
Original Article

Representative claims in practice: The democratic quality of decentralized social and healthcare policies in the Netherlands

Hester van de Bovenkamp^{a,*} and Hans Vollaard^b

^aInstitute of Health Policy & Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

E-mail: vandebovenkamp@bmg.eur.nl

^bInstitute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands.

E-mail: vollaard@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

*Corresponding author.

Abstract Any assessment of the democratic nature of representation should look at both electoral and non-electoral representation yet few empirical studies have looked into the latter. To increase our understanding of non-electoral representation, we use Saward's concept of representative claims, which helps bring into view a broad variety of representatives. Our empirical study of decentralized social and healthcare policies in the Netherlands describes the actors making representative claims at the local level, including elected, appointed non-elected and self-appointed non-elected representatives working on a variety of bases, such as elections, expertise and shared experience. Their democratic nature is assured by authorization and accountability mechanisms, including but not only election. However, a number of difficulties are encountered in assuring responsiveness in practice. We conclude that non-electoral representation can and does strengthen democratic representation at the local level. This study reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the representation practices found and on what our findings mean for future studies of representation.

Acta Politica (2017). doi:10.1057/s41269-017-0040-6

Keywords: democracy; decentralization; healthcare policy; representation; representative claim; responsiveness; social policy

Introduction

Citizen participation has been on the policy agenda of many countries for years. Partly inspired by theories on participatory and deliberative democracy, citizens have increasingly been given the opportunity to influence public policies in order to



strengthen democracy (Canel, 2001; Michels, 2012). However, research into these forms of direct participation shows that the number of citizens who actually use these opportunities is limited (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Michels, 2011; Van Oenen, 2011). Those who do participate are often the same highly educated, white, middle and upper classes that also tend to dominate other democratic spaces (Michels and de Graaf, 2010; Veldheer *et al.*, 2012; Michels and Binnema, 2016). As a result, the needs and interests of citizens who remain passive might be overlooked by policymakers. This situation sits uneasily with the democratic ideal of equality, since it poses the danger that certain interests and needs receive less attention than others (Verba and Nie, 1972; Bovens and Wille, 2011; Held, 2006).

Representation can be a solution to unequal participation. As long as the interests of passive citizens are represented by others, their voices will be included in the debate (Plotke, 1997; Urbinati, 2006; Van de Bovenkamp *et al.*, 2013). Elected representatives are the obvious actors to do this. Still, important problems are identified with this democratic channel. Electoral turnout is steadily declining, especially among groups of citizens who are less inclined to take part in participation processes, and political parties are struggling to connect society with politics (Mair, 2005; Hendriks, 2009; Saward, 2010; Bovens and Wille, 2011). However, it is increasingly recognized that electoral representation is only part of the representation story. Recently, non-electoral representatives active in the public debate have been identified as a possible means to strengthen democracy (Young, 2000; Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Saward, 2010; Montanaro, 2012). Empirical evidence is essential to determine if and how non-electoral representation contributes to democracy in practice, but studies are still few and far between (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Montanaro, 2012; De Wilde, 2013; Wolff, 2013; Chapman and Lowndes, 2014). Aiming to fill this gap in the literature, this paper reports on an empirical study of social and healthcare policies that have recently been decentralized to Dutch municipalities. Because of the major impact of these policies, a wide variety of actors speaking up for often vulnerable people were expected to be active in the debate.

To find out if non-electoral representatives are active in practice, the first question guiding our study was (1) *Which actors claim to represent citizens?* Here the concept of representative claims was of great value, since studying actors claiming to represent certain groups or causes brings into view all kinds of representatives besides electoral ones (Street, 2004; Rehfeld, 2006; Saward, 2008; Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Saward, 2009, 2010). To determine the democratic contribution of non-electoral representation, our second research question was (2) *What kind of authorization and accountability mechanisms are used?* In assessing the democratic value of representative claims, responsiveness is an important aspect (Pitkin, 1967). Non-electoral representation has particularly been criticized in this regard, since no regular elections arrange authorization and accountability (Chapman and Lowndes, 2014; Lord and Pollak, 2010). Just as we need to broaden



our view on who may be considered a representative, we argue that we need to broaden our view of authorization and accountability. Alternative mechanisms are available to non-electoral representatives but they have seldom been the object of empirical research (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Montanaro, 2012). Answering these questions will help us understand electoral and non-electoral representation better and allow a first assessment of its contribution to democratic decision making. Future studies should also find out which claims are accepted by the represented and how the represented perceive the various mechanisms of authorization and accountability.

