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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Lead, link, or leverage? An integrative framework to assess different government roles in collaborative governance processes across political systems

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Abstract

Collaborative governance is an emerging phenomenon through which governments nowadays are seeking to address today's societal challenges. Oftentimes, this requires governments to assume different roles and responsibilities. To unpack this multidimensionality, this study establishes an integrative framework distinguishing between a leading, linking and leveraging role, and accounting for institutional and actor-level aspects. We clarify the analytical leverage of this framework through a plausibility probe comparing two collaborative processes in Canada and the Netherlands, focused on national climate policy processes. Our findings underscore the value of our framework, shed light on how institutional and political drivers shape collaborative roles of governments across political systems, and their collaborative abilities in the face of politicization.

KEYWORDS

climate policy, collaborative governance, government roles, public officials

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, governments are turning to more collaborative modes of policymaking and governing (“collaborative governance”) to address complex societal challenges that stretch across sectors and (sub) national borders. It implies a collective logic (Ostrom, 1990), whereby political actors enter into dialogue to, ‘co-produce goals, strategies and share responsibilities and resources’ (Ansell & Gash, 2018, p. 19; Booher, 2004; Cepiku, 2016, p. 143; Davies & White, 2012, p. 161). For governments specifically (i.e., ministries, agencies, and departments), this often translates to work beyond standard operating procedures, and requires bridging actors and issues beyond jurisdictional boundaries, whom otherwise would lack capacity to respond alone (Miller-Stevens et al., 2015, p. 206).

Participation in collaborative governance therefore implies a change in roles normally assumed by governments, creating new possibilities of how to interact, share information, make decisions, and

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implement policy (Agranoff, 2012, p. 53). No longer is their only role to be ultimate decision makers, governments must also “take steps to encourage prosocial orientation” (Choi & Robertson, 2019, p. 410; see also Feldman & Khademian, 2007; Scott et al., 2019) by engaging stakeholders vis-à-vis consensus-seeking interaction. This suggests an agile *modus operandi* that can adapt to dynamic processes by which responsibilities are more dispersed throughout networked or multilevel governance systems (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Unsurprisingly, this redefinition of administrative decision making has left many governments disoriented on how best to “do business” with society, raising doubt on which role(s) to take, or how to position themselves most effectively when engaging.

Illustrative in this regard are the struggles many governments experience in the face of divergent societal interests to reach national climate agreements via collaborative means. In the Netherlands, for instance, final agreements within the agricultural sector have stalled after years of struggling through a difficult process of collaboration and negotiation. What this example signals is that while governing collaboratively is conceptually and normatively the ideal governance arrangement to address complex societal challenges, the specific roles governments should assume and how broader institutional and political contextual factors affect their space to maneuver remain understudied in the literature.

This invites us to better understand how governments position themselves as they continue to adopt more collaborative approaches as part of their (policy) mandates. In that regard, scholarship continues to underscore the importance of governments in collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Doberstein, 2016; Emerson et al., 2012) and acknowledges varying conceptualizations of possible roles taken when collaborating on policy (Ansell & Gash, 2012; Koontz et al., 2004; Ryan, 2001; Wondollock & Ryan, 1999). While important, the literature remains skewed by predominantly adopting a disaggregated lens. That is, departing from individual-level roles or specific local problems. It hardly conceives of collaborative governance as stemming from government in a collective sense. This narrows our ability to pinpoint how institutional-level factors impact collaborative processes.

Insights into how government roles might vary across institutional contexts remain equally implicit, and only broadly acknowledge institutional context as a factor to impact collaborative processes (Doberstein, 2016; Emerson et al., 2012; Koontz et al., 2004). Given the predominant public management perspective, we gained tremendous insight into how collaboration can facilitate an approach to move beyond purely transactional relationships (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Tang & Mazmanian, 2010), yet we have limited understanding of how the broader politically driven and institutional contexts might affect how governments take up roles—be that strategically intentional, browbeaten, or serendipitous.

We aim to advance the literature by considering the role of government in collaborative governance, and how this varies across institutional contexts. We develop an analytical framework that adopts a more aggregate lens of the different roles governments assume in collaborative governance processes (hereafter, CGPs) by integrating two established frameworks addressing such roles (i.e., Koontz et al., 2004; Wondollock & Ryan, 1999) from the collaborative governance literature via a trichotomy to either *lead*, *link*, or *leverage*, and posit how these roles could vary across institutional contexts. Additionally, we characterize these three roles based on three distinct positions governments assume in CGPs, namely the starting, operational, and engagement positions. We argue that delineating these positions within each role can enable a more systematic way to assess governments engaging with stakeholders in CGPs and better account for the dynamic nature of these roles throughout these processes. This includes how government enters CGPs and how they contribute to the process procedurally and substantively.

Accordingly, adopting an aggregate approach provides a more comparable metric to study regime-level differences. This is imperative for three reasons. First, it enables us to understand how institutional structures impact how governments situate themselves; an important factor to discern how collaborative governance can be scaled (see Ansell & Torfing, 2015). Second, it complements existing studies adopting disaggregate approaches that examine agent-level rationales for assuming specific roles (Scott & Thomas, 2017).¹ Lastly, it yields practical relevance. Since engaging collaboratively is typically a complex endeavor, having a broader lens to assess government's positioning can reveal implications

for policymakers operating within them. It can also provide societal stakeholders a tool to identify government engagement patterns and inform their own positioning.

To investigate the potential validity of our analytical framework, we employ a plausibility probe comparing the roles national ministries in the Netherlands and Canada assumed when formulating national climate policy plans following pledges to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Selected cases are indicative of two important institutional features: systems of interest intermediation and systems of government in advanced democracies. The Netherlands represents a decentralized unitary, neo-corporatist state, and Canada, a federalist, pluralist state.

Our findings signal two scholarly contributions. First, our results demonstrate the added value of our framework to identify roles and positions governments assume in initial decision making stages. Secondly, they highlight the significance of institutional context and politically driven interventions; clarifying how these elements shape government roles in CGPs. In both cases, collaboration was sought to address climate policy—a conceivably wicked issue—however, when faced with stakeholder contention, governments arguably sidestepped the collaborative process and reverted it back into the political debate. Namely, the Dutch creating exclusivity in decision making, and in Canada, leaving final discretion to provincial premiers, despite being overseen and coordinated by a federal ministry. Prevailing institutional milieus therefore created a “stickiness” that seems to stifle the (potential) dynamism in role(s) taken up, that otherwise are deemed principal success factors in the collaborative governance literature. This underscores an otherwise neglected aspect to understanding the complexity of governing collaboratively, and calls for further research to address how governments’ institutional and organizational environments affect their behaviors in CGPs.

