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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Beyond coalition and opposition? The effect of councilwide agreements on legislative voting behaviour in Dutch municipalities

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Abstract

A well-established finding in the field of legislative behaviour is that parliamentary voting behaviour is nearly always strongly structured by the coalition-opposition dynamic, even beyond the issues agreed on in the coalition agreement. Can parties break the mould of this coalition-opposition division? Several Dutch municipal councils work with a councilwide agreement (*raadsakkoord*) with the specific goal that there is no demarcated coalition and opposition. This could open the political process up for more issue-driven voting. We test whether council agreements change voting behaviour in the local council. By comparing voting in these municipalities before and after implementing councilwide agreements, we show that these agreements lower the extent to which voting is structured by the coalition-opposition division. Coalition parties are less likely to vote the same when a councilwide agreement is present. The strength of the coalition-opposition division depends upon the choices of political parties.

KEYWORDS

Coalition-opposition division, Local council, Netherlands

Zusammenfassung

Die Forschung zum legislativen Verhalten hat etabliert, dass das Abstimmungsverhalten im Parlament fast immer stark durch die Dynamik von Koalition und Opposition strukturiert ist, selbst über die im Koalitionsvertrag vereinbarten Themen hinaus. Können Parteien

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diese Spaltung zwischen Koalition und Opposition durchbrechen? Mehrere niederländische Gemeinderäte arbeiten mit einem Ratsabkommen (*raadsakkoord*) mit dem spezifischen Ziel, dass es keine abgegrenzte Koalition und Opposition gibt. Dies könnte den politischen Prozess für ein stärker themenorientiertes Abstimmungsverhalten öffnen. Wir testen, ob Ratsabkommen das Abstimmungsverhalten im Gemeinderat verändern. Durch den Vergleich des Abstimmungsverhaltens in diesen Gemeinden vor und nach der Einführung von Ratsabkommen zeigen wir, dass die Abkommen den Grad, zu dem der Gegensatz zwischen Koalition und Opposition das Abstimmungsverhalten strukturiert, verringern. Koalitionsparteien stimmen weniger oft einheitlich ab, wenn Parteien ein Ratsabkommen geschlossen haben. Die Stärke der Spaltung zwischen Koalition und Opposition hängt von den Entscheidungen der politischen Parteien ab.

Résumé

La recherche sur le comportement législatif montre que le vote parlementaire est fortement structuré par la dynamique coalition-opposition, aussi sur des questions qui ne sont pas réglées dans l'accord de coalition. Les partis peuvent-ils briser cette division coalition-opposition? Plusieurs conseils municipaux néerlandais travaillent avec un accord du conseil (*raadsakkoord*) visant à éviter cette délimitation. Cela pourrait ouvrir le processus politique à des votes qui sont structurés par les division thématiques. Nous testons si ces accords modifient le comportement de vote dans le conseil municipal. En comparant les votes dans ces municipalités avant et après la mise en œuvre des accords de conseil, nous montrons que ces accords réduisent le degré auquel le vote est structuré par la division coalition-opposition. Les partis de coalition sont moins susceptibles de voter de manière uniforme lorsqu'un accord de conseil est en place. La force de la division coalition-opposition dépend des choix des partis politiques.

Riassunto

Una scoperta ben consolidata nel campo del comportamento legislativo è che le votazioni in parlamento sono quasi sempre fortemente strutturate dalla dinamica coalizione-opposizione, anche oltre le questioni concordate nell'accordo di coalizione. I partiti possono rompere lo schema di questa divisione coalizione-opposizione? Diversi legislativi comunali nei Paesi Bassi lavorano con accordi di legislazione (*raadsakkoord*) con l'obiettivo specifico di non avere una coalizione e un'opposizione delineate. Questa prassi potrebbe aprire il

processo politico a votazioni più orientate a temi specifici. In questo studio esaminiamo se tali accordi cambiano il comportamento di voto nei legislativi comunali. Confrontando le votazioni prima e dopo l'attuazione degli accordi legislativi, mostriamo che gli accordi riducono la misura in cui le votazioni sono strutturate dalla divisione coalizione-opposizione. I partiti di coalizione hanno meno probabilità di votare nello stesso modo quando è presente un accordo legislativo. La forza della divisione coalizione-opposizione dipende dalle scelte dei partiti politici.

INTRODUCTION

A key finding in the field of legislative behaviour is that legislative voting behaviour is nearly always structured by the dynamic between the opposition and the government coalition (Hix & Noury, 2016; Louwerse et al., 2017). Our understanding of what drives these patterns is limited: Is the importance of the coalition-opposition dynamic the result of institutional design? Or the result of actual choices made by parties?

The goal of this paper is to improve our understanding of what drives the division between coalition and opposition in legislatures in general. To this end, we examine voting in a select number of local councils in the Netherlands which have worked with ‘councilwide agreements’. Dutch councils work under a system of positive parliamentarism that closely mirrors parliamentary government at the national level (Bergman, 1993): Members of local executives need the support of the majority of the council to be instated and can be removed by a majority vote. To create majorities most Dutch municipal councils work with a governing coalition: there is a multiparty coalition in the council that supplies members of the local executive and these parties coordinate closely. In recent years, a number of Dutch municipal councils have attempted to break free from the mould of the traditional coalition-opposition division in a novel way. Instead of a coalition agreement, these councils work with a councilwide agreement (*raadsakkoord*). Under such an agreement all parties of the council agree on the broad lines of policy and/or the rules and norms under which decisions are made (Van Kalken et al., 2021). The goal of these councilwide agreements is that there is no demarcated coalition and opposition. These agreements aim to open the political process to issue-driven deliberation and issue-by-issue coalitions in council decision-making. It is an open question to what extent these formal commitments to work beyond the confines of the division between coalition and opposition actually materialize: although the spirit of councilwide cooperation may be willing, the flesh may be weak in everyday politics. By studying voting patterns in seven small municipalities experimenting with a new kind of governing arrangement in the Netherlands, we get a unique insight into the nature of the coalition-opposition dynamic. Our central research question therefore is: *To what extent do councilwide agreements reduce coalition-opposition patterns of voting in municipal councils?*