The paper continues as follows. The “[The varied nature of representation](#)” section discusses the concept of representative claims and how to assess their democratic quality. The “[Methods](#)” section introduces our case study of representation and the empirical methods used. The “[Results](#)” section presents our findings, while the “[Discussion](#)” section reflects on how various forms of representation might contribute to the democratic quality of decision making.

The Varied Nature of Representation

In the literature on democratic decision making, representation is often depicted as a surrogate for direct participation of citizens or even as anti-democratic (Pitkin, 2004; Urbinati, 2006; Mansbridge, 2011). However, few citizens actually use the myriad opportunities for direct participation available to them (Michels and de Graaf, 2010; Bovens and Wille, 2011; Michels and Binnema, 2016). This raises the question of representation being regarded as a second-best ideal is justified. Several authors therefore state that representation warrants more scholarly attention as an intrinsic part of a viable democracy (Plotke, 1997; Urbinati, 2006).¹

Representation is about making present again something that is not literally present (Pitkin, 1967). Many forms and models of representation can be found in the literature (e.g. Pitkin, 1967; Manin, 1997; Mansbridge, 2003; Saward, 2009). Key questions include what should be made present again (e.g. personal characteristics, interests, the common good) and who should do the representing (e.g. people sharing characteristics or interests or experts) (Pitkin, 1967; Bovens and Wille, 2011). These questions do not necessarily focus on electoral representation. In fact, Pitkin describes representation as *the patterns emerging from the multiple activities of many people* (Pitkin, 1967, p. 222). Despite the long-standing recognition of the variety of representation, the empirical focus has often been on electoral representation. This focus prevents due attention being paid to many other ways of making groups or causes present again in the public debate. Therefore, some argue that to better understand representation it is important to cast



the analytical net wider to include all actors making representative claims (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Saward, 2010).

The concept of representative claims helps direct attention to other forms of representation (Street, 2004; Rehfeld, 2006; Saward, 2008, 2009, 2010). The concept is used in several ways (Street, 2004; Rehfeld, 2006; Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Saward, 2010; De Wilde, 2013; Decreus, 2013; Wolff, 2013; Chapman and Lowndes, 2014). Saward (2010, p. 36) provides the most comprehensive definition, conceptualized as follows: *A maker of representation puts forward a subject which stands for an object that is related to a referent and is offered to an audience.* The literature contains much debate on this conception and the added value of the different elements it identifies (e.g. De Wilde, 2013; Decreus, 2013). One point of criticisms is that it is hard to discern the different elements empirically (De Wilde, 2013). Therefore, in our explorative study, we follow a simpler definition that is used often, sometimes implicitly: actors who claim to make present certain groups or causes in public.

Varied actors make representative claims implicitly or explicitly, on various grounds and focused on different groups (Saward, 2010). The variety includes the following: (a) actors claiming to represent a group based on their institutional position (e.g. elected members of parliament claiming to represent their electoral constituency); (b) actors claiming to represent a specific group based on core aspects of that group's identity (e.g. churches claiming to represent their followers based on religion); (c) actors claiming to represent specific groups based on specialist expertise (e.g. doctors who claim to represent patients based on their expert medical knowledge); and (d) actors claiming to represent specific groups based on shared experiences or identity (e.g. patients who call upon shared experiences to represent other patients) (Saward, 2009, 2010). So, using a representative claims approach, all kinds of non-electoral representatives can come into view, besides elected representatives, claiming to represent specific groups of citizens or causes.