RECOGNIZING GOVERNMENT ROLES IN COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

Collaborative governance is a “shared” approach to policymaking that involves joint consensus-oriented problem-solving between governments and non-state stakeholders² to reach (policy) decisions in a more collective and inclusive way (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544). This transforms how policies are realized, and recalibrates our understanding of government decision making and engagement with stakeholders compared to traditional policymaking. Whereas traditional policymaking largely requires a one-way transfer of power or input to inform decision makers’ choices, collaborative policymaking implies governments are “one component of a much more fluid and complex [adaptive] system of governance” (Innes & Booher, 2003) that creates deliberative “sites of persuasion” for diverse perspectives to inform policy (Doberstein, 2016, p. 837). For instance, a collaborative approach would invite more participatory means (workshops, roundtables, etc.) for stakeholders to directly contribute or inform policy goals or strategies.

Recognized as a challenging endeavor (Huxham & Vangen, 2004), governments have incentives to adopt this policy-making approach. For instance, to maintain or enhance resource dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2015), support government interventions and transform the steering capacity of public programs or policy networks (Kickert et al., 1997; Sorensen & Torfing, 2015) and support policy design and implementation (Ansell & Torfing, 2017; Howlett, 2014). Doberstein (2016) found that over half of policy decisions (and their policy outcomes) made collaboratively would not have been made in a similar way in scenarios of unilateral bureaucratic control, as governments assumed a different and more collaborative approach. This merits an approach to discern how governments navigate these dynamic environments.

Existing scholarship considers the roles governments assume in CGPs, yet often largely focuses on *either* macro or micro approaches (Walker & Senecah, 2011, pp. 116–120). For example, macro approaches tend to capture broader actor constellations such as collaborative communities coming together (Straus, 2002). However, most approaches address government roles at the agent level (Scott & Thomas, 2017; Walker & Senecah, 2011; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999), addressing aspects such as functions of leadership (Ansell &

Gash, 2012; Fischer, 2000), roles within specific engagements (i.e., reg-negs) (Ryan, 2001) or governance contexts that focus on local policy problems (O Flynn & Wanna, 2008; but see Lelieveldt, 2003). This is often followed by more static descriptions of roles (Walker & Senecah, 2011, p. 119) and lacks a more structured and dynamic way to analyze aspects shaping these roles. For instance, Daniels and Walker (2001, p. 81) define roles such as “representative”, but do not explain how it contributes to the engagement process. Our framework therefore responds to these gaps to more systematically delineate what governments are doing in their role, and what this implies for CGPs. Hence, we aim to clarify the shifting, dynamic nature of *how* governments contribute procedurally or substantively to CGPs.

To do this, we merge characteristics from previous typologies, including Koontz et al. (2004) and Wondolleck and Ryan (1999), and complement this with recent studies on how governments navigate roles and positions when collaboratively governing (Berthod et al., 2022; Hysing, 2022, p. 208; Lubell et al., 2025; Ulibarri et al., 2023). Each framework is considered for its explicit focus on government roles, and together they capture institutional and agent-level considerations, while recognizing the unique authority governments hold when engaging with stakeholders. Koontz et al. (2004) recognize the role of government as an actor *and* institution, focusing on the institutional characteristics of a collaborative governance setting. This outlines how roles operate within processes, including how decisions are made or formats governing actors are determined. Wondolleck and Ryan (1999) focus on agent-level behaviors and responsibilities in collaborative interactions. This includes actor-level characteristics in CGPs, including relevant actions and skill sets.

Building on this scholarship, we adopt a trichotomy to align with these frameworks, classifying roles to *lead*, *link*, or *leverage*. One caveat is that these roles should not be viewed as mutually exclusive (Scott & Thomas, 2017, p. 201), that is, one or a combination of these roles can coexist for governments in CGPs. Hence, we clarify each role based on three key positions governments take when participating in a CGP, namely the starting, operational, and engagement positions. These serve as “points of reference” to empirically delineate how governments position themselves and more precisely pinpoint implications for the process and respective stakeholders.³ Assuming governments may adopt different roles in individual CGPs, assessing roles in each position can provide a more fine-grained understanding of what is happening and why.

First is the *starting position*, or the position a government assumes when entering a CGP. This provides a first indicator of how governments intend to engage with stakeholders, and “sets the stage” for how others will respond to the government's presence or CGP (if initiated by government). Often, this illuminates the “starting conditions” among actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Crosby and Bryson (2010, p. 219) note the importance of initial conditions for shaping how parties will support or commit to kick-start efforts. Although the start of a collaboration does not preclude how it will develop thereafter, it does lend to first iterative or intermediate process outcomes that can impact initial dynamics (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

Second is the *operational position*, or the functional actions to structure or coordinate the process. This relates to the participatory design (Fung, 2006), and represents how government may seek to influence or exert authority “over the process,” regardless of the issue-content. For instance, how engagements are structured or which modes are assumed (i.e., workshops vs direct meetings) or the (in)direct resource allocations (Crosby & Bryson, 2005) such as financial, technical, or expert resources for the process. Previous research undeniably shows that collaboratively governing is a resource-heavy effort, and seeing what governments offer provides insight into its intention, capacity or signal underlying tensions affecting its participation.

Third is the *engagement position*, or the substantive position taken during deliberations, and contributes to how decisions are reached. This position delineates how government actually interacts and communicates its interests related to the content at hand, including how government discusses, frames, or negotiates issues or how they build rapport with parties. Deciphering these engagement dynamics is imperative to understand how government deals with conflict, co-develops agendas, etc. when formulating policy (Innes & Booher, 2003, p. 42). This is key to decipher underlying political interests, regardless of a government's coordinative role.

Government to lead in CGPs

Starting position

Governments entering to lead usually assume a dominant position, either by initiating and catalyzing the process, or positioning themselves in a central role to an already existing CGP (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 90–91). For policy-making purposes, this may be triggered by the cabinet's agenda, or via public pressure to transform government programs (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 109). Regardless, entering to lead is evident by a proactivity to work with others (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 108). Over time, governments may shift from this starting position to relinquish control once things have taken shape, but will remain a central decision making party. Whether leading in initial or later stages, governments can yield legitimacy to CGPs due to their centrality in policymaking and distinct decision making authority (Ansell & Gash, 2012; Koontz et al., 2004, p. 52; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, p. 121).⁴ This is largely due to government leadership being two-pronged: as an actor in CGPs (i.e., government officials taking action), or an institution providing rule-bounded parameters (i.e., rules, norms, structures of the administrative state) for collaboration (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 21; March & Olsen, 2002).

Operational position

Regarding operational activities, governments who lead commonly shoulder most managerial efforts to coordinate and design the process, overseeing day-to-day operations. For instance, coordinating the participatory methods implemented between stakeholders (i.e., workshops, taskforces, roundtables, etc.) (Fung, 2006; Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 117–118; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, p. 122). Doing this also incentivizes governments leading to align planning with regulatory environments (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 141). They also manage resources. For example, funding (or stipends), human capital (i.e., staff assistance), technical support (i.e., research, information gathering) (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 41–42, 124–125, 140), or other logistics such as stakeholder recruitment, hiring facilitator(s), and setting time frames (if bounded by subsequent negotiations) (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 117–118, 140; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, p. 122). Governments leading provide the majority of resources, but this is not compulsory (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 138).