In this paper, we seek to contribute to both the literatures on the politics of local councils and comparative political behaviour. The field of local politics is still “vastly underdeveloped” (Downs, 2014, p. 622). Academic attention to the study of local councils is minimal (McGarvey & Stewart, 2018). Analyses of the relationship between the local executive and the council are mostly based on impressions, experiences, memories and attitudes: on the one hand there is case study work based on interviews in specific municipalities (Barren

et al., 1991; Ashworth & Snape, 2004; Bochel & Bochel, 2010; Peters & Castenmiller, 2018). On the other hand, there is work based on surveys of local politicians (Egner & Heinelt, 2008; Egner et al., 2013; Heinelt, 2013; Plüss & Kübler, 2013; Egner, 2015; Navarro et al., 2018; Van Well, 2024). But even analyses of large-N surveys summarize impressions, experiences, memories and attitudes. These may not necessarily meet up with the reality in the council: Local councillors can report that there is a strong conflict in the council because they remember a single vote that divided the council. The actions and behaviour of local councillors have rarely been observed directly (Otjes et al., 2023): Studies of actual voting patterns are few and far between and all come from the North American continent (Kay, 1971; Simpson, 2001; Austin, 2002; Burnett, 2019; Bucchianeri, 2020). But even in the U.S., the academic attention to local legislatures is much smaller than the attention to local executives (Palus, 2014). Given the paucity of studies in the field of local council behaviour, this study is in a paradoxical situation. It is *both* a study of voting in only a baker's half dozen councils *as well as* the largest study of patterns of voting in local councils outside of the U.S.

Secondly, we seek to contribute to the comparative literature on legislative behaviour. Though councilwide agreements are a particular feature of some local governments in the Netherlands, they may share similarities with periods of technocratic government (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014) or caretaker government (Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). We know little about how parliaments function during such periods (but see Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). Our study can also shed a light on the nature of the division between coalition and opposition, by examining how a formal agreement to work beyond the traditional confines of coalition and opposition affects actual behaviour. Is the division between coalition and opposition the result of political choice or is it a fact of political life (cf. Hays, 1994; Sibeon, 1999)? We do not believe that these kind of councilwide arrangements occur anywhere else, but we believe that by comparing periods where they were and were not present, we can shed light on the nature of the division between coalition and opposition. Our results indicate that a councilwide agreement dampens the division between coalition and opposition, in particular because coalition parties tend to vote less often as one bloc when a councilwide agreement is present. That is, councilwide agreements weaken the need for coalition parties to present a united front. This shows that the strength of the division between coalition and opposition is the result of choices made by politicians, in line with Wendt's (1992) classical adage: the coalition-opposition divide is what parties make of it. In this way, our study speaks to a broader literature on comparative politics.

Not only do we offer a unique theoretical insight into the nature of the coalition-opposition division, we also offer an important methodological innovation. We offer an integrated study of legislative behaviour in multiple polities. That is, we directly analyse voting in multiple polities (seven municipalities) in such a way that we can directly compare voting patterns and evaluate the importance of multiple factors. Our study of a small number of municipal councils forms a pilot for comparative work on legislative voting. In the field of comparative legislative behaviour, there is a paucity of genuinely comparative work (but see Hix & Noury, 2016, and Louwerse et al., 2017). We examine voting behaviour using two measures: firstly, per vote we analyse to what extent the vote is divided between coalition and opposition parties (the so-called Louwerse's φ_{co}) and secondly, we use Van der Veer's (2018) dyadic method, which examines similarities in the voting behaviour of different political parties. This allows us to analyse the extent to which these similarities are due to coalition participation or programmatic agreement.

THEORY

By examining councilwide agreements our paper sheds a light on the nature of the coalition-opposition division. To understand this, we will first examine the literature on the coalition-opposition division in parliaments. From this we will derive a general idea about how different

types of coalitions can affect voting patterns. We will apply this logic to councilwide agreements to derive a set of hypotheses.

The Coalition-Opposition Division

This article focuses on the behaviour of coalition and opposition parties. For the purpose of this paper, we define ‘coalition parties’ as those parties that do supply members of the executive body in a polity and ‘opposition parties’ as those that do not.¹ With a coalition-opposition voting pattern, we mean that the coalition and opposition parties vote differently: this can be all coalition parties voting in favour and opposition parties against or vice versa.

The rational-choice institutionalist approach argues that legislative behavior reflects the incentives offered to politicians by the institutional setting in which they operate. Hix and Noury (2016) argue that legislative voting patterns reflect differences between political systems: the division between government and opposition parties is stronger in two-party systems, in parliamentary systems, under majority government and in systems where a majority of MPs can keep issues from being voted on. Understanding the mechanisms through which government type affects voting patterns is an important step to understanding how councilwide agreements do.

To illustrate this perspective, we will examine the example of majority and minority governments in parliamentary systems in greater detail: given the incentives, we expect the division between the coalition and opposition parties to be stronger under majority government than under minority government. Laver (2006) describes majority government: “since members of [majority coalition] cabinets are bound together by constitutional rules of collective cabinet responsibility, it is likely that all parties in the executive coalitions will vote in the same way, despite having different policy positions” (p. 137). Coalition parties are not just bound together constitutionally. From a policy-seeking perspective, Parties are likely to engage in policy log-rolls (Bergman et al., 2023; Dumont et al., 2024): by pledging their votes for the coalition, they get a majority for the proposals they prioritize, even if the majority does not prefer them to the status quo (Willumsen & Otjes, 2024). From a vote-seeking perspective, parties may fear that if they vote against the coalition and new elections are called, they will be punished at the ballot box (Narud & Irwin, 1994).

It is also possible that all members of a diverse opposition vote in the same way, and against the government. As the British MP Tierney is supposed to have said, “the duty of an Opposition [is] very simple [...] to oppose everything, and propose nothing” (cited by Lord Stanley in Hoyt & Roberts, 1922). Opposition parties have multiple incentives to oppose legislation under majority government. From a policy-seeking perspective, if all opposition parties commit themselves to vote against all legislation proposed by the government, the government is forced to make proposals closer to the status quo than if they were to vote sincerely (Dewan & Spirling, 2011). From a vote-seeking perspective, parties that oppose the government are more likely to increase their vote shares in future elections than parties that cooperate (Tuttnauer & Wegmann, 2022): with conflictual voting behaviour opposition parties can differentiate themselves from the government (Tuttnauer, 2020). From an office-seeking perspective, it is relevant that parliamentary majority coalition governments can also declare an issue a matter of confidence. In that case, all coalition parties will vote in favour even if they disagree substantially with the matter, and all opposition parties have an additional incentive to vote against, even if they agree substantially with the proposal (Huber, 1996).

In contrast, minority governments have to build legislative coalitions on an issue-by-issue basis (Hix & Noury, 2016). The government has to seek ad-hoc majorities for their policies by

¹Specifically, in this paper we do not define coalition parties as those who voted in favour of the investiture of members of the executive, as councilwide agreements often see unanimous support for the executive.

striking deals with opposition parties (Bergman et al., 2023) and the latter will act as a coalition party on that specific issue (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014). If opposition parties have the opportunity to influence policy, they are more likely to vote with the government (Tuttnauer & Wegmann, 2022). In that case, the policy-making opportunities outweigh expected future electoral benefits. Therefore, under minority government, policy positions matter more than under majority government.

