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CHAPTER 10

MUNICIPAL POLITICS IN THE NETHERLANDS

LISANNE DE BLOK, GIEDO JANSEN, AND HANS VOLLAARD

Since the late eighteenth century, local governments in the Netherlands have been firmly integrated into a decentralized yet unitary state, in which their uniform organizational format, their financing, and most of their responsibilities are determined at the national level. Probably reflecting this dominance of the state, the scholarly focus in the Netherlands has predominantly been on national politics and governance. It is not a given that concepts and theories based on (comparative) analysis of national politics and governance also apply to municipal politics. This chapter therefore focuses on features specific to municipal politics, such as second-order elections, local parties, layman politicians, and the position of mayors.

We discuss the existing body of knowledge on municipal politics by distinguishing three clusters of relationships: (1) between municipal governments and citizens, local civil society, and the private sector; (2) within municipal governments between legislative, executive, and administrative actors, and (3) between municipal governments and other levels of governance. While international scientific publications on Dutch municipal politics and governance are rather limited and fragmented, there are also relevant publications in Dutch-language scientific journals and research published in books and reports commissioned by government agencies, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations (see e.g. Van Ostaaijen, 2022; Vollaard et al., 2018). Based on these publications, we will not only present the current state of knowledge but also discuss avenues for future research. We start with an introduction to the way municipal politics and governance are organized in the Netherlands.

Dutch Municipal Politics in a Nutshell

The number of municipalities in the Netherlands has been declining incrementally: in the 1950s there were still more than 1,000 municipalities, but by 2023 the lower-level

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of the Dutch unitary state comprised 342 municipalities.[1] Their current average size of 52,172 inhabitants is far larger than in most other countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (average size in 2020: 10,250), and in most other member states of the European Union (EU) (average size in 2020: 5,960) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/United Cities and Local Governments, 2022).

Municipalities have by and large the same responsibilities, ranging from public order and safety to social and health policy (unemployment, youth care) to land-use planning and waste management. Municipalities have the right to take up responsibilities as long as they do not contravene rules from higher levels of government. They are, however, foremost involved with executing tasks assigned by the national government (so-called co-governance), in which they have a variable degree of policy discretion (Schaap, 2019). Financially, municipalities depend much more on the national government than local governments in other parts of the EU. Their main sources of income are general and special grants from the national government (61%), local property tax and other taxes, charges, and levies (15%), and land development (5%) (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). Municipalities spend about 20% of all public expenditures in the Netherlands (2020), which is lower than the OECD average (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/United Cities and Local Governments, 2022). Social and health policies are the largest budget items, involving 60% of local budgets. Provinces and the national state execute budget oversight when a municipality is not able to balance its books structurally. Altogether, in international comparison, Dutch municipalities are in the low-middle category of local autonomy (Ladner & Keuffer, 2021).

All Dutch municipalities are governed by three institutions: the municipal council (*gemeenteraad*), the executive board of mayor and aldermen (BMA) (*college van burgemeester en wethouders*), and the mayor (*burgemeester*). The organization of Dutch municipalities is principally laid down in the constitution (*grondwet*) and the Municipalities Act (*Gemeentewet*). Municipal councils are elected every four years on the same day, although amalgamations can result in alternative election dates for the municipalities involved. Active and passive suffrage apply with few exceptions to all local inhabitants (aged 18 and over), who include non-Dutch EU citizens as well as other non-Dutch inhabitants who have lived in the Netherlands uninterruptedly for five years (Seidle, 2015). The size of the municipal council ranges from nine to 45 (typically part-time) councillors, depending on the number of inhabitants in the municipality. The maximum number of seats has remained the same since 1896, despite municipal mergers and population growth, meaning that a councillor today on average represents a larger number of citizens than they did some decades ago. Parties and independent lists compete for municipal seats in an open-list system that is extremely proportional,

[1] See Oostindie and Veenendaal, *this volume*, for the quasi-municipal status of the Caribbean islands of Bonaire, Statia, and Saba.

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as entire municipalities constitute one district in which seats are allocated proportionally without an electoral threshold (except in councils with fewer than 19 seats, where the threshold is 75% of the electoral quotient).