Engagement position

Governments leading are key for advancing negotiations, and shaping the engagement process. Wondolleck and Ryan (1999) highlight three stages where this is evident. Firstly, *during the process* to manage the CGP's "tone" and "vision" (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 137–138). This involves leading discussions to define agendas, problem statements, guiding principles, or issue scope (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 106; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, pp. 121–122). Secondly, *during discussions*, leaders may gather, distribute, and confirm information to create more equal footing during deliberations, or supply frameworks for stakeholders to engage on key issues (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 117, 128). This includes brokering shared responsibility and understanding between participants (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 119–120; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999). Lastly, *following negotiations* leaders may signal feasibility of collaborative decisions vis-à-vis knowledge on statutory requirements or bureaucratic maneuverings (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 137–138). They can be expected to shoulder extra responsibilities including communicating "difficult" decisions (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 125) or opportunities to circumvent deadlocks between adversaries (Ansell & Gash, 2012; Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, pp. 121–122). Likely, leaders will position themselves strategically for deliberations. For example, in committees overseeing key decisions among salient stakeholders (i.e., selection of proposals) (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 95–99, 108, 121–122). This means leaders do not have to entirely "dominate" but ensure strategic oversight (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 150–151).

Government to link in CGPs

Starting position

Governments may position themselves to *link*—integrating roles of an “encourager” (Koontz et al., 2004) or “partner” (Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999). “Linkers” primarily catalyze CGPs, but this is not a requisite. In practice, this typically involves instigating a process, with intention to delegate control to aid and assist a process, rather than fully manage it (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 150). If entering an existing CGP, linkers will likely offer mechanisms or tools to promote conditions for stakeholders to work together (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 73). For example, waving regulations to incentivize stakeholders' commitment that otherwise burden collaboration (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 77–78). Hence, entering a CGP with incentives like these may appear like a hands-off effort, but it can be central to the overarching goals of a CGP (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 149–151).

Operational position

Linkers' contributions to a CGP's operations is a proactive one. Similar to their starting position, linkers will aim to offer resources for the process to “sponsor” or promote collaboration among stakeholders (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). Operationally speaking, this can include varying financial, technical, or human resources. For instance, linkers may offer policy tools that remove traditional command-and-control rules like providing regulatory relief, grants, or advice to support stakeholders' legal compliance (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 73–78). Alternatively, linkers may also provide technical assistance like modules educating parties on dialogical skills or collective action. Like leaders, linkers may match funding toward activities that promote collaboration (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 66–67). Linkers still hold autonomy over how funds are overseen, but with the intention to minimize politically charged regulatory oversight during a CGP (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 88–89). This can strategically position linkers to influence a CGP's design, leaving an “institutional imprint” on its structure or actions taken.

Engagement position

During deliberations, linkers typically adopt a “we” mindset (Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999) and remain attentive to recognize opportunities for shared action. Oftentimes, this requires reacting to adversaries and emphasizing shared responsibilities (Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999, p. 126). As mentioned, providing targeted resources is one method to encourage parties to engage in new ways (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 86–87). This can serve as an important lever to wield influence (Purdy, 2012) over the collaborative's scope (i.e., problem definition) and how participation is realized (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 63–65). Linkers may still hold a “leader-like” position in these settings, that is, a taskforce-lead guiding discussions (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 88) but this is generally to further catalyze synergies between parties. For instance, initiating technical committees to provide operational advice, or data to evaluate or inform deliberations (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 113, 116–117). Overall, linkers represent an active advocate of policy plans, deeming them a “motivated stakeholder.”

Government to leverage in CGPs

Starting position

A leverage role integrates “stakeholder” (Wondolleck & Ryan, 1999) and “follower” roles (Koontz et al., 2004). “Leveragers” do not convene CGPs (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 146–147) but join as a

participant, or sit in as observers of collaborative efforts. This is primarily to represent their organization's interests, or remain aware of efforts closely linked to their goals or agendas (Scott & Thomas, 2017, p. 205). Even when governments enter in this role, they can still be a central player due to their formal decision making authority. Or, they can still enter to support others with catalyzing the process, but this will be in parallel with other participants or leaders.

Operational position

Unlike other roles, governments assuming a leverage role would not oversee coordination activities nor be a primary funder (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 45–46). Instead, contributions may be issued directly, such as partial funding (i.e., financing programs) or indirectly, such as physical resources (i.e., facilities, meeting spaces), technical resources (i.e., access to data, expertise, and grant writing), or human resources like knowledge of legal or administrative processes to support a CGP's structure (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 49–50, 62–65). What differs a leverage operational position from a link or lead role, is unpacking the intent behind why certain coordinative efforts are exercised; which is often recognized when governments align efforts close to existing agendas that directly serve their goals (Scott & Thomas, 2017, p. 206). To illustrate, Waylen et al. (2023) demonstrates how the government cited certain policy priorities to justify the partnership's focus, impacting which resources and funding were offered.

Engagement position

A leverager's participation can vary (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 58–59), ranging from an observer to an active participant (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 146–147). This is generally justified by the organization's capacity or outlook and how well it aligns with their mandate (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 52). In contrast with a linker, this embraces a “me” mindset (Wondollock & Ryan, 1999), whereby a government may be active in a CGP for reasons beyond the process itself. For instance, when CGPs occur during electoral shifts, this role can benefit government participation and information exchange that otherwise could be censored by superiors (Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 47–49, 62–63). Partial participation may also occur if government lacks political will or authority to convene a CGP and could otherwise alienate others (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 59).

Either way, leveragers have more discretion over the breadth of their engagement since they are not as strongly tied from an operational perspective. Unlike other roles, a leverage role may take stronger positions to defend their organization and interest-based constituencies to persuade, make use of information, and shape the problem, solution, or what they can gain from the CGP. Within a CGP, this can be evident when government takes a backseat on activities or partakes in ulterior activities (i.e., lobbying) to create (political) pressure. Cook (2015, pp. 379–80), for instance, demonstrates how government assumes a leverage role by implementing strategies during the process to keep issues on the agenda. However, leveragers may also participate in co-defining issues' scale or scope (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 49), or signal commitment to a vision or change within their agencies (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 37). Again, this role can still remain central within a CGP, particularly if government holds formal decision making authority, which minimizes their ability to delegate certain decision making responsibilities.

Table 1 provides a summary of each role and delineates its characteristics based on the three positions defined in our framework.

HOW LEADING, LINKING, AND LEVERAGING ROLES VARY ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Despite underlying assumptions that CGPs may be equivalent, engaging in collaboration between government and societal partners likely depends on the institutional and political context in which a CGP

TABLE 1 Overview of government roles in collaborative governance processes.

