Perspectives on cutback management in public organisations : what public managers do

Schmidt, J.E.T.

Chapter 2

Research setting, design, and methods
Studying cutbacks and top civil servants in Dutch central government

CHAPTER 2 – RESEARCH SETTING, DESIGN AND METHODS: STUDYING CUTBACKS AND TOP CIVIL SERVANTS IN DUTCH CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

There are two important reasons to situate the study of managerial behaviour during cutbacks in a Dutch public sector context. First of all, public managers in the Netherlands were confronted with substantial cutbacks in recent years. As we will shortly outline, cutbacks in the Dutch government can be considered as an intermediate position in between countries that were hit hardest by cutbacks (mostly southern European countries, and Ireland) and countries that did not feel the need to cut back substantially (mostly northern European countries). The second reason for study cutback management in the Dutch context is that public managers in the Dutch government provide an interesting group of actors to focus on, as they have considerable autonomy in managing cutbacks within their department.

In order to set the stage for the empirical chapters of this dissertation, this chapter fulfils three different goals. First, this chapter outlines to what extent public managers were confronted with cutbacks by sketching the broader context of cutbacks in Europe to place cutbacks in Dutch government into perspective. Second, this chapter outlines what the political-administrative and civil service context within the Dutch government looks like, in order to describe what tasks and responsibilities are commonly associated with being a public manager within the Dutch government. Third, this chapter describes the research design and data collection methods of this study by describing what cases (within the overall context of cutback on Dutch government) have been studied in-depth and with what methods, with particular attention to elite interviewing.

2.1 INTRODUCTION: CRISIS IN EUROPE

The global financial crisis from 2008 onwards brought public finances all over the world under enormous pressure (Kickert and Randma-Liiv, 2015). It all started as a banking crisis with the collapse or near collapse of banks in different countries (such as Lehman Brothers in the United States, Icesave in Iceland, Northern Rock in the UK and ABN Amro in the Netherlands). A total collapse of the financial sector was averted by governments rescuing banks or providing support measures, yet the economic damage caused was significant (Kickert, 2012b). The banking crisis turned into an economic crisis when economic growth turned into decline and unemployment rose rapidly throughout the OECD region (Lodge and Hood, 2012). Governments in different countries responded similarly with measures to stimulate economic growth (Kickert and Randma-Liiv, 2015). While the bank rescue missions of governments already resulted in growing public debt, the costs of the economic recovery packages made debts even rise to near post-war levels (Posner and Blöndal, 2012). The combination of increasing public debt on the one hand and decreasing tax revenues on the other resulted in substantial budgetary deficits. Between 2007 (the year before the

crisis) and 2010, budget deficits in the OECD countries rose from an average 1.2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to as much as 8% of the GDP. Within the European Monetary Union, budget deficits should not exceed 3% of the GDP. From 2010 onwards, countries throughout the world were thus not only in an economic crisis, but also in a fiscal crisis. The fiscal crisis was the start of an era of reform and cutbacks throughout the European continent (Kickert and Randma-Liiv, 2015).

Kickert, Randma-Liiv and Savi (2015) differentiated between five different clusters of European countries in how governments dealt with the fiscal crisis. The first cluster consists just of Norway, as this is generally seen as the only country that was left untouched by the crisis. The second cluster involves countries that needed help from international organisations (such as the IMF and the European Central Bank): Iceland, Ireland, Italy and Spain. Generally, cutbacks have hit these countries hardest, and financial bailouts led to externally imposed reforms (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2015; Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013). The third clusters consist of governments that implemented moderate amounts of cutbacks. Within this cluster, cutbacks were necessary, yet the magnitude and impact of cutbacks were less compared to the previous cluster. Countries such as Germany, Belgium, France, Slovenia and The Netherlands belong to this group (Kickert, 2012b; Overmans and Timm-Arnold, 2016; Troupin et al., 2015). The fourth cluster only involves the Baltic states Lithuania and Estonia, who were quick to announce severe cutbacks after the start of the crisis in 2008 and afterwards, did not need help of external partners, contrary to the countries in the second cluster (Nakrosis, Vilpisauskas, and Kuokstis, 2015; Savi and Randma-Liiv, 2015). The last cluster is again an outlier: United Kingdom. Based on electoral prospects, the government first refused substantial cutbacks. After a new government was installed, unprecedented cutbacks were proposed and implemented (Barbera, Jones, Korac, Saliterer, and Steccolini, 2017; Leslie and Canwell, 2010).