There also is a literature with a more normative institutionalist bent: Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) argue that the strong division between government and opposition is not the “consequence of any formal regulation” (p. 477). The close cooperation between parties is the result of norms: coalitions require loyalty, with a coalition agreement regarded as “a Bible” that parties keep to almost religiously (Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000). Coalition parties have strong expectations about the behaviour of their partners: they do not accept another partner sponsoring or voting for bills that go against the coalition agreement (Holzhacker, 2002). Cooperation extends to issues outside the agreement, as party leaders foster close cooperation and coordinate compromises and package deals on new issues in coordination meetings between the leaders of coalition PPGs and the (vice) prime ministers (Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000; Koole, 2021). In the Netherlands, parties are expected not to pursue policy maximization and instead to accept compromises or minority vetoes (Lijphart, 2008; Otjes & Louwerse, 2023). These norms depend on reciprocity, and parties that chose not to pursue a particular agenda, because of the concerns that other coalition parties may raise, will be likely to expect the same from its partners.

These norms may be so strong that coalition and opposition are replicated at the local level (Van Well, 2024), even though there is no legal basis to do so (Egner, 2015). Informal coalition coordination meetings also occur at the municipal level (Peters & Castenmiller, 2020). As Van Kalken (2023) suggests, the difference between coalition and opposition can create an “us versus them” dynamic in which the lack of influence of the opposition leads them to criticise the government, which in response develops stronger bonds. Despite incentives to act otherwise, coalitions are coherent because that is how they “usually act” (Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014).²

In both the rational-choice institutionalist and the normative institutionalist perspective, the coalition-opposition divide reflects the choices made by political parties. The choice to have a majority or a minority cabinet, for instance, is a choice made by parties that affects the level of coalition-opposition voting. Political parties determine the rules of the game they play. Parties can choose to cooperate in different ways than simply the sharp division between coalition and opposition. The nature of political agreements underpinning the executive is crucial. Here, a far greater diversity is possible than the common stark division between the parties with executive members and committed to a coalition agreement and the parties without executive members and not committed to the coalition agreement. That is, it is possible for parties to choose to play the game under different rules.

Councilwide Agreements

In Dutch municipalities, we have seen the rise of so-called councilwide agreements which can take different shapes (Van Kalken et al., 2021). Table 1 provides a two-dimensional model for understanding them. One dimension concerns how members of the local executive are

²Coalition discipline may be similar to party discipline. Ohmura and Willumsen (2022) show that “only” 10 percent of the free votes in Germany are cast against the party line. Unanimity may primarily be the result of group dynamics within a group, such as loyalty (cf. Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011), instead of being the result of party discipline enforced by sanctions. Similar reciprocal expectations may drive coalition discipline.

TABLE 1 Coalition types.

	Coalition Program	Councilwide program
Partisan nominations	Traditional Coalition Agreement	Partisan coalition executing a councilwide program
Non-partisan selection	Hypothetical: non-partisan government executing a partisan program ^a	Complete non-partisan government

Note: ^a Did not occur in the Netherlands in our research period.

selected: are they appointed on the basis of partisan nominations or of an open non-partisan process? The second dimension concerns who wrote the policy program: was it written by a set of parties commanding a majority in the council or determined through consensus by the entire council? In a traditional coalition agreement, a set of parties commanding a majority agree on a set of policies, and each nominate a common slate for the local executive (Smithuis et al., 2019). These are often minimal-winning coalitions that we often see in local governments in Western Europe (Skjæveland et al., 2007; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2015; Gross, 2023; Otjes, 2024). In a complete non-partisan government, *all* of the parties in the council agree on a substantive policy agenda and agree to select the executive in a non-partisan process. One can also think of in-between cases: a set of parties could still nominate members of the executive but the policy agreement they execute could be based on councilwide support. It may be that there are two policy agendas: a more general one that the entire council agrees on in terms of general policy goals, and a more specific one that the coalition agrees on in terms of how to execute these goals.

Existing research on councilwide agreements is based on qualitative case studies. Councilwide agreements do not just differ from traditional coalition agreements in how many parties are signatories and how members of the executive are selected. Compared to coalition agreements they are also more focused on the process of governing. That is, they often include provisions on how the council and executive will operate. This often contains a commitment to cooperate closely with citizens or societal organizations (Van Kalken, 2022b). This can include commitments to work on a new political culture which emphasizes the separate responsibilities of the council and the executive, and an inclusive, transparent, consensual way of policy building. The goal is often to make the council and not the executive the main arena for political deliberation and decision-making. Where it comes to substantial elements of the agreement, there is considerable diversity. Some councilwide agreements have a long-term agenda on important issues for the municipality, like housing and finance, that spans longer than a single council term (Van Kalken, 2022a). Other councilwide agreements diagnose key problems but do not offer detailed solutions, leaving it to the executive to work out policy solutions and find ad-hoc majorities (Van Kalken et al., 2021).

Van Kalken (2022b) examined why parties form councilwide coalitions. The latter are often the result of dissatisfaction with an unstable, conflict-ridden, and tempestuous period of government that preceded it. One situation preceding a councilwide agreement was described as an atmosphere of “political overdrive, too much politicization, [where] power counts more than substance [...] a deep gap [between coalition and opposition], sharp contrasts [...] a strangling *monism*”³ (Voermans et al., 2014, p. 3). In another, the pre-existing situation was described as one where “the parties that are [in the coalition] together are in charge and hold on to each other” and the “parties that are [out of the coalition] can do little but express their frustration with the policy from the side line” (Van Kalken, 2022a, pp. 7–8). In another municipality,

³Monism is a specifically Dutch term for the intense coordination between the coalition parties in the legislature and the executive.

“parties and members of the municipal council stand opposed to each other, and many conflicts develop” despite the fact “that municipal manifestos overlap 85%” (Van Kalken, 2023, pp. 69–70). The councilwide agreement is chosen as a “way out of the government impasse and the difficult relations in the council” (Van Kalken, 2023, p. 70).