	Lead	Link	Leverage
Starting position	- Typically to initiate and catalyze the process - Behave proactively	- May initiate or catalyze the process - Be an explicit proponent of the process	- Refrain from initiating or catalyzing the process - Join as a participant
Operational position	- Oversee and shoulder most managerial efforts; - Typically a key funder; provide most resources - Design and structure engagement process	- Can co-guide on daily operations; proactively seek policy tools to alleviate (regulatory) burdens; - Typically a co-funder; sponsor - Provide resources that educate or encourage collective action	- Offer resources upon discretion; may co-fund - Typically limit coordinating process-related activities - Assume delegated tasks upon discretion
Engagement position	- Manage vision/tone and agenda - Typically broker and signal feasibility of actions	- Motivate engagement that catalyzes synergies - Co-broker between groups (i.e., “we” mindset) or provide policy tools	- Defend organizational interests; - Bargain (i.e., “me” mindset) - Participate actively or observe process (participation can vary)

is embedded. Previous literature acknowledges the importance of institutional context as a factor that impacts CGPs (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Doberstein, 2016; Emerson et al., 2012; Koontz et al., 2004, p. 37), without examining its implications. Two key contextual institutional factors that stand out as relevant to understanding roles assumed include a country's system of government and its system of interest intermediation. We therefore assume that these structures set parameters for how collaboration and political developments ensue.

Systems of Interest Intermediation

Interest intermediation systems—namely corporatism and pluralism—constitute one important institutional feature, representing the political relations between specialized interest organizations and the role of the state (Schmitter, 1977, p. 4). Each system varies in how access is provided to interest organizations with(in) the state, thereby affecting their involvement and contribution to policymaking (Binderkrantz & Rasmussen, 2015; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). Corporatism represents a hierarchical structure of interest representation, whereby the state formally attributes public roles to selected interest groups such as trade unions and employers' associations. Conversely, pluralism facilitates a more open structure to stimulate competition between political interests and values among diverse groups (Lijphart, 2012; Schmitter, 1984). This can often lend itself to more fragmented policies as groups advocate their specific interests and do so by engaging government departments separately (i.e., venue shopping). Hence, corporatist systems may mitigate siloed policymaking more due to their structured approach of engaging interest groups.

That said, we expect governments in (neo)corporatist systems will be inclined to adopt a *linking* role across all positions. This is justified on assumptions that its organized, stable relationships between government and stakeholders provides the “infrastructure” to assist and catalyze a CGP alongside key partners. Because interest groups in these systems have formally recognized roles in policymaking, it could incite governments to enable these partners to (co)lead and otherwise assume a more open, proactive role that promotes instruments to stimulate collaboration across sectoral interests.

In pluralist systems, we expect a *leading* role across all positions to be more likely. Since political arenas are more diffused, it may stimulate government to play a central role to coordinate and synthesize viewpoints from diverse, competing groups seeking to influence decisions. This is justified to ensure actors are supported and efforts can be adequately (re)distributed across jurisdictions and

arenas. Having a strong vision at the federal level could hopefully entice better coordination across jurisdictions.

Systems of government

A second key institutional feature is the distinction of government systems, namely unitary and federal. This refers to the formal division of policy responsibilities across governance levels for making collective societal decisions (Hague et al., 1998, p. 228). Traditionally, unitary states are governed by a single, centralized government unit under one constitution. Many unitary states, however, operate in a decentralized manner with other subnational governments holding relatively more political and administrative autonomy. Delegation of decision making to lower levels is typically justified to ensure uniformity and compliance with national legislation (De Vries, 2004, p. 307; Hague et al., 1998, p. 208; OECD, 2019). Conversely, federal systems share sovereignty between national and subnational governments, who are recognized as “self-governing” units (Hooghe & Marks, 2012). Through complex negotiations of competing territorial interests, these coexisting orders of government hold specific powers established via judicial interpretation or constitutional framework(s) (Papillon, 2012, p. 292). This is with the intent to protect sovereignty, regional diversity, and allow for local policy design (Fenna, 2012).

Implications of roles assumed in each system offer slightly different assumptions. Recent scholarship identifies collaborative shifts (i.e., “*collaborative federalism*”; “*collaborative decentralization*”) vis-à-vis increased intergovernmental and political “inter-wovenness” due to present-day issues spanning jurisdictional boundaries, requiring government agencies to cross-pollinate procedural and political duties when problem-solving (Ames, 2015; Cameron & Simeon, 2002; Culpepper, 2005; Miller-Stevens & Tiffany et al., 2015, p. 207; Saunders, 2002; Toonen & Steen, 2008, p. 218).

Provided this emphasis on collaborative decision making, we expect governments in federal systems to assume a *linking* role across all positions. Assuming a linker role may be prioritized if the government perceives establishing policy programs would evade any jurisdictional impingements or harmonize policy across sectors (i.e., distributing financial assistance) (Saunders, 2002, pp. 71–73; Toonen & Steen, 2008). Accordingly, cross-jurisdictional issues may narrow the likelihood of a leverage role as solely defending interests may otherwise destabilize collaborative engagements. Hence, adopting a linker role may encourage improved interprovincial cooperation.

Conversely, we expect governments in unitary systems to adopt a *leader* role across all positions. Since authority largely rests with the central government, a leader role ensures core responsibilities and oversight remain with the government. Moreover, it can maintain national coherence by utilizing existing institutional fora. This can contribute to setting a clear vision and ensure smoother implementation at other governance levels.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the analytical value of our framework, we use two ongoing cases in the Netherlands and Canada, as a “plausibility probe.” Plausibility probes are commonly acknowledged as preliminary empirical investigations, serving our purpose to provide an initial assessment of our framework’s analytical leverage (Eckstein, 2000).

We selected the Netherlands and Canada as they represent two divergent systems of interest representation and government. (Neo)corporatist systems such as in the Netherlands (Visser & Hemerijck, 1997) are argued to have high degrees of institutionalized behavior (Woldendorp & Keman, 2007, pp. 319–320). Characterized by its “polder model,” a highly coordinated, consensus-oriented interest intermediation system, it aims at forging distinct cooperative relationships among key trade unions, employers’ associations and government via “tripartite negotiations” and collective bargaining agreements (Braun, 2016; Jacek, 1986, p. 421; Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991; Vergunst, 2013). This typically makes the state the core

bargainer, but directs activities among groups in close partnership during policy formulation and implementation (Marks, 1986; Martin, 1983; Thomas, 2004).

Conversely, pluralist systems like Canada (Lijphart, 2012, p. 166), are characterized by open systems of interest intermediation, whereby policymaking occurs via a “marketplace” of competing politically organized groups in addition to trade unions and employers' associations (Martin, 1983, p. 92). This makes power among groups less centralized, extending across policy domains and beyond purely economic matters (Dye & Zeigler, 1970, p. v; Thomas, 2004, p. 41). In comparison with the Dutch polder model, organized interests in pluralist systems are more confined to formulating policy (Martin, 1983).

The Netherlands and Canada also represent different systems of government. The Dutch national government is the core responsible body for networks of economic and social development. Provinces are deemed comparatively weak between their stronger national and municipal counterparts, representing “area-managers” to oversee regional-specific policies (Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). Canada represents a decentralized federalist system (Studlar, 2010) whereby constitutional divisions warrant strong provincial and territorial governments with extensive jurisdictional, fiscal, and bureaucratic capacities (Jacek, 1986; Simeon, 2002, p. 399), and a federal government with more selective responsibilities, such as equally redistributing payments across provinces. Local governments are also governed through provincial legislation, and do not independently work with federal entities (OECD, 2017, 2019).