As the formal head of the municipality, the council's main tasks are determining policy goals, oversight, and representation. Municipal councils appoint aldermen (two to nine full-time positions, depending on council size), usually as a result of a coalition formation process. Councils also have a large say in the selection of mayors, who are not elected by citizens but are formally appointed by the national government for a renewable term of six years. Councils have the power to dismiss aldermen, while they can request the national government to fire a mayor because of a 'disturbed relationship'. The provincial king's commissioner has a consultative role in both mayors' (re)appointment and (forced) withdrawal. Mayors are chairpersons of the council without voting rights, and they also chair the BMA, in which they do have a (decisive) vote. Moreover, they are responsible for public safety and order (including disaster management and fire protection), for which they are accountable to the council. Mayors should also further the integrity of municipal government and serve as the ceremonial head of the municipality (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017).

The institutional relationships within Dutch municipalities are often somewhat confusingly described in terms of 'monism' and 'dualism' (see also Louwerse & Van Vonno, *this volume*). This confusion stems from different emphases on (1) the formal relationship between the council and the executive (functions and sources of legitimacy of both institutions are distinct or derived from the council) and (2) the actual relationship between these two institutions (dominance of the executive over the council vs. the council as an effective counterweight to the executive). Reforms in these relationships in the early twenty-first century had a dualistic tinge, as several executive tasks were formally shifted from the council to the executive board, the role of councillor and alderman became incompatible, and councils obtained their supporting staff. Still, Dutch municipalities continue to be a mix of monistic and dualistic elements. The reforms confirmed the division of labour between a council focusing on legislation and oversight, and a dominant executive focusing on preparing and executing local policies. Moreover, the council remains head of the municipal government according to the constitution, and aldermen still derive their position from the council, in contrast to mayors.

Dutch municipalities have faced considerable challenges, similar to other local governments in Western democracies. These challenges include the local public sector reforms based on the ideas of New Public Management (NPM) since the 1980s and post-NPM reforms more recently, various waves of decentralization, ongoing attempts to enhance participation by the local citizenry, expanding intermunicipal cooperation, intensifying globalization and European integration, the emergence of metropolitan regions, and the rise of populist and local parties since the 1990s (e.g. Callanan & Loughlin, 2021; Denters & Rose, 2005). These challenges have also shaped the three clusters of relationships: between municipal governments and local civil society, within

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municipal governments, and between municipal governments and other levels of governance. These will be discussed in the following sections.

Relationships between Municipal Governments and Citizens, Local Civil Society, and the Private Sector

This section focuses on the relationships between municipal governments and local civil society, discussing participation and representation, respectively. While electoral representation in Dutch municipal politics has only recently started attracting more scholarly attention, non-electoral participation has been studied more extensively under headings such as democratic innovations and interactive policymaking. As for political representation, there is some work on independent local parties, the recruitment of council candidates, and the perception of representation.

Electoral and Non-electoral Participation

International-comparative studies of electoral participation at the municipal level in Europe and elsewhere are fairly new (see Gendzwill et al., 2022). Dutch municipal elections have been studied for somewhat longer. The launch of the Dutch Local Elections Studies in 2016 provided an impetus to this field. As elsewhere, Dutch municipal elections are commonly seen as second-order elections, perceived as less important than national elections (cf. Lefevere & Van Aelst, 2014). Local turnout has been lower than in national elections and declined from 70% in the early 1980s to 51% in 2022 (see also Den Ridder & Van Ostaaijen, *this volume*). Typically, the same factors can explain non-voting across municipal and national elections, where turnout is positively related to age, education, and income, which can be explained by higher levels of political knowledge, interest, and efficacy (Boogers & De Blok, 2022; Jansen & Boogers, 2019; Steenvoorden & Van der Waal, 2016).

In addition, the second-order nature of municipal elections is also reflected by the imprint of national politics on party voting. Although the proportion is declining, the latest edition of the Dutch Local Election Studies indicates that 45% of voters still say that national considerations (also) determined their vote (Jansen & Vollaard, 2023). Accordingly, parties in the national coalition government usually lose in subsequent municipal elections (Allers et al., 2022). In addition, voters of independent local parties are more motivated by distrust of national politics and the absence of their favourite national party in municipal elections than by a localist orientation (Otjes, 2018).