In contrast to many institutional reforms of the local level (Lidström et al., 2016), a councilwide agreement is primarily a change in the political culture (Van Kalken, 2023). It offers a different structure of opportunities for parties seeking majorities and a different way of working together as politicians, oriented more at cooperation. Research on existing cases suggests that the atmosphere in the council becomes less antagonistic. One study indicates that the governing coalition was more willing to vote in a divided way (Voermans et al., 2014). Under a councilwide agreement, there is no coalition line that parties should submit to. Moreover, the opposition behaves in a more constructive fashion (Voermans et al., 2014). Similarly, another study suggests that there is a weaker division between coalition and opposition parties, and that all parties can participate in the formulation of policy, leading to shifting majorities in the council (Van Kalken, 2022a). Some interviewees suggest that the coalition-opposition division persists and that majority coalitions set policy (Van Kalken, 2022a, p. 18).

So far, councilwide agreements have exclusively existed at the local level in the Netherlands. They share similarities with other governing arrangements. One might argue that they are similar to oversized and grand coalitions that we see at the national level and the local level. Often such oversized coalitions are rooted in the conviction of consensus and compromise. Arguably, the agreements studied in this article are one step further along a continuum of coalition governance from minimal-winning coalition via oversized coalition to councilwide agreement. Yet, there is an important qualitative difference between oversized coalitions and councilwide agreements: in an oversized coalition, there is a formal coalition, which coordinates and excludes the parties in the opposition, and under a councilwide agreement, this division does not exist. Another interesting analogy are systems where proportional representation of parties in the executive is required by law as for instance in Upper and Lower Austria and Vienna (Dolezal & Fallend, 2023). Yet despite the legal requirement of all parties to be part of the government, we see the formation of “a coalition within the coalition” here (Dolezal & Fallend, 2023, p. 226, our translation).⁴ In the Netherlands, there have been other experiments to break a rigid coalition-opposition at other levels, such as the ‘extraparlimentary executives’ in the province of Limburg that formally do not rest on a coalition in the provincial council (Leenknecht & Groenleer, 2022). The current Dutch Schoof cabinet is a technocrat-led partisan government that does not rest on a comprehensive coalition agreement between the supporting parties. The extent to which this will materially lead to a less rigid division between coalition and opposition remains open.

Hypotheses

We base our hypotheses both on the mechanisms underlying voting patterns in minority government and the specific characteristics of councilwide agreements. Firstly, like under majority government, we expect that when there is a traditional coalition agreement, the disagreements in the council will be funnelled into the coalition-opposition division. The coalition parties bargain with each other about how to deal with issues (Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000). If a new issue arises, the parties will often strike a compromise which will

⁴In Vienna this is even formalized by a difference between governing and non-governing executive councilors (Dolezal & Fallend, 2023).

mean that they vote the same (Otjes & Louwerse, 2023). Like under minority government, we expect that when there is a councilwide agreement, the coalition-opposition division will be weaker: If there is a disagreement in the parties supplying members of the local executive under a councilwide agreement, parties accept the outcome of an open vote, because there is no mutual expectation that they have to come to an agreement (Van Kalken, 2022b). Because there is no predetermined majority, all kinds of alternative majorities can form. There is a cornucopia of options of which the coalition-opposition division is only one. One might argue that this expectation is tautological: when parties choose not to divide themselves between coalition and opposition, they will not vote along these lines. Yet, in these systems, some parties supply members of the local executive. The relationship between these local executive members and some parties in the council may lead them to fall back to traditional coalition-opposition patterns, because of either strategic or policy considerations or habit. In biblical terms: though the spirit may be willing, in everyday politics the flesh may be weak. Despite this we propose that:

1. *Coalition-Opposition Hypothesis*: Under councilwide agreements, the coalition-opposition division is weaker than under traditional coalition agreements.

Secondly, we take into account ideological differences (Louwerse et al., 2017; Hohendorf et al., 2020; Tuttnauer, 2020): we expect that a traditional coalition agreement suppresses the differences between coalition parties. Following Laver (2006) we expect the latter to operate as one block even though they may have very different views on policy issues. A councilwide agreement often includes a commitment to deal with issues on an issue-by-issue basis. This allows ideological differences to express themselves. Hix and Noury (2016) show that under minority government ideological differences between parties are more pronounced. Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) show that under caretaker cabinets these differences are stronger as well. Councilwide agreements may work in a similar way.⁵ We therefore expect:

2. *Ideology Hypothesis*: Under councilwide agreements the left–right division is stronger than under traditional coalition agreements.

CASE SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION

We analyse voting patterns across two terms in seven municipal councils in the Netherlands to study the effect of councilwide agreements on municipal politics. Our goal is to study the common patterns of political behaviour we see in multiple municipal councils. In the study of local politics, the Netherlands offers an important advantage compared to other polities, due to the uniformity of the political system. Many other countries use different institutional rules in different regions (e.g., Germany), for different kinds of local authorities (e.g., the U.K.) or for municipalities of different sizes (e.g., France). The Netherlands is one of six West European states that have a uniform local structure.⁶ Votes are more comparable there than in systems

⁵This is likely to be the case when coalitions are ideologically heterogeneous. The compromises between disparate parties in such coalitions will lower ideological divisions. If these parties can disagree with each other without risking coalition stability, the ideological divisions, such as the left–right division, are more likely to rear their heads. If coalitions are ideologically homogeneous, the left–right division is already likely to be strong (Louwerse et al., 2017). In the Netherlands, local coalitions tend to be heterogeneous (Boogaard, 2015).

⁶We limited our selection to West European states with more than 1,000,000 inhabitants that are democracies since the Second World War. Of those, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden have uniform structures for every municipality.

that use different rules in different municipalities. This makes the Netherlands an excellent case to study council voting comparatively.

Dutch municipal councils are quite comparable to parliamentary systems at the national level, where a confidence relationship between parliament and the executive also exists: Dutch municipalities use a separated powers positive parliamentary system. The highest body in a municipality is the directly elected municipal council. These councils are elected every four years on the basis of quasi-open lists in a single municipality-wide district. The council has the power to propose, amend and adopt local legislation. After the elections, it elects a local executive which proposes local bills and implements local policies. The municipal council can remove members of the local executive through a motion of no confidence. One cannot be a member of a local council and a local executive at the same time.⁷ Dutch municipalities have responsibilities and considerable policy freedom both in the physical domain and in the social domain.

In 2022 there were 344 Dutch municipalities. Out of these, 56 used a councilwide agreement instead of or in addition to a coalition agreement during the 2018–2022 council term. We were able to collect council voting data for seven of these municipalities concerning both this term and the preceding term, and these seven are therefore selected as the focus of our research. The voting data was supplied in a machine-readable way by the councils on their websites (see below). These municipalities are listed in [Table 2](#). Our research design does not depend on a representative case selection. Rather, we are interested in seeing whether before or after the introduction of the councilwide agreement behaviour changes. [Appendix A1](#) details the representativity of our cases, showing that in terms of demographic, political and economic characteristics the median case among our municipalities is close to the median municipality (both for all municipalities and those with a councilwide agreement). On three variables the selected cases differ from the average municipality with a councilwide agreement: they are more often densely populated, located in North-Holland and have a large number of parties. The latter factor is most likely to influence political dynamics: making it more costly to create a majority and allowing for more different majorities.