To ensure grounds for comparison, we examine a shared policy challenge—formulating national climate policy plans. We examine collaborative engagement in this policy domain for three reasons. One, its “wicked,” salient nature and spillover effects on societal issues such as human health and prosperity. Two, its well-studied prevalence in collaborative governance literatures allow us to build on existing findings to unpack government roles (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Batory & Svensson, 2019; Ulibarri, 2015). Thirdly, this policy issue is one which governments traditionally hold central authority (Walker & Senecah, 2011, p. 112), yet increasingly require societal stakeholders given its cross-boundary nature.

Besides variation in institutional context, our plausibility probe is bounded to initial engagement phases (i.e., first stakeholder consultation/deliberations) that shaped first national policy documents (Government of Canada, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2016; Rijksoverheid, 2019). This focus resulted in excluding a principal contextual factor, namely the increasing political fragmentation in each country. We will reflect on these implications in the concluding discussions. We focus on the role of ministries responsible for these portfolios. In Canada, this involves the federal department Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), and in the Netherlands, the national Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate (Ministerie van Economische Zaken en Klimaat, EZK). Comparatively, both countries share similar climate-related concerns, reflected in their expanded pledges (e.g., 30% and 49% emission reductions by 2030) and tailored governance approaches. In 2017, climate “change” or “policy” were added to ministries' official department titles, respectively, signaling their political commitment. Efforts began within existing departmental frameworks, with ministries adopting an economic lens to address climate agendas—Canada emphasizing carbon pricing and cleaner energy sources, and the Netherlands focusing on sustainable economic development and growth.

Sources analyzed include publicly available documents published between 2015 and 2019. This included ministry websites and policy documents outlining policy processes; top national newspapers reporting on each case to capture additional nuances about the political climate during deliberations; and public documents such as online political commentaries and commissioned reports.

Based on these sources, we classify government actions into specific positions and roles. Starting positions are identified via the timing and nature of a government's initial actions or statements. A lead role implied that a government proactively launches an initiative or process in motion; a link role when it facilitates connection among actors toward an initiative; and a leverage role when governments reacts to preexisting processes. Operational positions are identified via examining government's daily operations, managerial decision making, and resource commitment. A lead role might involve full management and

resource oversight; a link role shared provision; and a leverage role implies limited or discretionary involvement. Lastly, engagement positions are identified by examining communication and participation methods. A lead role focuses more on the management of interactions, a link role centered on enabling discussions, and a leverage role mostly involves broader participation and observation.

Our design is not without limitations. First, utilizing only publicly available resources likely falls short of capturing all nuances or dynamics by government, in particular political dynamics taking place in closed settings. For instance, governments assuming a leverage role may not be inclined to make actions public if it corresponds to other strategic agendas. A second limitation follows from our focus on national-level ministries. This focus may impede us from garnering salient collaborative dynamics such as cross-sectoral interactions and influences, informal networks involved in policy development, inter-ministerial dynamics, or other bottom-up initiatives. However, our approach has the value of providing one structured entry point to examine collaborative dynamics. Lastly, the nature of the cases (i.e., national climate policy agreements) has important implications. Given attention to the Paris Climate agreement, it is not extraordinary that governments stepped up to initiate these agendas. We therefore recognize that combined with the governments' unique authority, this may make the adoption of a purely participant role somewhat unlikely. Yet, it still warrants a dynamic approach in relation to engagement with societal stakeholders.

ANALYSIS

Next, we probe each case and present results based on the framework's core elements to evaluate government roles and assess how collaboration emerges across each process.

The Netherlands: “KlimaatAkkoord”

The KlimaatAkkoord is the Netherlands' national climate policy plan, adopted on June 28, 2019 by the Dutch central government (Min. EZK, 2019b). This was in response to the nation's commitment to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Initiated under the 2017–2021 coalition agreement, it integrates previous energy and climate programs (i.e., EnergieAkkoord) into one multi-sector national climate agreement (Min. EZK, 2019c), with the fixed ambition to reduce emissions by 49% by 2030.

The process was launched on February 23, 2017. Former Agricultural Minister Ed Nijpels was appointed chairman of the “Climate Council,” the leading independent task-force of the process consisting of—its secretariat, five ministerial chairs (“subject ministers”) and five independent experts. The secretariat was led by EZK (the politically accountable ministry) and the Dutch Social and Economic Council (SER)—the advisory body that monitors industry partners and public interests overseeing energy-related sectors (ROB, 2020, p. 44; SER, 2015). Independent chairs oversaw five sector-related tables (“tafels”) that would contribute to the overarching emission reduction goal that EZK cochaired and administratively coordinated along other ministries. This ensured process oversight, and smoother coordination between national and regional agendas (i.e., Dutch Regional Energy Strategies) (Min. EZK, 2019a). Sectors included electricity, mobility, industry, agriculture and land use, and build environment. Five supplementary task groups were also established for cross-cutting issues (i.e., finance, innovation, labor, etc.).

Each table involved diverse private and public organizations totaling over 300 participants (Min. EZK, 2019d). This included companies such as Shell, Philips, and Tata steel, branch organizations like the LTO representing agricultural sectors, the association of municipalities (VNG), civil society organizations such as the Association of Electric Drivers, or NGOs like Greenpeace. Stakeholder table composition was based on three criteria: their sector-related contribution for transitions, expertise, and their ability to make mandated agreements.

Lastly, EZK's Minister designed “progress consultations” which aims to monitor subsequent implementation across tables and task groups, and safeguard short and long-term administrative or societal

efforts across parties and governance levels (Min. EZK, 2019a). For instance, assessing affordability of cost-sharing among stakeholders (i.e., who pays for what) (ROB, 2020, p. 51) to create better accountability.

Overall, the nature of the process was complex and politically charged. Concerns of policies being elitist and resulting in unequal public debts were highly contested (Hofhuis & van Schaik, 2019a). Even more, there were encircling legal rulings (i.e., Urgenda case), claiming the state's unlawful action to prevent climate change (Hofhuis & van Schaik, 2019b). After multiple rounds of negotiations, criticisms heightened as three proposals were rejected by the secretariat,⁵ with agreements remaining vague and unconvincing to alleviate future deadlocks (ROB, 2020, p. 45). Chairman Nijpels even traveled throughout the country to reassure constituencies and explain its complexities (Smit, 2018). Approximately 2 years later, the KlimaatAkkoord was published. During the time of writing this article, the implementation of the agreement is ongoing, with the most recent policy notes documented concluding the nation is on track to meet their reduction targets (Rijksoverheid, 2020).

Canada: “Pan Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change”

On March 3, 2016, Canadian First Ministers⁶ signed the Vancouver Declaration to establish a series of collaborative commitments by federal, provincial, and territorial governments (FPT) to improve climate policy coherence. Among these commitments, was creating a Pan-Canadian approach to establish Canada's first-ever national climate policy framework (Government of Canada, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2016). Unprecedented public interest and newly elected 2015 liberal government pledging Canada to the Paris Agreement enabled an opportunity to initiate this process (Paris Agreement, 2020). Regarded as a necessary step to support Canada's emission reduction goal of 30% below 2005 levels by 2030, the Pan Canadian Framework (PCF) underscores a “collective plan to grow [Canada's] economy while reducing emissions and building resilience to adapt to a changing climate” (Government of Canada, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2016). Ultimately, the PCF serves as a “starting point” to a larger endeavor of provincial and territorial governments updating provincial policies.