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The second-order nature of municipal elections is no surprise as Dutch citizens have limited interest in and knowledge of municipal politics (Jansen & Vollaard, 2023). Despite the increasing responsibilities of municipalities, a majority of citizens still perceive the municipality to have only a minor influence on their daily lives, or no influence at all (Jansen & Vollaard, 2023). Municipal elections are commonly perceived as national opinion polls, with national politicians actively contributing to the campaigns of the local branches of national parties. Local news coverage is declining, despite online media innovations (D'Haenens et al., 2019). Turnout is higher among citizens with higher levels of attachment to their municipality and with higher levels of trust in municipal institutions. However, identification with one's municipality is low compared to other countries (Hendriks et al., 2013). Citizens tend to have more trust in the municipal government than in other government levels (De Blok & Van der Brug, 2019), but scholars have pointed out that such trust is unlikely to be driven by the actual performance of municipal governments (De Blok & Van der Brug, 2022; Proszowska et al., 2022).

Beyond their second-order nature, Dutch municipal elections also have distinct local features. Turnout is shaped by municipal characteristics, including municipal size and amalgamations. Turnout is consistently lower in larger municipalities than in smaller ones (Van der Kolk, 2022). Allers et al. (2021) also showed that municipal amalgamation reduces turnout structurally in local elections by 2.2 percentage points. Municipal politics also matter for voting behaviour. Parties participating in municipal executive boards suffer in subsequent elections (Allers et al., 2022). Voters punish parties for corruption and scandals of their politicians (Rienks, 2023). In addition, the share of preferential voting is larger in municipal elections (54% in 2022) than in national elections (32% in 2021), with more residents personally knowing a candidate (Nagtzaam, 2021).

Despite a relatively low turnout, voting is the main form of political participation at the municipal level. However, Dutch municipalities have been an incubator for democratic renewal and experiments with new forms of citizen participation, partly in response to declining turnout in the early 1990s (cf. Den Ridder & Van Ostaaijen, *this volume*). The participatory and deliberative initiatives from above and below have sparked scholarly interest in studies of political science, public administration, policy sciences, and political geography (see e.g. Bakker et al., 2012; Edelenbos & Meerkerk, 2011; Michels & Binnema, 2018; Michels & De Graaf, 2010; Van der Does & Kantorowicz, 2021; Van der Krieken, 2019). These studies often focus on some aspects of citizen involvement or on a few cases, which do not allow for firm conclusions on their impact on (Dutch) municipal politics and governance (Denters, 2016). Existing work points to the crucial role of connecting participatory and deliberative initiatives, on the one hand, and the actors within municipal government, on the other (Edelenbos, 2004; Michels & Binnema, 2018; Sørensen et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars have pointed out the enduring lack of diversity of participants, as higher-educated citizens with more political trust and more political interest are overrepresented (see e.g. Binnema & Michels, 2022; Den Ridder & Dekker, 2023). While support for a decisive role of citizens is low among local politicians (Jansen & Boogers, 2019), there is higher support for

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more direct involvement among the general public, particularly among those with high levels of political discontent (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Den Ridder & Dekker, 2023; cf. Den Ridder & Van Ostaaijen, *this volume*). However, the latter are less inclined to participate themselves and as a result the representative nature remains a weakness of democratic innovations.

Electoral and Non-electoral Representation

Despite a considerable number of citizens expressing willingness to become a municipal councillor (Denters & Rose, 2013; Vollaard et al., 2023), about half of the political parties have some or many difficulties in recruiting sufficient candidates for the more than 8,000 seats in municipal councils (Boogers & Voerman, 2023; Otjes et al., 2020). Although most parties recruit candidates among their members, they also recruit external candidates due to a limited number of active party members. Being known in local society and having policy expertise have been the two most important selection criteria in the last 20 years (Boogers & Voerman, 2023).

A large majority of parties said they specifically looked for candidates from underrepresented groups such as women, migrants, and young people. The share of women and people with a migration background among elected municipal councillors has been growing in recent decades (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). Nevertheless, older, higher-educated, non-migrant, and male citizens are still overrepresented on municipal councils (see also Mügge, Runderkamp, & Spierings, *this volume*). On average, both citizens and municipal councillors attach less importance to this descriptive representation than certain styles of representation (Denters et al., 2020). They both attach larger value to councillors being Burkean trustees following their conscience, with a focus on the general interest, and being 'democratic watchdogs'. In terms of substantive representation, niche parties do not perform better than mainstream parties (Van Ditmars & De Lange, 2019).