The party landscape of Dutch municipalities is diverse. The coalition parties listed in [Table 2](#) show this. The main national parties, the centre-right Christian-Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*, CDA), the centre-left Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) and the conservative liberal Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD), run in nearly every municipality. In some cases, the Labour Party runs on a joint list with independents or other parties, such as the social-liberal Democrats 66 (*Democraten 66*, D66) and the green GreenLeft (*GroenLinks*, GL). They can also run independently. Those progressive combinations are present in Hilvarenbeek and Oisterwijk (*Helder Open*, *Integer*, HOI and *Progressief Oisterwijk*, PrO). In addition to these we have other national parties, such as the left-wing populist Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij* SP), the Christian-social ChristianUnion (*ChristenUnie*, CU) and the Christian-conservative Political Reformed Party (*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij*, SGP). The latter two often run on a joint list, as they did in Enkhuizen. In a limited number of municipalities, such as Zandvoort, the right-wing populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) also participates. Additionally, nearly every municipality has at least one independent local party. These parties mix a centre-right position and an orientation towards local issues with anti-establishment rhetoric (Otjes, 2024). All abbreviations in the column ‘coalition parties’ in [Table 2](#) not mentioned here are independent local parties. We looked at these

⁷Both the municipal council and the executive are chaired by the mayor. The mayor is a formally non-partisan figure who is appointed by the central government after consultation with the municipal council.

TABLE 2 Selected municipalities.

Municipality	Province	Inhabitants	Inception	Gov't	CA	Coalition parties	Votes
Castricum	North Holland	36,294	8/5/14	MWC	No	VVD/D66/CKenG/PvdA	227
			17/4/16	MWC	No	VVD/D66/CDA/GDB	283
			6/7/18	MWC	Yes	VVD/CDA/DVL	128
Enkhuizen	North Holland	18,631	3/5/14	MWC	No	SP/CDA/CU/NE	218
			20/9/16	Minority	No	SP/CDA/CU	12
			8/3/17	Oversized	No	D66/EA/NE/LQ/PvdA/VVD	25
Hilvarenbeek	North Brabant	15,281	20/9/18	Non-partisan	Yes	PvdA ^a /VVD ^a /CDA ^a	139
			12/5/14	Oversized	No	GeL/VVD/CDA	173
			14/6/18	Non-partisan	Yes	HOI ^{ab} /VVD ^a	397
Oisterwijk ^c	North Brabant	32,549	15/5/14	MWC	No	AB/PGB/VVD	389
			17/5/18	Oversized	Yes ^d	PGB/AB/Pro/CDA	374
			21/5/14	MWC	No	CDA/VVD/SGP/D66/ProV	311
Veenendaal	Utrecht	67,748	10/12/16	Oversized	No	CDA/VVD/CU/SGP/D66	45
			16/5/18	Oversized	Yes	CU/VVD/SGP/ProV	362
			22/4/14	MWC	No	SP/CDA/PvdA/D66/CU-SGP	187
Vlaardingen	South Holland	74,118	5/6/18	MWC	Yes	OV/SP/VVD/GeL/CDA	128
			28/5/19	MWC	No	VVD/GeL/CDA/VV2000-LV/SP/independents ^e	239
			30/4/14	MWC	No	OPZ/CDA/D66	290
Zandvoort	North Holland	17,142	13/12/16	Oversized	No	D66/CDA/GBZ/SZ/PvdA/independents ^e	86
			14/12/17	MWC	No	D66/CDA/PvdA/SZ/independents ^e	34
			5/6/18	Minority	Yes	OPZ/VVD/CDA/D66	242

Note: Votes: excluding procedural votes; CA: Councilwide agreement; MWC: Minimal Winning Coalition; ^a national affiliation of executive members who serve as non-partisans; ^b HOI is affiliated with PvdA; ^c 2018 period ended in 2020 due to municipal amalgamation; ^d The VVD did not subscribe to the councilwide agreement; ^e Councillors who left their group during the term.

municipalities during the 2018–2022 term and the preceding term, where there was no councilwide agreement.

METHODS

To study the effect of councilwide agreements on municipal decision-making, we examine voting patterns across two terms in seven municipal councils. Studies of the actual patterns of voting in municipal councils are rare. To our knowledge, this study of just seven municipalities is the most systematic study of voting patterns in multiple municipal councils outside of the United States (Bucchianeri, 2020).

We look at two different dependent variables. Firstly, we examine the extent to which the vote divides coalition and opposition in order to test the coalition-opposition hypothesis. The final analysis looks at the voting patterns at the party-level in the so-called dyadic method. This allows us to more precisely contrast the importance of coalition participation and the left–right dimension to test our hypotheses.

Data Collection

To collect voting patterns in municipal councils, we wrote purpose-built scripts. Many Dutch municipalities make data available through council information systems. There are several suppliers of these systems. One of these, NotuBiz, incorporates the outcomes of council votes in the reports of council meetings in a way that allows for their automatic harvesting. We therefore focus on this system. Using RVEST in R we collected these votes for the period of 2014–2022 (Wickham, 2016). We collect whether party groups voted in favour or against, as well as meta-data such as the date. If party groups voted, we count it as voting in favour when the majority of the votes cast by the group are in favour, and count it as against in all other situations. Party unity in Dutch local councils is very high. In less than 1% of vote decisions, councillors deviate from their group. Therefore, we analyse votes at the party level. We only collect votes that are presented as votes in this system.⁸ Votes can concern local bills, amendments to these, motions, the agenda, the minutes of the last meeting, the appointment of persons and miscellaneous other topics. In this paper, we look at votes regarding issues, which means that our research does not focus on procedural votes.⁹ We have collected 4,244 votes in a total of 20 municipality * coalition dyads.

Analyses at the Level of Votes

At the level of the vote, we look at the extent to which the vote divides coalition and opposition. We use the measure φ_{coa} , which was developed by Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) as a way to determine whether votes divide the coalition and the opposition:

$$\varphi_{coa} = \left| \frac{C_y O_n - C_n O_y}{\sqrt{YNOC}} \right| \quad (1)$$

⁸Other decisions, such as proposals that are adopted by acclamation without a vote, are not incorporated, neither are votes that the council clerk neglected to add to the system.

⁹533 out of 4777 votes are disregarded as procedural.