The PCF sits under the Environmental and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) portfolio, the key coordinating ministry (ECCC, 2018, p. 5). Although the process was initiated by First Ministers and the Environment Council of Ministers (CCME) (representing FPT environmental ministers) to set mandates and head final decisions (GoC, 2016b), the ECCC's role was assumed at “working group” level, to oversee four thematic pillars structuring the process. This included: (i) pricing carbon pollution; (ii) actions to reduce emissions; (iii) adaptation and climate resilience; and (iv) clean technology, innovation, and jobs. Pillars were selected to offer provinces flexibility to implement suitable actions within their jurisdictions. For example, carbon pricing—arguably a top issue of the PCF—outlined different options including a carbon tax, levy, or cap-and-trade system. Hence, working groups aimed to identify common issues to inform these policy options. Each workgroup was cochaired by one federal and one or two provincial cochairs, tasked to oversee stakeholder deliberations. Additional technical subgroups and ministerial tables consisting of CCME and economic and finance ministries also took place. Those inputs would also be sent upward to inform the cabinet (Donnerer, 2019, p. 82).

ECCC cochairs coordinated tables of diverse stakeholders such as national industry associations of petroleum producers, experts, NGOs like Environmental Defense, or David Suzuki Foundation, think tanks such as Pembina Institute and economic organizations like the Canadian labour Congress or the Business council of Canada (ECCC, 2016a, p. 34; Pham, 2020). Various engagement modes were adopted for each pillar including workshops, meetings, and roundtables (ECCC, 2016a, p. 11, 2016c, p. 43). Where necessary, ECCC additionally followed up with bilateral stakeholder meetings to seek additional input (ECCC, 2016a, p. 34; Pham, 2020) and issued separate consultations with indigenous

representatives to deliberate terms of reference on policy aims (GoC, 2016a). Lastly, ECCC launched an online platform, “Let’s Talk Climate,” for citizen input to inform working group deliberations (ECCC, 2016b, p. v, 2016d, p. 43). Topics included climate policy design and coherence, or managing industry competition (ECCC, 2016c, p. 59).

After a mere 8 months, First Ministers announced the PCF on December 9, 2016. This excluded the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, who rejected the framework based on political mandates (Tasker, 2016). This also demonstrated the politically charged nature of the initial decision making stages particularly between First Ministers illustrating tensions to balance provincial interests regarding diverse economic and environmental agendas (Cowan, 2018). Since then, ECCC resumed a monitoring role to inform the federal progress reports on PCF implementation from 2017 onward (Government of Canada, Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2016, pp. 3, 46–47). Subsequently, three additional provinces have renounced the PCF despite the federal government releasing their federal climate plan in December 2020 to build on PCF measures, with more than 60 strengthened federal policies, programs, and investments (Government of Canada, 2021).

Application of analytical framework

In the following subsection, we zoom in and assess governments’ positions in the two cases.

Starting position

CGPs were initiated by the government in both cases. Yet, the Dutch government entered in a leading role and in Canada a linker. Canadian First Ministers initiated and gripped a dominant undertone of the process. This is clear in how they delegated the coordination of this CGP to ECCC to collect input to inform policy options (ECCC, 2018, p. 5). This implied a less dominant position, yet one that was tasked to encourage or promote a collaborative process among stakeholders to subsequently inform First Ministers heading final decisions (GoC, 2016b). In the Netherlands, the setup involving a separate independent council and secretariat to oversee the process created different dynamics for how EZK influenced the process due to its position entering the CGP. Specifically, this positioned EZK in key governing bodies as an actor in the process and as an institution bridging alignment across ministries (Koontz et al., 2004). Hence, the nature of how each process started is comparatively unique. With ECCC tasked to gather input to help inform a national framework for subsequent provincial plans, and EZK tasked to create a central, national plan.

This difference helps explain why each ministry assumed different roles, and can be understood via their institutional contexts. ECCC’s linker position corresponds to federal-like properties, with dominant provincial leadership and oversight initiating the process. Hence, ECCC’s coordinative role was tasked to primarily organize diverse interests to enable provincial heads to shape the framework. For EZK, unitary and corporatist features are evident. From a unitary-state perspective, the central government’s strong grip on the outset of the process and setup design secured EZK in a leading position. Furthermore, corporatist practices are evident in the *KlimaatAkkord*’s secretariat, jointly led by EZK and the Dutch Social and Economic Council (SER)—which would subsequently monitor key industry (“tripartite”) partners (ROB, 2020, p. 44; SER, 2015).

Together, these starting positions provide first insights into each CGP. For one, it helps apprehend the capacities ministries offer to the process and the underlying autonomy they hold when engaging stakeholders. Two, it signals the possible dynamics these ministries will be exposed to and how they might be able to influence. In this case, ECCC has the ability to filter stakeholder input prior to reporting to First Ministers, and EZK has more ability to co-shape policy plans directly before issuing to parliament.

Operational position

Operational positions taken by each ministry also mirrored similar role patterns. Both cases not only reveal how governments were positioned *within* the process, but also how their role and process design mirror institutional practices bringing stakeholders together. EZK held strong managerial oversight for the coordination and structure of the process. Not only was EZK a primary funder, but also a key coordinator and cochair to negotiation tables and task groups, and key position within the secretariat and climate Council leading the process (Min. EZK, 2019a). This positioning implies a strategic one, to retain oversight of deliberations such as assessing the cost-sharing and accountability among stakeholders (ROB, 2020, p. 51).

ECCC's coordination role continued to reflect a linking nature. ECCC cochairs shouldered most managerial efforts. This included funding, recruiting, and hosting stakeholders engagements. Importantly, it sought out additional engagements as necessary to spur new collaborative input to inform First Ministers. For instance, the additional public consultation platform. Additionally, ECCC supported stakeholders by brokering additional inputs during discussion to facilitate "climate data into information, tools or support for decision-making." For example, inputs brokered included increasing investments in research and wildlife health monitoring programs, and aligning land-use planning frameworks with legal frameworks focused on adaptation (ECCC, 2016a, pp. 35–36).

The design of each CGP and what this implied for stakeholder deliberations and ministries' position further reflect institutional contexts. In this regard, the KlimaatAkkoord was structured via "sector tables," which largely resemble neo-corporatist practices of traditionally consulted for economic policies. Moreover, these tables were dominated by key industry organizations (see, Min. EZK, 2018). In Canada, engagements were structured around "issue pillars," creating a more open format, resembling a pluralist-like approach, that is, a "marketplace" of competing interests to deliberate, as noted by the diverse makeup of pillar workgroups including national associations, experts, NGOs, and economic bureaus (ECCC, 2016a, p. 34; Pham, 2020). In turn, this impacts the nature of input received. Consequently, this also reinforced the ministry's traditional role of consultation.