While the crisis boosted cutbacks in government to unprecedented levels, cutbacks have been a permanent feature for many European public administrations for much longer. From cutbacks at the end of the 1970s onward, governments throughout the world have searched for ways to make public service better, more efficient, and above all, cheaper. The financial crisis of the 1970s combined with a growing belief that the western welfare state *"had become unaffordable, ineffective and overly constraining on employers and citizens"* (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011: p. 6) gave way for New Public Management (NPM) reforms. As Raudla, Savi and Randma-Liiv (2013) note: *"cutback management in the 1970s and 1980s clearly emphasised the rhetoric which was later translated into the main slogans of NPM"* (p. 37). The idea behind NPM was that private sector instruments were applicable and needed in the public sector, to work toward a smaller and more efficient government and a solution to continuing budgetary deficits. More recently, NPM ideas and instruments have come under increasing scrutiny and are sometimes considered inappropriate in a public context (Van de Walle and Groeneveld, 2011). Furthermore, evidence of actual efficiency gains of NPM is patchy and incomplete at best (Hood and Dixon, 2015; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Lastly, the scale and magnitude of cutbacks that were required as a result of the 2008 crises made NPM reforms unsuitable (Hood and Dixon, 2013).

In short, the financial crisis of 2008 onward put government budgets throughout the world under enormous pressure. Increasing criticism from both practitioners and scholars of NPM forced public managers to find new strategies and tactics to deal with cutbacks (Van de Walle and Groeneveld, 2011), making cutback management an increasingly important topic. For public management scholars, the substantial cutbacks on public organisations provided an opportunity to learn more about managerial behaviour in a highly turbulent and complex environment. As Barnard argued in 1938 in his classical work on the functions of the executive: *"studying organisational problems in stable environments is important but trivial in comparison with understanding how organisations adapt to turbulent environment that not only threatens the organisation's growth, but also portends its decline"* (Barnard, 1938 in: Jimenez, 2018: p. 592).

2.2 CUTBACKS IN DUTCH CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Just as with other countries in Europe, cutbacks have been an almost permanent reality for public managers in The Netherlands for the last two decades. Different treaties within the European Monetary Union (EMU) state that sanctions follow if the national budget deficits exceed three per cent of the Gross National Product (GNP) (Kickert et al., 2015). The Dutch government, traditionally praised for its adherence to such treaties, was a far stretch from this three per cent norm at the beginning of 2012. The Netherlands Institute for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) expected that the budget deficit would have been 4.6 per cent of the GNP (CPB, 2012) if no cuts were made. It was, therefore, no surprise that the financial crisis and related austerity measures were one of the major themes in the Dutch elections of September 2012.

Late 2012, the newly installed liberal/social democratic coalition government announced 28 billion euros in cutbacks at the presentation of their coalition agreement. These cutbacks can be divided into three categories (Raudla et al., 2015): cutbacks on (1) operational measures, (2) program measures, and (3) capital expenditures. Operational expenditures mostly consist of personnel and non-personnel costs, the costs of running government organisations. Program measures can be defined as the service provisions of public organisations towards citizens. These can take many different forms, such as entitlements (for example unemployment benefits) but also service hours for public organisations. Capital expenditures, lastly, are the investments that the government makes, for example, for new projects or maintenance of capital. Cutbacks, in this regard, usually entails postponing or cancelling new projects. As explained in the previous chapter, the focus in this dissertation is on the first category, operational expenditure. Operational expenditure refers to all costs related to 'running the government'. The most important costs for the government, as these often make up for the largest share of operational expenditure, are housing costs and personnel costs. Operational expenditure does not include costs such as welfare state expenses. While operational costs include the cost of having an employee who engages with citizens on the phone, operational expenditures do not include the subsidies or welfare provisions that citizens receive

from the government. At the same time, as governments are often asked to do more with less, cutbacks in operational expenditure often lead to cutback-related change. Cutbacks to particular policy programs do not necessarily lead to such changes. Within the 28 billion euros of cutbacks, 1.1 billion euros (9% of the total budget for central government) was reserved for cutbacks to central government: ministries and executive agencies.