Y is the number of party groups voting in favour, N the number of party groups voting against, O the number of groups in the opposition and C the number of groups in the coalition. C_y is the number of coalition parties voting in favour, O_n the number of opposition groups voting in favour, C_n the number of coalition parties voting against and O_y the number of opposition groups voting in favour.¹⁰ The φ_{coa} runs from zero to one, with higher levels indicating a stronger divide between voting behaviour of coalition and opposition councillors. This measure is one if the coalition votes in favour and the opposition parties vote against (or vice versa). It is zero if the vote splits the coalition parties and opposition parties evenly. It produces a missing variable for unanimous votes, and these are assigned value zero. We follow our theory section in defining coalition and opposition parties as those with and without seats in the local executive (excluding the mayor, who is a non-partisan figure). In municipalities where the members of the executive were selected on a non-partisan basis, in particular Hilvarenbeek and Enkhuizen (Van Kalken, 2023), we still traced the party membership of those politicians and assigned those parties as coalition parties (see Table 2). Table A3 summarizes the vote-level data.

We analyse this variable in multi-level linear regression analyses with municipality * coalition dyads as levels. The dependent variable in these analyses is the distinction whether the votes occur under a councilwide agreement (or not).

Appendix A3 presents a number of robustness tests. Firstly, we include weights for the number of votes. In these analyses in the paper, municipal periods with a lot of votes are overrepresented. Our specific weights are the inverse of the number of votes in that four-year period in that municipality. Secondly, we run an additional model with cases that do not precisely fit our theoretical model. Specifically, we exclude Oisterwijk, where one party did not subscribe to the councilwide agreement and we also exclude the period in Vlaardingen following the collapse of the councilwide agreement (see Table 2). Thirdly, we also include an analysis that includes all votes (including procedural votes). Finally, we examine the effect of minority government on φ_{coa} . Appendix A4 examines whether councilwide agreements lead to more unanimous votes and greater support for proposals.

Dyadic Analysis

To determine the relative importance of the left–right dimension and the coalition–opposition division, we employ the dyadic approach by Van der Veer (2018) which studies parliamentary voting as a relational characteristic. Rather than studying whether a councillor votes in favour or against, we examine the extent to which councillors vote the same. We can see whether this similarity in voting is predicted by exogenous variables concerning ideology or coalition participation. We first identify all possible pairs of parties in each council under each coalition (e.g., AB and VVD in the Oisterwijk council in the period between 2014 and 2018 when there was a AB/PGB/VVD coalition). We analyse the data per coalition because we are specifically interested in the effect of the nature of the coalition. We then calculate the share of votes in which each pair of parties vote the same (yes–yes or no–no) in votes they both participated in, and in which neither voted divided. This score can have values between zero (the pair always vote differently) and one (the pair always vote the same).

We examine the extent to which these votes follow the division between coalition and opposition. Primarily, we use a single dichotomy to measure the difference between coalition and

¹⁰Abstentions are only allowed in very special circumstances (0.07% of the votes are abstentions). These votes are disregarded in this calculation method.

opposition. This assumes that the similarity in voting between coalition parties and opposition parties is the same.

For left–right positions, we use left–right estimates of parties based on manifestos from Otjes (2024). This analysis employs Wordscores. This is a method for estimating the position of a party on the basis of the words in its election manifesto (Laver et al., 2003). Wordscores employs reference texts to determine which position can be inferred from which words. If a word is exclusively used by left-wing parties, a text that uses that word is likely left-wing; the opposite is true for words exclusively used by right-wing parties. We used the national manifestos from 2006 to 2021 as reference texts. We assigned each manifesto the left–right position from the closest Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al., 2017). When a manifesto was absent, the estimate for an older or new manifesto is used. In nine out of 720 dyads, the z-score of left–right distance is greater than 3. To prevent these outliers from biasing the results, we excluded these cases. Table A4 summarizes the dyad-level data.

To test our expectations, we run an interaction concerning whether there was a councilwide agreement or not. We run multi-level linear regression models with two party groups and the municipality * coalition combinations as levels. We run a number of robustness tests. Three of these are in the article. Firstly, we look at an alternative operationalization of the coalition–opposition division. We use a pair of dummies that identify coalition–coalition and opposition–opposition pairs. This allows for the possibility that the coalition is more coherent than the opposition. Secondly, we include weights for the number of parties. As party dyads are cases, municipalities with a large number of parties are overrepresented.¹¹ Therefore, we include analyses which we weigh each case by the inverse of the number of parties in that municipality * coalition. Thirdly, we run all the models with and without the ideology measures as these reduce the N markedly. A number of robustness tests are in the Appendix A3. Table A6 includes an empty model. This indicates that the variance is located about equally in the three levels. Secondly, Table A6 adds a model with weights for votes.¹² Thirdly, it adds a model with weights for party * periods.¹³ Thirdly, as in the analysis of φ_{coa} , we also include an analysis that excludes Oisterwijk and the period in Vlaardingen following the collapse of the councilwide agreement. Fourthly, we include an analysis that includes procedural and substantive ones. Finally, we include a dummy for minority government. Table A8 adds the ideological measure in a number of different constellations: with vote weights, with party * period weights, without border cases, with procedural and substantive votes and while controlling for minority government. We also add two specific robustness tests for the ideology measure. The first excludes the newer or older manifestos if the one from the exact year is missing. The second includes the outliers otherwise excluded.

RESULTS AT THE VOTE LEVEL

We first examine the extent to which votes divide the coalition and the opposition at the vote level. We show these analyses in Table 3, which is visualised in Figure 1. This φ_{coa} measure reflects the extent to which votes divide the coalition and the opposition. It goes from one (the vote perfectly divides the council in coalition and opposition) to zero (the vote perfectly divides both the coalition and the opposition, or the vote is unanimous). This φ_{coa} is 0.21 on average. This means that these votes often break the coalition and/or the opposition. This value is lower than in the Dutch Parliament (*Tweede Kamer*), where we find values between 0.4 and 0.5 (Otjes

¹¹A municipality with four parties yields six cases. A municipality with 11 parties yields 55.

¹²As the other models treat cases with only 36 votes equally to cases with 397 votes, but the evidentiary basis is much stronger in the later compared to the former.

¹³Without this weight, periods in which there is more than one coalition are also overrepresented. We weigh each case by the inverse of the number of parties in that municipality * coalition divided by the number of coalitions during that period.

TABLE 3 Multi-level regression models of vote-level data.