Engagement position

Lastly, engagement positions reflect leading and linking roles, respectively. However, in both cases, we also observe a strong underlying leverage role simultaneously emerge toward their political superiors that influences the collaborative input proposed by stakeholders. To discern this dynamic requires assessing three factors, including how they: (1) set the CGP's tone or vision, (2) consolidated stakeholder input, and (3) dealt with conflict.

Firstly, EZK held strong discretion over the structure of negotiations. Throughout deliberations, EZK and other co-ministerial chairs led tables to define a collective framework. This included aligning the tone of the agreement with the cabinet's policy goals (ROB, 2020, p. 46). This intended to safeguard stakeholders' decisions for parallel political proceedings. ECCC's central coordinating role also involved establishing a vision with stakeholders by providing guiding principles designed by First Ministers. For instance, recognizing collaborative commitment to complement actions without duplicating efforts, and incorporating diverse knowledge given varying provincial and territorial economies (Government of Canada, 2016, p. 3). Importantly, guiding principles reinforced limited federal-level discretion as stakeholder input was to remain flexible for subsequent FPT policymaking.

A second aspect concerns engagement with stakeholders. During the 17-month negotiations, EZK and relevant ministries brokered deliberations to define a feasible national framework among increasingly polarized stakeholders. This process mirrored the Dutch "polder model" approach, leaving the formulation of measures open to stakeholders involved, rather than implementing the framework in a top-down manner. This differs from the Canadian case. ECCC cochairs remained intermediaries to

gather input from collaborative stakeholder engagements, to relay information back to First Ministers who held veto power on which inputs to consider for policy development (ECCC, 2016a, p. 34; Pham, 2020, p. 5). Hence, EZK held larger decision making discretion than ECCC cochair, and they would broker stakeholders *and* be present in Climate council discussions selecting final inputs.

Thirdly, concerns how government positioned themselves to deal with conflict. For EZK, additional action was sought to combat stakeholder tensions. Exclusive, weekly “cockpit” meetings between sector-leads, the Climate Council, SER representatives, the Dutch prime minister and secretary of state convened to gauge the feasibility of ongoing negotiations. This involved reconsulting the Dutch Environment Assessment Agency (PBL) who calculated emissions based on sector table proposals. Once made public, these non-disclosed backdoor meetings received backlash by stakeholders, claiming EZK and KlimaatAkkoord leaders were abusing their role. Some politicians publicly renounced their participation in the CGP (ROB, 2020, pp. 46–47). While this arguably occurred to ensure timely outcomes, it reveals that when political pressure mounted, ministries resorted to other “uncollaborative-like” means to achieve an outcome. It appeared as a misuse of leadership to alleviate uncertainty, illuminating a leverage role by government. Consequently, this lent itself to decreased legitimacy and distrust within the CGP. Despite this, EZK reinstated their role to lead subsequent proceedings, and justified to ensure decisions would be streamlined across governance levels.

In Canada, tensions were not necessarily prevalent among stakeholders or ECCC, but instead among First Ministers who undermined the gathered inputs when finalizing the CGP's initial decision making phase. So despite ECCC encouraging nation-wide stakeholder collaborations, inputs were ultimately dismissed by several provincial leaders who pursued action based on their own political mandates. This included provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan who claimed policy options did not offer enough economic benefit. In regards to ECCC's linker role, this underscores an institutional limit to impact the initial decision making stages of the CGP and demonstrates a simultaneous leverage role assumed by ECCC, which were thereby constrained to prioritize stakeholders' inputs in anticipation of First Ministers' political wishes.

DISCUSSION

Based on our plausibility probe, the findings underscore the analytical leverage of our framework. Across cases, government demonstrated a range of leading, linking, and leveraging roles when collaborating in initial decision making stages. While it cannot be ignored that the nature of the cases—governments pledging national climate plans resulted in both governments initiating these processes—our framework's three dimensions facilitate a more contextualized understanding of these role characteristics and delineate how institutional context matters for how governments assumed these roles.

Table 2 provides a summary of roles observed for each case. Given the three positions, Canada and the Netherlands demonstrate different roles, with EZK demonstrating a predominant leader role and ECCC a predominant linker role. Broadly speaking, the findings align with our expectations regarding systems of government (i.e., federal and unitary). Particularly, the Dutch leading role lent to their strong oversight to maintain national coherence, and the Canadian linking role lent to encourage federal-provincial synergies. Equally, however, it appeared this institutional factor also explains challenges faced by governments and why they navigated tensions the way they did. Put simply, both ministries faced difficulties presenting feasible policy agendas—a responsibility primarily dictated via jurisdictional means and subsequently impacted how interests were mediated. This also helps explain the nuances found in the engagement positions, as we will elaborate below.

For both *starting* and *operational* positions, governments' roles remained constant. While both *starting positions* were marked by governments initiating each process, it is key to underscore how ministries positioned themselves when entering the CGPs. EZK entered in a dominant position within the KlimaatAkkoord's secretariat and Climate Council to steer the process across sector tables and committees, whereas ECCC did not hold strong decision making discretion but did catalyze stakeholders for

TABLE 2 Overview of roles.

	The Netherlands	Canada
Starting position	Lead: Dominant position in leading taskforces and secretariat; proactive supporter	Link: Delegated coordinating ministry by First Ministers; proactive supporter
Operational position	Lead: Oversaw day-to-day operations via role in secretariat; cochaired sector-tables	Link: Cochaired pillar workgroups; proactively sought engagement modes to gather stakeholder inputs
Engagement position	Lead: Guidance on collective vision; oversaw feasibility of inputs Leverage: Side-stepped CGP by establishing exclusive meetings to meet political deadlines	Link: Intermediary between deliberations and filtering input to provide First Ministers; implemented guiding principles during engagements Leverage: Nation-wide stakeholder inputs were dismissed by select First Ministers to fulfill provincial political mandates

diverse inputs. Both clearly held central coordinating capacities for their CGPs, but how government initiated the process delineates their role more explicitly. The same goes for their *operational positions*. For EZK, their congruent leader role took shape due to their operational presence in the secretariat to oversee day-to-day operations of the broader KlimaatAkkoord process. For ECCC, their operational position portrayed a linker role as seen in their cochairmanship alongside other provincial and territorial leaders, who fundamentally had stronger oversight due to jurisdictional considerations. Considering the respective institutional contexts, these findings align with recent research on ministerial collaboration with (coalition) governments and how institutional structures may be a factor influencing which ministries take the lead in engaging stakeholders on policy developments. For instance, ministries with slightly more authority or jurisdiction over an issue might take more of a leader role in engaging stakeholders, which lends to the point mentioned above, that is differences in jurisdictional policy responsibilities between EZK and ECCC, respectively (Klüser et al., 2024; Scott & Thomas, 2017, p. 199).

When assessing governments' *engagement* position, a more nuanced picture surfaces. Here, leading and linking roles remain prevalent, respectively, but both cases additionally reveal an emergent leveraging role when politically driven tensions arose, particularly at the intersection between the bureaucracy and elected government. Firstly, EZK's leading and ECCC's linking engagement positions are evident in their discretionary capacity for stakeholder inputs or deliberations. Whereas EZK was positioned to broker polarized groups and cross-check its feasibility for policymaking, ECCC's discretion was limited to prioritizing initial inputs that First Ministers were subsequently determined to assess for feasibility, and only had discretion to catalyze additional consultations where necessary (Pham, 2020, p. 7).