What is important here is that the cutbacks of 2012 were far from the first for Dutch central government. Before the 2012 cutbacks, all cabinets from 2002 onwards proposed cuts for the Dutch government, either in financial terms (i.e., cutting a specific percentage of the budget) or specifically aimed at decreasing the number of civil servants. For many public organisations, the cutbacks proposed in 2012 came on top of earlier cutbacks, thus making the challenge of cutback management even harder. Table 2.1 shows an overview of cutbacks of the last 15 years since the euro came into existence.

TABLE 2.1 *Cutbacks in Dutch central Government (2002 – 2017)*

Time	Cabinet	Magnitude of cutbacks
2002 – 2003	Balkenende I – Christian Democratic Party (CDA), Right-wing populist party (LPF), Conservative Liberals (VVD)	330 million euros
2003 – 2006	Balkenende II – CDA, VVD, Progressive Liberals (D66)	Around 300 million euros
2007 – 2010	Balkenende IV – CDA, Social-Democrats (PvdA), Social Christian Party (CU)	750 million euros
2010 – 2012	Rutte I – VVD, CDA	1,79 billion euros
2012 - 2017	Rutte II – VVD, PvdA	1.1 billion euros

The 2012 coalition government decided to differentiate between ministries as to the magnitude of cutbacks that had to be implemented, meaning that ministries were assigned cutbacks of either 4.4, 8.9, or 13.3 per cent of their budget. However, these cutbacks came on top of cutbacks from earlier coalition governments, which means that in reality, many ministries had to implement cutbacks of up to 25% of their budget. To make the challenge even bigger, the coalition agreement already stated that some organisational units within ministries were exempted from cutbacks implying that the manoeuvring space for public managers was further reduced. Most notably, the national police (which was in the middle of a major reorganisation) was exempted from cutbacks at the Ministry of Safety and Justice, meaning that public managers were not allowed to cut back on this part of the organisation. Table 2.2 shows the differentiation between different ministries.

While the coalition agreement did state which organisational units were exempted from cutbacks, there was no pre-defined differentiation *within* ministries on how to divide cutbacks into the remaining organisational units. Executive agencies, parts of the ministry that are responsible for the execution of public tasks (such as the tax collection agency of the custodial institutions agency) were also not explicitly mentioned within the coalition agreement, meaning that the extent to which they would need to cut back, would be determined within the ministry. This means that public managers, especially in the highest echelons of government, had substantial autonomy to make decisions about how to implement cutback-related change.

TABLE 2.2 *Percentage of cutbacks on operational expenditure, per ministry (2012 – 2018)*

Percentage of cutbacks per year			Ministries
2016	**2017**	**2018**	
1.6%	3.6%	4.4%	General Affairs, Finance, Social Affairs, Health
3.2%	7.3%	8.9%	Safety and Justice, Defense, Economic Affairs, Infrastructure and the Environment
4.8%	10.9%	13.3%	Foreign Affairs, Interior Affairs and Kingdom Relations, Education, Culture, and Science

Based on a series of semi-structured interviews with public managers from all ministries (resulting in the empirical work of chapter 6) and an analysis of budget proposals by the Dutch government, we identified different cases that were potentially interesting and suitable for the purpose of this dissertation. Based on the aims of the different empirical chapters, we selected different cases to study in-depth. These cases include both ministries as well as executive agencies.

2.3 THE POSITION AND ROLE OF PUBLIC MANAGERS WITHIN THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT

The term public manager can be used for a wide variety of actors. Within this dissertation, we focus on those public managers that can be regarded as top civil servants. While the specific group targeted as respondent differs per case study, all respondents hold or held positions that are among the top-four highest ranks within the government. This means that the interviewees within the different case studies all hold influential positions within government and can be regarded as administrative elites (Raadschelders and Meer, 2014). The highest civil service level is that of the secretary-general (SG), followed by the director-general (DG), director, and head of department. Politically, ministries are led by a minister, most of the times accompanied by a junior minister. While political superiors are ultimately responsible in Parliament for what happens within their ministry (see, for the role of the Parliament, Duisenberg, 2016), the responsibility for the administrative apparatus lies with the top civil servants.