	Model 1
(Intercept)	0.23*** (0.02)
Councilwide agreement	−0.07** (0.03)
AIC	1,592.34
Number of votes	4,244
Number of municipalities * coalitions	20
Var: Number of municipalities * coalitions (Intercept)	0.00 (0.05)
Var: Residual	0.08 (0.29)

Note: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

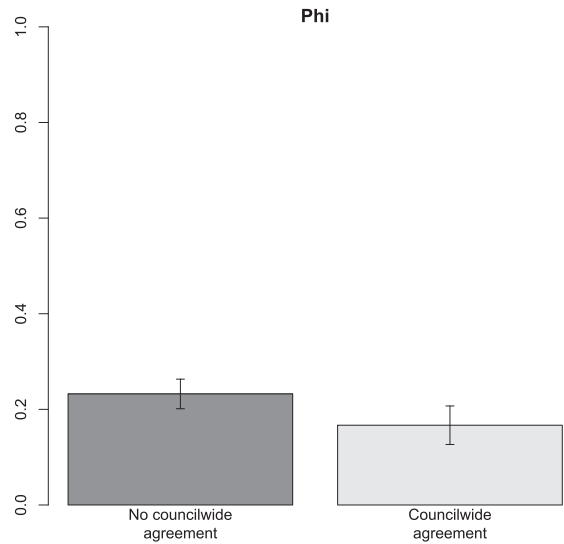


FIGURE 1 ϕ_{co} .
Note: Based on Model 1 with a 95% confidence interval.

& Louwerse, 2021). Under councilwide agreements, the average value is 0.07 points lower than in the absence of such agreements, a significant difference. This indicates that voting patterns in local councils, which tend not to follow coalition-opposition lines in general, do so less under councilwide agreements: councilwide agreements achieve their goal of weakening the division between coalition and opposition. In Table A5 in the Appendix, we look at a number of robustness test, examining all votes, excluding some municipalities that do not ideally fit our approach and with weights to prevent municipalities with a lot of votes from influencing the results too much. Here we consistently find a significant difference for the ϕ_{coa} .¹⁴

¹⁴In Appendix A4 we examine the percentage of unanimous votes and the level of support of proposals. These analyses indicate that this percentage is not affected by the presence of councilwide agreements.

DYADIC RESULTS

Next, we examine the data dyadically. The analysis concerns the extent to which two party groups vote in the same way. [Table 4](#) presents a number of regressions which [Figure 2](#) and [3](#) visualise.

Model 2 gives a first insight into general voting patterns. Both under councilwide agreements and in their absence, the average level of voting similarity is more than 80%. That means that in more than four out of five votes, two party groups vote the same. A councilwide agreement does not affect this. We add additional explanatory factors in the following models. Model 2 shows a significant interaction between councilwide agreements and the coalition-opposition division. We can see that pairs of party groups that are on the same side of the coalition-opposition divide vote the same on 85% of the issues when there is no councilwide agreement. Under a councilwide agreement, this decreases to 84%. Parties that are on opposite sides vote the same in 79% of the votes under those conditions and this increases to 80% for parties under the councilwide agreement. This shows that the division between the coalition and opposition is less strong under a councilwide agreement as the differences are weaker. These effects might seem small, but it is important to note that on average two groups vote differently on less than 20% of the votes: the two-percentage point increase in Model 2 represents one tenth of the average difference between parties, making this a substantial change.

We can further unpack these patterns by slicing the difference between the governing coalition and opposition more precisely (Model 3). If both parties are coalition parties, they vote the same in 90% of the votes in the absence of a councilwide agreement. Under councilwide agreements, these differences decrease: coalition parties vote the same in 87% of the cases. This three-percentage point decrease is statistically significant. Given that on average parties vote the same in 80% of the cases, we can mark this as a substantial decrease. If both parties are opposition parties and there is no councilwide agreement, parties vote the same in 82% of the cases. If there is a councilwide agreement, this still is 82%. In mixed pairs, this is 80% when there is a councilwide agreement and 79% when such an agreement is absent. These differences are not significant.

We also examined the extent to which ideology matters: in Model 5 we only include the left–right distance between the pairs of parties. Two parties with ideologically identical positions vote the same way in 81% of the cases in the absence of a councilwide agreement. If they are one standard deviation on the left–right dimension apart from each other, this is 81%. When there is a councilwide agreement, those percentages are 82% in both cases. The interaction effect is not significant.

Models 6 and 7 combine the ideological and coalition-opposition variables (visualised in [Figures 2](#) and [3](#)). For coalition-opposition these show the same patterns as the previous models: the coalition-opposition divide is less important when there is a councilwide agreement. It is particularly the case that coalition parties vote the same less often when there is a councilwide agreement compared to when one is absent. For left–right ideology we again find a significant interaction effect. All in all, we find strong support for the coalition-opposition hypothesis: councilwide agreements decrease the level of coalition-opposition voting. We do not find any support for the ideology hypothesis.

In [Table A6](#) and [A8](#) in the Appendix, we examine a number of robustness tests. These have the same format as our other tests, with the added factor of examining all votes, excluding border line cases, two different weighting strategies, controlling for minority government, and alternative approaches to the ideological variables including outliers and missing data when we did not have the manifesto from that exact year. We replicate Model 4 and Model 8. All replications of Model 8 support the results presented here. The replications of Model 4 do so

TABLE 4 Multi-level linear regression models of dyadic data.

	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
(Intercept)	0.82*** (0.01)	0.79*** (0.01)	0.79*** (0.01)	0.80*** (0.01)	0.81*** (0.02)	0.77*** (0.02)	0.77*** (0.02)	0.78*** (0.02)
Councilwide agreement	-0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Same side of CO division		0.06*** (0.01)				0.07*** (0.01)		
Councilwide agreement * Same side of CO division		-0.02* (0.01)				-0.02** (0.01)		
Both coalition			0.10*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)			0.11*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)
Both opposition			0.03*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)			0.04*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Councilwide agreement * Both coalition			-0.04* (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)			-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.04*** (0.02)
Councilwide agreement * Both opposition			-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)			-0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Left-Right Distance					0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)
Councilwide agreement * Left-Right Distance					-0.07 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.09)
AIC	-1,913.76 1025	-1,994.32 1025	-2,005.15 1025	-2013.11 1025	-1,447.21 711	-1,553.34 711	-1,562.10 711	-1568.38 711
Number of dyads								
Number of parties ₁	189	189	189	189	156	156	156	156
Number of parties ₂	187	187	187	187	156	156	156	156
Number of municipalities * governments	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Var: Parties ₁ (Intercept)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)
Var: Parties ₂ (Intercept)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)
Var: Municipalities * coalitions (Intercept)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)
Var: Residual	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.07)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00 (0.01)

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; CO division: Coalition-Opposition Division; Model 5 and Model 9 have weights for the number of parties.