Non-electoral, functional representation such as neo-corporatism has received scholarly attention, but more as a case of lobbying organizations trying to influence policy than of representation. Moreover, the role of this kind of non-electoral representation is often institutionally predefined, whereas the concept of representative claims allows us to analyse them as part of a dynamic process of representation which is only partly related to the institutional position of those who claim to represent (e.g. being elected) (Saward, 2010; Wolff, 2013). In addition, the concept also includes non-electoral representation by self-appointed individuals, not just organizations from civil society. Representative relationships are therefore not only limited to formal institutions or organizations but also include all kinds of claims by other non-elected actors. Moreover, elected representatives can also make non-electoral claims (Saward, 2010; Mansbridge, 2011). Mansbridge (2011) illustrates this point, which she calls surrogate representation, with the example of



gay politicians who claim to represent the gay community outside the territorial boundaries of their electoral constituency. This means that we need to explore representative claims beyond the institutional setting or organization of representation. At the same time, it remains important to consider the institutional position of actors making representative claims when studying representation since acceptance of their claims by decision-makers and their relationship with their constituency may be influenced by their institutional position (Saward, 2010; Chapman and Lowndes, 2014).

The literature described so far shows that to gain a better understanding of the variety of representation, attention should be paid to who claims to represent which groups or causes and based on what they do so. However, this is not enough if we want to explore if these claims should be analysed as forms of democratic representation. First, to be an act of representation, claims must be made in the *public* debate. This is how they can be judged and consequently accepted or rejected transparently. This acceptance or rejection can happen in the decision-making arena. However, mere acceptance of a claim will not necessarily make a claim democratic. Rehfeld (2006) for example shows that although representatives of dictatorships may be accepted (e.g. by the United Nations) as representatives of their countries, they cannot be considered democratic representatives.

To be an act of democratic representation, representatives need to be responsive to their constituency (Pitkin, 1967; Young, 2000; Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Severs, 2010; Montanaro, 2012). In the words of Pitkin (1967, p. 95) individuals should have the ability to 'object to what is done in their name'. It is therefore important to explore the relationship between representatives and those they claim to represent (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Saward, 2010; Severs, 2010; Montanaro, 2012; Chapman and Lowndes, 2014). Responsiveness can be conceptualized in terms of authorization and accountability. Elections are generally seen as a means to ensure this responsiveness. In fact, some authors suggest that authorization and accountability are inherently attached to elections (Chapman and Lowndes, 2014). Viewed that way, the democratic nature of non-electoral representation is problematic. However, as other authors point out, authorization and accountability are far more varied than elections (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Maia, 2012; Montanaro, 2012). Authorization can be defined as the selection or direction of representatives. This can be done by elections as well as by signing petitions, deliberation, joining protests, becoming a member of an organization, and expressions of trust, depending on the relationship between the representative and the represented (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Montanaro, 2012). The relationship between the representative and the represented is also central in accountability. Accountability can be defined as a representative's sense of obligation to explain and justify their conduct to the represented (Bovens, 2007). Besides elections, this can be done by accounting for one's actions in the public debate, at meetings with members, or making plans, financial accounts, annual



reports publicly available (Montanaro, 2012). In other words, representatives and the represented need to establish contacts in which authorization and accountability can take place.

A first conclusion based on the above is that the concept of the representative claim recognizes a wide variety of actors who can represent a variety of groups on a variety of bases. These claims are partly connected to the institutional position of those who claim to represent, but this position does not provide the whole story. Second, to be considered democratic, claims should be part of the public debate and there should be mechanisms that ensure the authorization and accountability of representatives, whose variety warrants further empirical exploration. In the following sections, we analyse the variety of claims and their democratic value in terms of responsiveness in our case study, preceding this with a brief explanation of the methods used in our study.

Methods

This section first explicates the reasons for selecting our case study. Next, it provides information on the methodology used to conduct our study and how we analysed our results.