Within Dutch ministries, top civil servants were traditionally the first advisor to the political superiors and responsible for the coordination and integration of ministerial policy. Much changed with the introduction of NPM after the crises of the 1980s. Central to NPM reforms in governments around the world was the idea that government could and should be run as a business (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). NPM also affected what role was expected from top civil servants. Top executives were no longer policy experts but had to become managing directors (Colebatch, Hoppe and Noordegraaf, 2010). No longer would managers devote the majority of their time to giving policy advice, but they would be working on more general issues such as reaching targets, personnel management, and organisational development. In all, the NPM reforms in the Dutch government aimed at creating a more professional managerial model of public sector leadership (Steen and Van

der Meer, 2007). These reforms also led to a hybrid public-service bargain (Hood and Lodge, 2006) in which Dutch top civil servants have considerable autonomy over the internal organisation and thus also have the responsibility for cutbacks. Chapter 3 outlines the public-service bargain (PSB) between top civil servants and political superiors in the Netherlands further.

To promote management development, to diminish the partition between the different ministries (Steen and Van der Meer, 2007) and to promote mobility, a Senior Public Service System was installed, including the formation of the Senior Public Service (SPS), the 'Algemene Bestuursdienst' (ABD). Whereas the first plans for an SPS were already proposed at the beginning of the 1980s, it took until 1994 before it was established (Raadschelders and Van der Meer, 2014). A commission advised the cabinet Kok I (1994-1998) to create the ABD. According to this commission, the ABD would ensure that civil servants would no longer owe allegiance to just one department or ministry, but to the complete civil service. The ABD became the employer of top civil servants and would be involved in the selection process of filling vacancies of top civil servants. Similar reforms of the senior civil service during the 1990s can be observed in many European countries Raadschelders, Toonen, and van der Meer, 2007).

Civil servants in the three highest echelons, thus SGs, DGs, and directors are recruited, selected and employed by the SPS. Heads of department can be accepted for the candidate program of the ABD, preparing them for a function as top civil servants. Members of the ABD are required to change jobs every five years to increase mobility. Contrary to the situation before the introduction of NPM, it is no longer natural to serve within one ministry for years. The idea was that this would improve mobility but also professionalism. Managers in this system were expected to have more general managerial skills because they have to function in different contexts, sectors, and within different organisations. Currently, all civil servants in the three highest wage levels are part of the ABD. This means that all SGs, DGs, and directors are members of the ABD. Heads of department commonly participate in the so-called 'candidate programme' of the ABD, which means that they are prepared for a job as a top civil servant.

Within a ministry, the SG is *"the [first] advisor to the minister and is responsible for the coordination and integration of ministry policy"* (Lemstra, 1993: p. 261). Whereas the DGs are the head of a specific directorate, the SGs are responsible for the general management of the ministry. This includes integration between policy areas (Lemstra, 1993). The specific parts of a ministry where the responsibility of a DG lies is often a specific policy area, but it can also be a specific agency. An example is the DG for the Custodial Institutions Agency, who is the director of an agency but falls within the jurisdiction of a ministry. Beneath the level of the DGs is, as mentioned, a level of directors who are in charge of a directorate. Directors can be appointed to a more specific domain within a directorate-general. An example is a director of higher education, within the directorate-general of Higher Education, Vocational Education, Science, and Emancipation, within the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sciences. Heads of department are commonly deputy-directors and daily supervisors over a larger department within a certain directorate.

Each ministry is headed by a Top Management Team (TMT), which includes the SG (who is the chairman of this team), DGs and sometimes the DGs from (larger) executive agencies. Whether DGs of executive agencies are members of these TMTs, differs per ministry. The TMT is in charge of all operational affairs, meaning that decisions regarding cutbacks are usually made in their meetings. Important to note is that for these management teams, the magnitude of cutbacks is pre-defined. The decisions that TMTs make regarding cutbacks are therefore concerning the content of cutbacks (what is cut back) and the process (how to implement cutback-related change). This also includes decision-making that concerns questions on how to divide cutbacks over the organisation. While TMTs commonly set the framework for the sum of cutbacks that should be realised per organisational unit and the process through which this should take place, directors and heads of department can have a large degree of autonomy regarding the implementation process of cutbacks. Again, how this is typically arranged is different across ministries.

2.4 RESEARCH DESIGN: STUDYING CUTBACKS WITHIN GOVERNMENT

To study managerial behaviour during cutbacks, we conducted different types of qualitative (case) studies on cutback-related changes within Dutch public organisations. The chapters 3, 4 and 5 are all case studies in which cutback-related changes in one or more public organisations are central, while chapter 6 is a qualitative study in which public managers from all over Dutch government have been interviewed. In all chapters, public managers are the central actors.