In addition to recruitment and representation by local councillors, there has been some scholarly interest in independent local parties. They are usually defined as parties not being active at the national level (Ostaaijen et al., 2021; Otjes, 2018). Reflecting the difficulty of defining them accurately, however, they may also include lists of candidates without any organization or combinations of local branches of national parties. Following the nationalization of the local party system up until the 1970s, local parties have been gaining ground since the 1990s. They are now the largest party family at the municipal level, with more than 30% of the seats on municipal councils and executive boards. They are fairly diverse in terms of left and right, but localism and anti-elitism feature more strongly among them than in local branches of national parties (Boogers & Voerman, 2010; Otjes, 2023). As they cannot rely on subsidized national mother parties, their main source of income for campaigning is contributions from their councillors (Bergwerff & Vollaard, 2017). Their voters are comparatively older, less educated, and

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more strongly attached to the local community, while having less political trust (Boogers & De Blok, 2023).

The voices of individual citizens can also be represented through non-electoral channels. Under headings such as non-electoral representation, network governance, stakeholder management, collaborative or interactive policymaking, triple helix, and urban living labs, some research has been done on the role of municipal interest groups, local business, and intermediate bodies such as the advisory boards on social and health affairs (see, e.g., Oldenhof et al., 2020; Van de Bovenkamp & Vollaard, 2019; Vollaard, 2020). Citizens appreciate non-electoral actors making representative claims, such as general practitioners and neighbourhood associations, more than municipal councillors (Denters et al., 2020). Given citizens' limited engagement with electoral politics at the municipal level, it may therefore constitute an alternative to strengthen the link between municipal governments and citizens, civil society, and the private sector.

Relations between Legislative, Executive, and Administrative Actors within Municipal Government

In this section, we discuss the various actors and their relationships within municipal governments, with particular attention to the aspects deviating from national politics, such as the position of the mayor, laymen politicians, and a tradition of oversized coalitions. From an international-comparative perspective, Dutch municipalities belong to the Nordic type, featuring a legalist administrative culture as well as a large role for municipal government, administrative accessibility for citizens, and open recruitment and career opportunities in the municipal administration (Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2017). Concerning horizontal power relations, Dutch municipalities are an instance of collective government, in which the executive board is collectively responsible for daily administration, local policymaking, and the execution of governing tasks (Heinelt et al., 2018).

Although the executive board has long been widely perceived as the most powerful actor, the municipal council is the formal head of the municipal government. Today municipal councils face several challenges in fulfilling their tasks: municipal councillors are laymen politicians, who spend on average 19 hours per week on their council membership compared to 34 hours spent on their (paid) main activity (Jansen & Boogers, 2019). Yet, not only have councils become more fragmented, with the effective number of parties growing from 4.8 in 1998 to 6.0 in 2018 (Gradus et al., 2021), but also the higher turnover of municipal councillors makes them less experienced. At the same time, municipal responsibilities have increased, also involving more actors at various levels (see later in this section and in the section 'Multilevel Governance'). Meanwhile, councillors

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often receive limited support or do not use the instruments at their disposal. National parties, on the one hand, have become smaller and can provide less support to their local branches, whereas independent local parties often have limited support infrastructure available. Councillors can rely on other support, such as from council clerks (Paulides et al., 2023), mandatory local audit offices (Keulen, 2021), and a subsidized association of local councillors. Since 2002, the Municipalities Act has also enshrined a wide range of instruments for the council to determine policy goals and oversee the executive board. Councillors attach importance to their scrutiny activities (De Groot et al., 2010), but they often do not use the available instruments (Peters & Castenmiller, 2019), although opposition councillors do so more than coalition councillors (Otjes et al., 2023). However, it remains unclear whether the influence of the council depends on councillors' activities rather than the willingness of the executive board and civil service to take councillors' views into account.