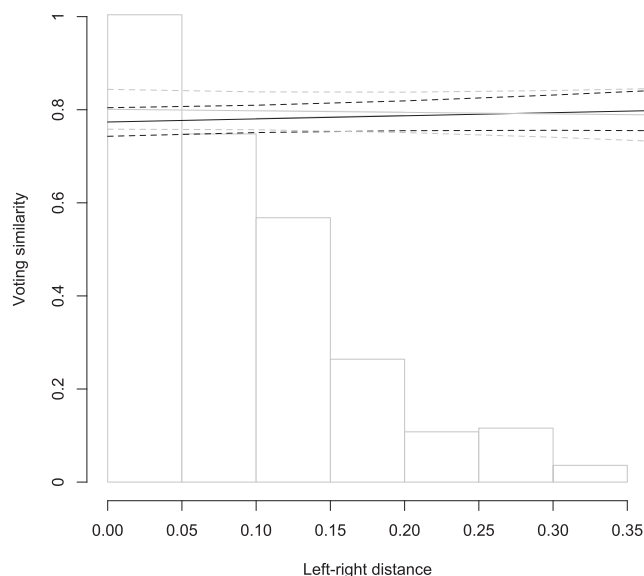


FIGURE 2 Voting similarity, left–right distance and councilwide agreements.
Note: Based on Model 8 with a 95% confidence interval; black line=no councilwide agreement; grey line=councilwide agreement.

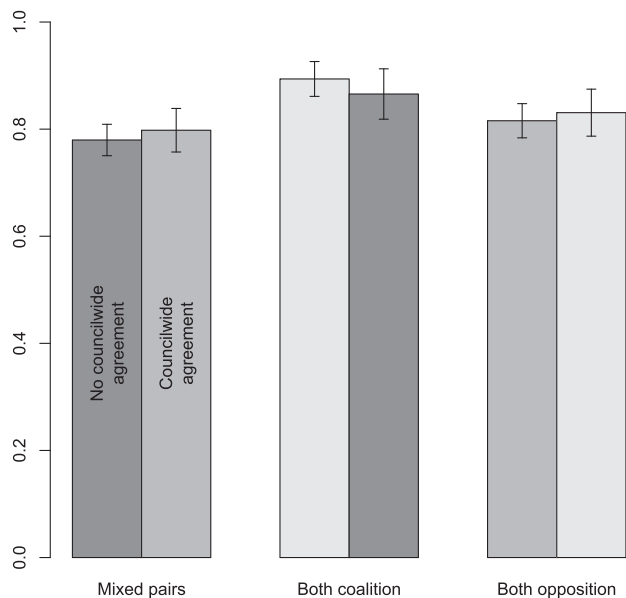


FIGURE 3 Voting similarity, coalition or opposition status and councilwide agreements.
Note: Based on Model 8 with a 95% confidence interval. Note that the confidence interval incorporates both the uncertainty in the fixed and random part of the multi-level analysis. The assessment of whether fixed effects are significant can best be based on Model 8.

in three out of five replications. They include council members who left their PPG to continue as independents. The fewer significant results likely reflect the fact that these groups did not subscribe to the councilwide agreement.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows that councilwide agreements decrease the extent to which the division between the coalition and the opposition is present in voting in Dutch municipal councils. We find strong evidence that when parties agree in writing that they will not let their work be structured by the division between coalition and opposition, this actually weakens the importance of this division in their parliamentary work. In periods of coalition government, in the absence of a *raadsakkoord*, we find that the coalition/opposition divide is primarily driven by coalition parties voting together. In contrast to the existing literature that emphasizes that the opposition tends to vote *en bloc*, we find that at the local level in the Netherlands the similarity in the coalition drives the division between coalition and opposition. Under a councilwide agreement, we see that the level of voting similarity among coalition parties decreases more sharply than the voting similarity among opposition parties. Contrary to our expectations, these agreements did not increase levels of ideological voting.

What do these results say beyond the borders of this baker's half dozen municipalities in the Netherlands? Given that there is a lack of comparative research on the nature of local coalition agreements, we cannot say whether our results travel to other countries, as we do not know whether councilwide agreements exist there or not. Councilwide agreements may very well be a response to a specifically Dutch political culture of detailed coalition agreements (Klüver et al., 2023). These agreements therefore are unlikely to be common elsewhere. Yet, we do believe that our study has comparative value. We provide an approach to think about the division between coalition and opposition. This may be useful for future research of parliaments under technocratic or interim governments (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). It may also be relevant for understanding political behaviour in oversized coalitions: here coalition discipline might be weaker as well because the coalition can afford to lose one of their partners. Furthermore, we believe that these experimental local coalitions give us a unique glimpse into the nature of the coalition/opposition division: the latter is the result of the choices parties make when they form coalitions as well as the choices in their daily legislative work. When they decide to work in a more open way, the division between coalition and opposition weakens. Parties set the rules under which they operate. The decision to change the rules did not truly affect the opposition, which already (and in contrast to Tierney's famous quote) showed itself quite cooperative. Rather, it affected how the coalition operated. Under councilwide agreements, the coalition parties are more likely to vote differently. The councilwide agreement weakened the need for coalition parties to present a united front.

A striking feature of this study is the extent to which any pair of parties votes the same. The depoliticised nature of decision-making at the local level can have many causes, such as a national political culture of consensus, the small scale allowing for informal politics, the lack of policy freedom that municipalities have, and the non-ideological nature of many issues on the council agenda. Appendix A4 further delves into these patterns of unanimity.

This study looked at voting patterns in seven municipalities in the Netherlands. To our knowledge this analysis of voting in only seven local councils is the largest study of patterns of voting in local councils outside of the U.S. We showed that voting patterns in municipalities show high levels of agreement, but that there are also clear differences which we can explain by government participation. We did not find evidence for the programmatic differences between parties translating themselves to differences in council voting patterns. This may be a result of our choice to approach council politics with a single dimension. It may very well be that the complexities of council politics require a multi-dimensional approach that is sensitive to the dimensions that matter on specific issues (cf. Hohendorf et al., 2020).

Normatively, this study showed that councilwide agreements can bring down the level of coalition-opposition conflict in a municipality. If there are municipalities where there is a sense that politics has gone into an overdrive, with too much politicization and in particular a deep gap between coalition and opposition that creates dissatisfaction on both sides, we believe that a councilwide agreement can help to change the behaviour of politicians in that system. We do not believe that these kinds of arrangements should be universally adopted, but do believe that they can address specific problems.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This article is based on new data that is collected as part of a PhD project. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. When the PhD project is finalised, the entire data set will be made public via a public repository.

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