There are two main reasons why this dissertation mainly draws upon different case studies and why this is an appropriate research design. First of all, the nature of this dissertation is exploratory (Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016). As explained in chapter one, this dissertation aims to increase our understanding of managerial behaviour during cutbacks, which have mostly been neglected in cutback management literature so far. This also means that there are no ready-made hypotheses or expectations that can be tested (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Rather, we have to develop an understanding of what public managers actually do during cutbacks ourselves. To answer questions of *how* public managers' act during cutbacks, and *why* they do so, qualitative case studies are a particularly useful way to go around. By doing an in-depth investigation of phenomena in a real-life context (Yin, 2009), we explore the previously neglected phenomenon of managerial behaviour during cutbacks.

Second, qualitative case studies can be helpful for the purpose of theory development (Toshkov, 2016), in this case, by elaborating and specifying public management theories (Ashworth et al., 2018). As explained in chapter 1, this dissertation does not only contribute to cutback management research but also aims for theoretical development. The theoretical perspectives used in this dissertation are not only applied in order to explain managerial behaviour during cutbacks, but the insights of the case studies are also used to develop propositions about what managerial behaviour

looks like during cutbacks. Rather than arguing whether a particular theory 'holds' in the specific context of cutbacks, qualitative research helps us to generate a rich, detailed, and contextualised account on managerial behaviour during cutbacks. The empirical study on leadership behaviour in chapter 5, for example, concludes with a list of propositions on what leadership behaviour may be observed during cutbacks. The theory guided the empirical analysis of the cases, while the observations from the case study were used to propose refinements to the theory, to be tested in other cases and contexts. This way, the propositions can add to our understanding of what leadership looks like during cutbacks and how it is different in this specific context. While especially the literature on leadership is said to be in need of a better contextual understanding (Bryman, Stephens, and Campo, 1996; Ospina, 2017; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006), we aim to contribute similarly to the literature on public service bargains (PSBs) in chapter 3, the literature on strategic management in chapter 4, and the literature on public values in chapter 6. For all empirical studies in this dissertation, theoretical generalisation, rather than empirical generalisation, is the aim.

Criteria for case selection

A case, in this study, consists of cutback related changes within a particular organisation or organisational-unit (that is: a particular part of the organisation). As can be seen from the introduction of this chapter on cutbacks in Europe and the Netherlands, cutbacks and cutback-related changes can vary greatly. The percentage of the budget that needs to be cut can be higher or lower, cutbacks can be more politically salient in one situation compared to another, and the planning (when cutbacks need to be realised) will be different for different organisations. Consequently, the content of cutback-related changes (*what* the cutback-related changes entail), process (*how* cutbacks are being implemented within the organisation) and outcomes (*the results* of cutback-related changes for the organisation and its employees) will be different, in different cases. The question then is: how to select an appropriate case to study?

First, it is important to decide which cases can be considered as a case. Within this dissertation, some demarcations have been made to limit the number of potential cases. First, this study limits itself to the central government in the Netherlands, consisting of ministries (mostly oriented towards policy-making) and executive agencies (mostly tasked with policy execution). Within the field of cutback management, most studies focus on local government (see, for example, Barbera, Guarini, and Steccolini, 2016; Barbera et al., 2017; Overmans and Timm-Arnold, 2016; Scorsone and Plerhoples, 2010). This means that how central governments are tasked with managing cutbacks has been subject to limited empirical research. Furthermore, cutbacks on central government are interesting and important to study, as such organisations have (also compared to local government) even fewer possibilities to increase income (Pandey, 2008). As central governments are often tasked with 'doing more with less', cutbacks are likely to result in cutback-related organisational changes and in addition to that ask substantial efforts from public managers.

Another demarcation is the emphasis on operational expenditure, rather than other types of expenditure. This means that cases in which certain policy programmes are cut (for example, par-

ticular welfare arrangements), are not taken into account. The reason to do so is that such cutbacks do not necessarily lead to cutback-related changes within the organisation, while cutbacks on operational expenditure necessitate public managers to think about and act upon organisational consequences.

