important is it for you as a councillor in your contacts with citizens, local organisations and followers of your party to explain or justify council decisions?' (explaining). And for the accountability domain we used the item 'How important is it for you as a councillor to control for a proper execution of taken decisions?' (controlling) and on a scale based on three items to measure 'steering'. These items were: 'How important is it for you as a councillor to define (1) municipal decrees, (2) white papers and other strategic plans, and (3) budgets?' For more details on measurements see de Groot (2009, chapter 6).
- 9 In the 2007 survey the responsiveness dimension was measured by two items 'How important is it for you as a councillor to express the requests and issues emerging from the local society?' (listening) and 'How important is it for you as a councillor to explain decisions of the council to citizens?' (explaining). And for the accountability domain we used the items 'How important is it for you as a councillor to control the municipal activity?' (controlling) and 'How important is it for you as a councillor to define the main goals of the municipal activity?' (steering). The measurements used in 1999 and 2007 can be considered as functionally equivalent but were not identical. Therefore we have tried to corroborate any conclusions by using evidence from other sources. An important alternative source of information was a council survey conducted in 2004 by a private consultancy (Berenschot, 2004). This survey, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, included the same attitudinal questions as in 1999. For a further discussion of the measurements and the analytical strategies employed refer to de Groot (2009).
- 10 The reported results are based on our analyses of both the 1999 and the 2004 data sets. A more detailed report of these findings can be found in de Groot (2009).
- 11 Unfortunately we do not have direct evidence about the selection *process*, but we can make inferences about its nature on the basis of the comparisons included in Table 4.

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