Councillors can exert considerable influence on the coalition formation. Traditionally, the largest party takes the initiative in coalition formation processes, or—as is increasingly done—puts forward an *informateur* who explores coalition options (Smithuis, 2018b). Due to the councils' fragmentation, single-party majorities are increasingly rare, with the largest parties holding on average 28% of the seats after the 2022 elections. Coalition formation processes have taken more time over the years (Otjes et al., 2021; Smithuis, 2018a), while coalition agreements are getting lengthier (Visser et al., 2017). In addition to fragmentation, the length of these processes also depends on the strength of anti-establishment parties, turnover of councillors, and municipal size (Otjes et al., 2021). Electoral manifestos reflect various dimensions in municipal politics concerning left/right orientation, localism, and elitism (Otjes, 2023). It remains to be seen, however, to what extent party composition matters for coalition agreements. Issues in coalition agreements reflect the evolution of co-governance rather than the priorities of cooperating parties (Breeman et al., 2014). Nevertheless, left-wing coalitions levy higher local taxes (Allers et al., 2001), right-wing coalitions privatize services more (Schoute et al., 2021), while coalitions with a majority of local parties spend more on local issues such as sports facilities (Serbö et al., 2023).

In principle, theories of coalition formation based on national politics are also applicable to municipal coalition formation. However, the inexperience of municipal politicians and the relative significance of personal relationships rather than policy disagreements (Smithuis, 2018b) may limit their explanatory power. Even though the average majority of Dutch municipal coalitions is declining (Gradus et al., 2021), they are still often oversized (Boogaard, 2015). Coalition formation processes have recently been accompanied by another 'oversized' phenomenon: council agreements (Van Kalken et al., 2021). These agreements, among (nearly) all parties in a council, may concern the collective formation of the BMA of aldermen, priorities regarding the council agenda, or political etiquette.

Despite being the most powerful actor within the municipal government, there is hardly any research on the way executive boards function, except for a few cases of so-called problematic municipal governments (Schoenmaker, 2011). Aldermen are also

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barely studied, except for their resignations (but see Van der Meulen et al., 2020, on their sources of authority, and Tops et al., 2024 with a full-range analysis of aldermen). The number of aldermen resigning has increased since the mid-1980s from approximately 20% premature resignations per legislative period to more than 40% since 2002 (Bouwmans, 2019). Troubled relationships within the coalition are the main reason, explaining half of the resignations since 2002. The number of parties in the coalition is linked to aldermen resigning for political reasons (Visser et al., 2017), while the resignation of aldermen with the budget portfolio seems to be associated with budgetary problems (Vuijk, 2020).

There is also some research on mayors. Among citizens, they are the best-known and most-well-liked public officials in municipalities (Jansen & Vollaard, 2023). Councillors and aldermen are quite satisfied about their mayor's performance (Jansen & Boogers, 2019). They earn their authority in particular by being impartial (Van der Meulen et al., 2020). The combination of the positions of council chair, chair of the executive board, 'security alderman', 'chief integrity officer', and ceremonial head of municipality does not necessarily make a mayor very powerful (Karsten & Hendriks, 2017), but in some respects makes their position problematic (Boogers et al., 2021; Karsten, 2019). From an international-comparative perspective, Dutch mayors' power is medium (Heinelt et al., 2018). The relative influence of mayors may be increasing more recently, as they have obtained more responsibilities to deal with (often drugs-related organized) crime and have a relatively unchecked position on the executive board of public safety regions (Boogers et al., 2021).

Politico-administrative relationships, municipal administrations, and the 180,000 civil servants (A&O Fonds, 2023) at the municipal level are studied mostly from the perspective of organizational models (Schaap, 2019) and public service delivery reforms (though see Van der Meulen et al., 2020, and Van Mourik, 2022, on municipal managers). Partly driven by budgetary cuts, Dutch municipalities embraced NPM in the 1980s as an organizing philosophy. NPM involved business-like reforms in the internal organization of municipal governments, including performance management, product-based administrative units and budgeting, and customer-friendly service delivery (Helden & Jansen, 2003; Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2017). Externally, NPM also involved a shift from in-house production to contracting private firms and non-profit service providers. After the NPM wave, a larger emphasis on the involvement of citizens and stakeholders in municipal policymaking followed in the 1990s (Tops & Hendriks, 1999). Later on, reorganizations focused more on strategic and comprehensive policymaking to tackle multidimensional problems in response to the rather sectoral NPM-inspired organizations. Partial reversals of NPM-induced externalization of public service delivery have also taken place—for instance, with the creation of municipally owned corporations (Voorn & Van Genugten, 2022). Today, municipal administrations reflect a variety of steering perspectives alongside NPM, ranging from traditional public administration (focus on legal rules and rational decision making), new public governance (focus on cooperation in networks), and societal resilience (focus on self-governance in civil society) (Nijdam, 2020). In addition, public value management

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has been propagated in response to the NPM-inspired measurable targets to meet real policy goals, although actors within municipalities appear to have rather different understandings of these values (Douglas & 't Hart, 2019). Given the variety of modes of service delivery, there have been several studies of what determines the choice between in-house production, intermunicipal cooperation, municipally owned corporations, and contracting private firms (e.g. Schoute et al., 2021). Ideological orientation, the financial position of the municipality, and the type of performance indicators play a role.