Case selection

Before doing the case studies, a qualitative, exploratory study, in which at least one public manager from each Dutch ministry was interviewed. These interviews were used to gain insight in how public managers were confronted with cutbacks in recent years, what factors affected cutback management, and to learn more about concrete cases of cutback-related changes within many different organisations. In total, 27 interviews resulted in a wide range of possible cases to study. From this list, we selected three different cases. These cases are concrete cutback-related change programs which were implemented around the same time but in different organisations. As the main aim of this dissertation is to explore managerial behaviour during cutbacks, we selected cases differing in the magnitude of cutbacks that had to be implemented, and in addition to that, different cutback-related changes. The aim of selecting these cases was not to compare across cases but rather, to explore different situations in which public managers had to realise cutbacks and cutback-related changes. This strategy means that we purposefully selected cases relevant to the research objectives of the four different studies. For example, to observe how political-administrative interactions develop during cutbacks, and what this means for the cutback management process, it is important to select a case in which political principals and public managers need to interact with each other. A more pragmatic reason for selecting particular cases was access concerning data collection efforts. Some cases met our criteria for case selection but were not easily accessible (or denied access) and therefore, unfit for this dissertation.

Selected cases

The first case that was selected is cutback-related changes in the Dutch penitentiary sector. The penitentiary sector was confronted with cutbacks of over 30% of the budget, resulting in thousands of layoffs among personnel. The substantial impact of cutbacks in this area made the case highly politically salient. Therefore, public managers in this case were not only confronted with leadership issues in how to implement cutbacks but also with how to deal with both political superiors and a wide range of actors in the outside world. Therefore, we selected this case for studying managing upward, outward and downward. To study this case, interviews were conducted with public managers in the highest three echelons (SG, DG and director) working in three different but related organisations: within the Ministry of Justice and Safety, within the executive agency in charge of policy execution, and with prison directors from local prisons. Respondents were purposefully invited, based on their specific role in the cutback management process. The interviews were used for chapter 3 and chapter 4. The interviews with public managers at the executive agency and prison directors are, together with the respondents from case 2 and 3, used for chapter 5. In total, 31

interviews were done for this case study, including 27 interviews with public managers and 4 other informants. Furthermore, 4 focus groups were held with other informants.

The second case that was selected involves cutback-related changes at one of the ministries in the Netherlands. This ministry was confronted with 13,3% cutbacks on its operational budget and therewith in the highest category of cutbacks. The organisation mainly realised cutbacks through implementing flexible working arrangements for all employees, thus substantially cutting back on housing expenses. By doing so, layoffs were avoided. Yet, the case is an example of cutback-related changes that many ministries had to implement, and which require a substantial change in daily practices within the organisation. Therefore, we expected that managing downwards would be an important orientation for public managers in this case. All public managers in the highest four echelons (SG, DG, Director and Head of Department) were invited for an interview. Twenty-eight public managers were interviewed for this study, next to 7 other informants, and the results are used for chapter 5.

The third case that was selected involves cutback-related changes at another ministry. This ministry was among those ministries that only had to cut back 4,4% of its budget and was thus relatively little harmed by cutbacks on its operational expenditure. They did so by implementing proportional cutbacks within the organisation, thus trying to make efficiency gains and cutting back on slack. We used this case to study managing downward. Within this ministry, we interviewed six public managers in the two highest echelons (SG and DG). The results of this study are used in chapter 5.

For all three cases, additional interviews or focus groups were done with policy advisors, political actors and 'general' employees. These interviews helped in gaining a better understanding of the context of specific cutback-related changes. Documents (both internal and public documents) were also used to increase our knowledge of what the cutback-related changes entailed, and how cutbacks were implemented. Generally, desk-research and interviews with policy advisors were used to prepare for interviews with public managers. Some public managers in the organisations as mentioned above were interviewed twice, for example, once in the exploratory phase, and once concerning a specific case. The appendix shows an anonymised overview of the respondents that were interviewed for this dissertation, per case. Table 2.3 shows an overview of the various data sources and what data sources have been used in what chapters.

TABLE 2.3 *Data sources*

Data Source	Number	Chapter
Interviews with public managers	88 Interviews	3 - 6
Interviews with other informants	11 interviews	3, 4 & 5
Focus groups	4 focus groups	3
Policy and Parliamentary documents	183 documents	3, 4 & 5
Newspapers articles	107 Newspaper articles	4

The interviews from the first case, which have been used in chapters 4, 5 and 6, included questions on the different actors that these public managers engaged with: political superiors, employees

and external actors. While chapters 4, 5 and 6 thus use data from the same respondents, different parts of the interviews have been used for the different chapters.