However, politically driven interventions affected government's responsiveness by adopting leverage roles and adhered to conventional practices when engagement became adversarial. Canada's top-down approach meant policy options surfaced from stakeholder consultations were funneled upward to elected First Ministers who adapted as they deemed relevant. Thus, ECCC and stakeholders lacked ability to prioritize inputs they themselves deliberated. Subsequently, political wrangling followed as two of 10 provinces refused to sign the agreement, and in later stages, two additional provinces withdrew (Gómez, 2023). In the Netherlands, similar tensions ensued but among polarized stakeholders due to government retreating from deliberations to otherwise “patch-up” discrepancies via closed-door exclusive meetings to ensure political alignment. Moreover, within sector tables, traditional tripartite industry partners who remained important actors alongside ministries, also sought exclusivity during consultation.

Political countermands aside, each case reveals how governments operate within tangled institutional environments seem to impact the breadth of their assumed collaborative role, illustrating an institutional “stickiness” (see Pierson, 2000), “layering,” or “thickening” by which collaborative arenas

and actors existing within political systems create gray areas of collaborative and conventional policy practices to overlap. Arguably, this recasts collaboration in a muddled way, and entices actions to be “cherry-picked” by government leaders to preserve autonomy and legitimacy over existing governance practices (Capano, 2019, pp. 594, 597–598; Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Purdy, 2012).

Taken together, this underscores the ability of our framework to pick up key nuances that contribute to the dynamism of government roles and implications for the process. By adopting an aggregate lens, it offers us a method to understand how government *in a collective sense* operates that might be missed when focusing solely on individual actors. Furthermore, it pinpointed how broader political agendas impacted CGPs and thereby the specific roles and positions assumed by governments when collaborating in the nexus of policy and political domains. This allowed us to delineate the institutional contextual factors across political systems and variations across Dutch and Canadian roles.

CONCLUSION

This article examines a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the roles governments assume when governing collaboratively. We developed an analytical model based on three types of roles: lead, link, and leverage, and characterize these roles based on three positions: starting, operational, and engagement. Doing so helps to unpack how governments assume their roles in CGPs and a more systematic comparative analysis of the factors influencing this. Our plausibility probe of governments roles formulating climate policies in the Netherlands and Canada lends support to our overall expectation that institutional factors affect the roles governments assume and also suggests that politicization similarly affects the roles—specifically, governments resuming less collaborative roles.

Cases undeniably emphasize the notion that governments retain an ultimate decision making authority in CGPs (Ansell & Gash, 2008), and that government intervention is not always positive (Kim et al., 2022). In both cases, however, decisions were not only shouldered by governments but were transferred within government who were not necessarily or directly involved in deliberations alongside stakeholders, denying stakeholders final agency to rank policy input. This reveals an important incongruity: Whereas collaboration is offered as a solution to overcome heated deadlocks, when cases illustrated such contentions, governments arguably reverted to the opposite approach: sidestepping the process and reverting it back into the political debate. Hence, institutional context not only shaped the participatory design of a CGP (Fung, 2006) but also reinforced political dynamics between government and societal stakeholders. While our plausibility probe did not capture a precise account of political dynamics, future research could more rigorously examine political conflict across the positions in our framework alongside these institutional dimensions (Ulibarri et al., 2023).

Our empirical design presents some limitations for the generalizability of our findings. First, our reliance on public documents hampered us from a richer and more comprehensive assessment of the role of institutional factors and the assumed roles. Research would also benefit from richer actor-level insights on how roles are reconciled (Scott & Thomas, 2017), for instance, through in-depth interviews. Future studies may consider employing our framework to unpack collaborative dynamics occurring at the agent level. Second, our plausibility probe only assessed initial decision making stages. Adopting a longitudinal approach to assess the evolvement of roles would be fruitful, given the increased politicization occurring across western democracies, which likely affects CGPs and therein government roles. Lastly, future studies could delve deeper into specific institutional or organizational-level explanations (Gray et al., 2015; Simon, 2013) to more thoroughly hypothesize on government collaborative behavior and responsiveness. For instance, unpacking the anomalies of these “embedded agencies” (Micelotta et al., 2021, p. 400) to explain how governments respond and reconcile conflicting demands when collaborative environments are compromised by a plurality of logics. Our framework could aid such inquiries to delineate various positions for a more detailed comparison across stages enabling comparisons of operational roles in early and later stages of a CGP. Moreover, a more fine-grained comparison of institutional considerations could be worth exploring. One suggestion from our findings might be

to explore systems of governments further, as this seemed to indicate why leverage roles were assumed during engagement.

Despite these limitations, our findings yield important implications for assessing government roles in CGPs. More often than not, the all-encompassing presence of government—be that government as actors or institutions—continues to be the ultimate buffer for policy change (Koontz et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2000). Our findings not only demonstrate how institutional and political contextual dimensions seem to show why governments assume certain roles but also how they are performed (Scott & Thomas, 2017). More specifically, we unravel a more compound snapshot by which governments seem to be more constricted to take on collaborative roles on national scales. Furthermore, our probing study underscores the importance of context-specific nuances than previous research suggests (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Booher & Innes, 2010; Emerson et al., 2012; Koebele, 2019). For instance, these contextual findings are also important for scholars of collaborative federalism and collaborative decentralization who, despite signaling increasingly collaborative practices across government systems, should account for the roles governments are able to take amidst their institutional environment (Miller-Stevens & Tiffany et al., 2015). Lastly, our findings contribute to calls for more comparative studies in collaborative governance literatures (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Douglas et al., 2020; Sørensen et al., 2020). This reinforces the paradoxes of collaboratively engaging as operating within certain institutional settings may otherwise contradict potential for genuine collaboration (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Phillips et al., 2000; Waardenburg et al., 2019).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Network governance scholars also emphasize the importance of variation in governance arrangements (see Jones et al., 1997; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Robins et al., 2011), offering additional support to examine government roles.
- ² By stakeholder, we mean any relevant group who has a direct interest or stake in the issue(s) at hand. This includes all parties that seek to influence, or are (in)directly impacted (Beyers et al., 2008).
- ³ We omit facilitation as a role, and consider it a separate form of leadership (Ansell & Gash, 2012; Wondollock & Ryan, 1999). Governments may temporarily assist a CGP with facilitation as a means of providing human resources, which we reflect in subsequent sections (see for instance, Koontz et al., 2004, pp. 146–147).
- ⁴ However, not all government officials and agencies hold equal levels of authority (Koontz et al., 2004, p. 52).
- ⁵ All matters related to the substance of agreements must be approved by the SER, the Dutch Environmental Agency (PBI), and the Dutch Bureau of Economic and Policy Analysis (CPB) (ROB, 2020, p. 45).
- ⁶ Canada consists of 10 provinces and three territories. Each province/territory has a head of government (“premier”). The federal Prime Minister and premiers are referred to as First Ministers.

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