Economies of scale have been an important reason for amalgamation (Broekema et al., 2016). Research, however, shows that municipal amalgamation did not bring more efficient or effective service delivery, partly because the economy of scale differs from service to service (Allers & Geertsema, 2016; Nianounakis, 2021). In addition, citizens' satisfaction with service delivery is not higher in larger or enlarged municipalities (Boogers, 2013). Despite actual diseconomies of scale, amalgamations have continued, partly because the administrative capacity to cope with decentralized tasks has been another important motivation (Broekema et al., 2016). This illustrates that the consequences for municipal democracy or local civil society have been rather neglected in national decision making on amalgamation, even though the negative consequences for political participation have been known for some decades now.

Multilevel Governance: Relationships of Municipal Governments with Other Levels of Government/Governance

Since the basics of intergovernmental relations were laid down in the mid-nineteenth century, the official understanding of intergovernmental relations has held that municipalities should have a relatively autonomous position; the central government should cooperate with, rather than command and control, local governments (Hendriks & Schaap, 2010). Although municipalities became increasingly dependent on general grants from the national government and carried out more and more national welfare arrangements, they maintained some autonomy as they could launch policy initiatives and had a certain level of discretion within tasks executed for the national government (Willemse, 2001). Three major developments have marked intergovernmental relations since the process of municipal amalgamation has taken place: more attention to the role of cities and metropolitan regions, decentralization, and internationalization *cum* European integration. How have these shaped intergovernmental relations?

The ongoing process of amalgamation resulted in ever-larger municipalities, thereby at times questioning the need for twelve provinces in between municipalities and the national government (see Binnema & Vollaard, *this volume*). Amalgamations also changed the relationship between municipalities and provinces, as larger municipalities could more easily maintain a direct relationship with the national government. Whereas

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amalgamations have continued, most other institutional reforms failed, including the establishment of city provinces in the metropolitan regions of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the 1990s, which were intended to facilitate social and economic regeneration, partly in the face of a globalizing market (Denters, 2021). Instead of introducing institutional reforms, the national government proceeded to collaborate with cities for their socio-economic revitalization (Denters, 2021). This collaborative approach has been used more broadly, as reflected by a series of negotiated agreements between the national government, (some) municipalities, provinces, and water authorities to deal with certain policy issues, such as water management or digitalization. The Dutch government also pushed for such a collaborative approach with cities at the EU level, leading to the launch of the EU Urban Agenda in 2016.

Not all institutional reforms in intergovernmental relations have failed (Boogers & Reussing, 2018; Peters et al., 2020). The national government centralized the police force in 2013. It also sought to limit institutional crowdedness by abolishing full-fledged sub-municipal governing bodies in 2014 and binding regional cooperation in urban agglomerations in 2015. After growing doubts about the cost-efficiency of the national bureaucracy, it has also pursued decentralization since the 1980s. This has also involved a drastic shift from earmarked grants to general grants, allowing municipalities more budgetary freedom (Boogers & Reussing, 2018). Vertical supervision by provinces and national government has been limited since 2012; horizontal supervision by municipal councils should be the alternative. Most importantly, municipalities obtained new responsibilities. The decentralizations of 2015 were the largest, involving youth care (from the provinces), labour reintegration (from the national government), and social support (from the national government).

These decentralizations have sparked scholarly attention. The official rhetoric of the decentralization was to allow for more efficient, integral, democratic, and tailor-made policymaking. It remains to be seen whether municipalities have become more autonomous, as the budget reductions (as the national government argued municipal governments would work more efficiently) adopted by the national government have hindered municipalities from launching their own policy Initiatives (Peters et al., 2020). In addition, national legislation on the decentralized tasks was at times fairly detailed, limiting the democratic say of municipal councils.