All three cases that were used represent different types of cutback-related changes that public organisations in the Netherlands had to deal with in recent years. As the type of cutback-related changes differs greatly, we did not aim to compare the different organisations to each other. The cases differ too much on many different variables that doing comparative case studies would risk that we are comparing apples and oranges. Rather, we selected cases with a different type of cutback-related change to make sure that we have a wide range of different cutback management processes to explore how public managers manage cutbacks targeted at their organisation.

The last empirical study of this dissertation, chapter 6, is the only chapter that does not use a case study design. For this chapter, we analysed the 26 interviews that were done in preparation for the case selection process. In chapter 6, a more elaborate description of the respondents and the methods of this study will be given.

In order to increase the transparency of the research methods used (cf. Aguinis and Solarino, 2019), we describe the procedure through which respondents were invited, how interviews were recorded and how data was stored. For all four empirical chapters, the same procedures were used to invite respondents, record the interviews, and store the data. First, all respondents were invited by the author of this dissertation. Respondents who were invited to participate in one of the studies for this dissertation received a similar e-mail and the same attachment explaining the general purpose of the research project. When respondents did not react in two weeks, they received a follow-up e-mail again, including the attachment explaining the research project. At the start of the interviews, all respondents were asked their permission to record the interview. The respondents were promised anonymity, with only members of the research team (PhD-Candidate, supervisors and student-assistants) having access to the data and transcripts.

Furthermore, respondents were explained that the transcripts of the interviews needed to be stored ten years on university servers. With two exceptions, all respondents agreed to be recorded. Three interviewees were interviewed by phone; all other respondents were interviewed in person. Respondents could name the place for the interview, resulting in almost every interview being held in the office of the respondent. Two interviews were conducted within the university, one interview was held in a restaurant, and one interview was conducted at the respondent's home.

2.5 INTERVIEWING GOVERNMENT ELITES

The previous section described how different cases were selected and why a case study design fits the research aims of this dissertation. As this dissertation mainly draws on interviews with public managers, it is important to describe in some more detail what this looked like and pay particular attention to the potential and pitfalls of interviewing administrative elites. Although there is no clear-cut definition of what exactly constitutes as elite, common features of definitions of elites

include aspects such as power and influence (Harvey, 2011; Liu, 2018; Richards, 1996), suggesting that elites have the potential to substantially influence government policy and organisational practices. This means that elites usually occupy a special position within government with considerable autonomy and, therewith, power and influence. As described in the previous section, public managers in the highest tiers in Dutch government find themselves in such a position. Therefore, the respondents of our studies can be regarded as elites (Raadschelders and Van der Meer, 2014).

There are several reasons why interviewing and studying elites is relevant in the context of cutback management. First of all, elite interviews may help in interpreting policy processes, reports and reforms, and may help to sketch the context in which such changes evolve. Elites can be seen as privileged witnesses of such reforms. During cutbacks, it is common that decision-making is centralised and centres around the political and administrative elites. Therefore, elites can be expected to know more about how decisions have been made compared to the outsiders of such processes. Second, elite interviews give insight into the mindset and behaviour of those actors that play an important role in *"shaping the society in which we live"* (Richards, 1996: p. 200). Not only are government elites' witnesses of reforms, they often play an active role in shaping these reforms. As explained in the discussion on the position of public managers in the Dutch government, especially cutbacks on operational expenditure are a core domain of the public manager, rather than political actors. Therefore, they have considerable autonomy in shaping the reforms as they deem good. This means that insight into the mindset and behaviour of these actors can tell us more about the rationale behind certain decisions. The third advantage of studying elites is that elites can help to establish networks and provide access to other respondents and to internal documents, which would otherwise not have been available for research. For this dissertation, 86 public managers from the highest tiers of government were interviewed. With the help of some respondents, internal documents have been made available for research purposes, and site visits to locations of interest were made possible.

The most common way of studying elites is by doing interviews. There is a wide range of studies that consider elite interviewing as a specific type of interviews (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2002; Harvey, 2010, 2011; Liu, 2018; Mason-Bish, 2019; Richards, 1996). That elite interviewing is considered different than 'regular' interviews, is due to the particular nature of the respondents of elite interviews, which poses challenges to the research process.