Despite the promise of tailor-made policies, however, differences in the way decentralized tasks are executed by municipal governments are limited for a variety of reasons (Boogers et al., 2009; Broekema, 2022; Nijdam, 2020; Peters et al., 2020). First of all, many municipalities rely on the draft by-laws on the decentralized tasks developed by the Dutch Association of Municipalities, partly because they often had limited time to implement the decentralizations. The perception among municipal politicians that decentralization principally involved implementation rather than a politico-strategic decision prevented municipal politicians from adopting a more municipality-specific approach. A strong, widespread norm of nationwide egalitarianism further prevents municipalities from deviating too much. In addition, many municipalities co-operate regionally on decentralized tasks, further limiting policy differences between

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municipalities. In certain decentralized tasks, the national government also uses a financial incentive structure that induces a rather similar approach among municipal governments (Bannink et al., 2014). Monitoring by the national government (for benchmarking and accountability) has also made the provision of decentralized services more uniform. In sum, the national decentralization policies may have increased municipalities' responsibilities but not necessarily their autonomy.

European integration and globalization together constitute the last development marking intergovernmental relations. Municipalities face opportunities and constraints from international and European law, European subsidies, and the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labour migrants on the European and global market. There are huge differences among municipalities in the way they have adapted to European integration and globalization in terms of lobbying at the European and global levels, implementing EU law, obtaining EU subsidies, participating in international transmunicipal networks, and international place marketing (e.g. Bondarouk & Liefferink, 2017; De Rooij, 2002; Fleurke & Willemse, 2006; Scholten et al., 2018; Vollaard et al., 2023). These differences can be explained by capacity and location (proximity to the borders with Belgium and Germany). The impact of European integration and globalization on intergovernmental relations seems to be rather limited, as only a few municipalities are able to act independently on a few issues at the international level (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). All in all, globalization and European integration have made municipal politics and governance more complex, in addition to the NPM-driven externalization of service delivery and decentralization. It is, therefore, no surprise that the concept of a wicked problem is increasingly used in analyses of municipal policymaking (see e.g. Van Mourik, 2022).

Conclusion

Taken together, research on municipal politics and governance is often descriptive and case-focused, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The need for more structured empirical comparison and stronger theoretical foundations is often stressed (see, e.g., Wayenberg & Kuhlmann, 2017). We present four avenues for future research.

The first route involves utilizing the recently established infrastructure for longitudinal data collection: the Dutch Local Election Studies and the Dutch Local Political Elites Studies. Together with other longer-running data collection (e.g. on recruitment and selection of council candidates, and the integrity and safety of public officials), these data collections form a solid empirical base for monitoring long-term trends, explaining key aspects of municipal politics and governance, and comparing Dutch municipalities with foreign ones. To date, this infrastructure remains a somewhat underutilized resource. We encourage future researchers to capitalize on the multilevel structure of these data (i.e. individual voters and politicians nested in municipalities), and study

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how institutional and sociodemographic characteristics of municipalities affect individual political behaviour.

Second, municipal politics offer a great testing ground for theoretical concepts and explanations rooted in national politics. The advantage of looking at municipalities is that it involves many cases, often with diverse characteristics, in which crucial factors can be controlled for, such as the institutional set-up (cf. Bäck, 2003). For example, theories on coalition formation, voting behaviour, the legislative–executive relationship, and political–administrative relations can be put to the test in the context of municipal politics.

Third, this chapter has been principally based on political science and public administration research, while studies from policy sciences and political geography may have been overlooked. Research is often based on case studies in one area or the other. Systematic meta-reviews of these case studies offer a stronger base for explanations of topics such as the choice and impact of non-electoral participation and how national, European, and international law is implemented.

Lastly, for Dutch municipalities, it is rather difficult to answer the classic and essential question of Robert Dahl's book *Who Governs?* There is a need for research on the relations within municipal government (legislative–executive; political–administrative) and with key actors in the various multilevel policy networks. Policy challenges such as climate adaptation and inequality in housing, health, and education often lead to calls for strong leadership, which may not always be feasible or accepted in the current administrative–political culture of cooperation, consensus, and compromise. Furthermore, addressing such policy challenges often requires multilevel policy networks that potentially result in a democratic deficit when they undermine the control and relevance of the municipal council. This makes answering the question of 'who governs' in Dutch municipal politics and governance even more pressing.

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