First of all, studying elites can be difficult because access to respondents might be limited. For example, elites can use their position to protect themselves from intrusion, which is seen as a reason that elite studies are relatively rare (Harvey, 2010). Furthermore, time constraints are one of the aspects that make it hard to gain a representative sample of elites. For this dissertation, generalisation is not the aim. We, therefore, do not approach our sample of respondents as quantitative researchers would. Yet, also qualitative researchers should take a close look at their sample of respondents. Non-random error can be caused by a variety of factors, including measurement error and non-response.

With regard to the latter, a systematic error can be the result of high numbers of non-respondents. Goldstein (2002) argues that it is important that we should not focus too much on the total number of (non-)respondents, rather, we should ask ourselves whether those who refused to be interviewed or could not be contacted have different characteristics than those who did participate in the research process. Within this study, we used purposeful sampling to invite public managers to participate in this research project. Lists of respondents were made by doing desk-research on the case at hand, for example by reading policy documents, parliamentary debates and reading media coverage on the topic, and by therewith looking for respondents who played an important part in the cutback management process. For each case study, a first choice and second choice respondent were selected which shared (as much as possible) the same characteristics with regard to their position (i.e. both being a director-general), gender (i.e. both being female) and organisation or organisational unit within the same organisation (i.e. both being confronted with cutbacks of a certain magnitude). By doing this, we hoped to ensure that the respondents included in the study were as similar as possible as that of respondents who did not participate. The second challenge of elite interviewing is that elites are more conscious about their self-interest. As Van der Wal (2013) puts it:

> *"It would be naïve to act overly trusting towards individuals that are very well equipped to 'spin' facts and events, 'play' interviewers, and dominate and take over conversations entirely. In fact: They would never have become government elites had they not developed such skills."* (Van der Wal, 2013: p. 6).

By being defensive, elites can hinder the researcher in getting their questions answered. Furthermore, elites are very well able to shape the interviews as they want. This means that they are very well equipped to steer the interview in a direction that they want, thus compromising the validity of the empirical material. It is difficult to deal with such issues, especially because different scholars' advice to use open-ended questions for elite interviewing, as *"elites especially, but other highly educated people as well, do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions."* (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002: p. 674). Such open-ended questions make it much easier for respondents to circle around the question and talk about other things than those the researcher wants to discuss. In the studies for this dissertation, preparation was a key aspect of making sure that respondents could not get away easily with circling around the question. Preparation in this sense was analysing (public) documents about the particular cases, doing interviews with policy advisors or otherwise involved actors, and properly checking the background of the respondent. Furthermore, all respondents were promised confidential handling of the data. Lastly, interviews were structured in such a way that easy and unthreatening questions (for example, questions about the job of the respondent) were asked first to bond with the respondent. Also, respondents were first prompted in giving a more chronological overview of the particular case of cutbacks, followed by questions about (aspects of) managerial behaviour. Such an order of questions is in line with

advice from Richards (1996), who suggests that uneasy questions can best be questioned after the interviewer build some rapport with the interviewee. We also followed the advice of Berry (2002) to circle back to (rephrased) questions which were previously left unanswered by the respondents and used rephrased questions on the same topic.

A third challenge of doing elite interviews is reflexivity of elite respondents. Elites can be highly reflective of their actions within interviews, meaning that they do not only answer questions but immediately start to analyse their behaviour. In some cases, interviewees are unclear whether they answer questions with their behaviour in mind, or whether they are making more general statements about the topics at hand. When questions are answered differently, this poses challenges to the reliability of the data. Therefore, in the interviews for this dissertation, whenever respondents were making more general claims about cutback management (for example by describing cutbacks within the government as a whole, rather than within their department), follow-up questions were used to dig deeper into the experiences from respondents themselves. In general, the interviews were more like conversations rather than just firing interview questions upon the respondents. Such a style of interviewing gives maximal flexibility, and by using a topic list, still helps the researcher to get the answers to all questions (Berry, 2002).

The different empirical chapters of this book are also designed as stand-alone publications. For this reason, the empirical studies in this dissertation use different case study designs and draw upon different samples of elites. Therefore, we explain how respondents were selected, who was interviewed, what interview strategy was used, and how data was coded and analysed in the different empirical chapters.