Case selection: Decentralized social and healthcare policies in the Netherlands

Decentralized social and healthcare policies in the Netherlands constitute an excellent case to deepen understanding of representative claims for several reasons. First, the wide variety of actors who can make representative claims. The Netherlands scores high on civil liberties such as freedom of speech, which allows many actors to speak up (Freedom House, 2016). Moreover, until the 1960s, the Netherlands was known for its elitist model of consociational democracy, leaders of social and main interest groups (several of which were intertwined in elaborate organizational networks, the so-called pillars) cooperated closely, while citizens remained politically rather passive (Lijphart, 1990). Since the 1960s, the call for direct political participation has been heard, but representative democracy remains the key feature of all levels of the Dutch political system. Grafted partly on the organizational networks from the days of consociationalism and pillarization, the Dutch civil society is still relatively vibrant with manifold organizations (Posthumus *et al*, 2014) all claiming to represent certain groups of citizens. Additionally, the enduring practice of consultation and cooperation in Dutch local politics provides a strong incentive for non-elected representatives to speak up (Randerad and Wolfram, 1998).



Second, decentralization of social and health policies is one of the largest reforms in post-WWII Dutch local government. Since the 1980s, Dutch municipalities have gradually obtained responsibility for significant tasks, such as social assistance and home care. In January 2015, a major transfer of tasks followed with the introduction of the Participation Act (concerning social assistance and labour re-integration of people with certain disabilities), the Youth Act (involving social and health policies for youth under 18, including psychiatric care, foster care and rehabilitation of young discharged prisoners) and an extended Social Support Act (aiming to help foremost elderly and people with disabilities to live independently and participate actively in society). Because of the magnitude of this reform, a wide variety of representatives were expected to become active in the public debate. Task decentralization was indeed propagated by the Dutch government to revitalize local democracy under the slogan of coming ‘closer to the citizen’.² Non-electoral representatives can play an important role because the groups affected by the decentralizations are on average less inclined to participate themselves, become elected representatives, or go to the voting booth (Bovens and Wille, 2011).

Research methods

The object of our study is to explore whether and how non-electoral representation takes place in practice and to assess its democratic nature. We conducted in-depth case studies, as they allow us to trace how and what kind of non-electoral representation takes place. To find as much variety in non-electoral representation as possible, we selected two contrasting municipalities in terms of health and socio-economic issues among the population, socio-geographic aspects and level of education: one mid-sized, economically vibrant university city (municipality A) in the heavily populated conurbation of the country and one small, recently amalgamated municipality in the rural, economically declining north (municipality B).

Our qualitative multi-method design consisted of document analysis and interviews with key actors. The research was conducted in the period January 2014–June 2015, when major decisions on decentralized social and health policies had to be taken. First, we analysed relevant documents from local government bodies (e.g. decentralization plans of the executive board of mayor and aldermen, ‘consultation round’ reports and council meeting minutes), media texts (local newspapers reports on decentralization), documents from municipal advisory councils (e.g. minutes and advisory reports) and websites of organizations that claim or were expected to claim to represent certain groups. Second, we interviewed 34 actors involved in the decentralization debate who claimed or could claim to represent citizens or were involved in municipal policy processes.



We conducted interviews with three aldermen, two civil servants, a municipal consultant focused on citizen participation, seven city council members, eight representatives of patient/elderly/informal carer organizations, six members of official municipal advisory bodies, a local journalist, five health care professionals and a director of an inter-municipal organization providing sheltered work. These interviews allowed us to gain a comprehensive impression of claim makers without needing to interview all such actors making such claims. The interviews provided us with an overview of the various types of representative claims and authorization and accountability mechanisms, enabling a deeper understanding of representation practice. We asked our respondents about who they claimed to represent, what their claim was based on, the type of authorization and accountability mechanisms in place, their experience with representation, any other actors they worked with or identified as representatives and how they related to them. We asked the aldermen and civil servants about their efforts and experiences in establishing contact with citizens and representatives, and their acceptance of different claims. All interviews were recorded with the respondent's permission and transcribed verbatim, except two in which case the researchers took notes. Our exploration took a broad approach to representative claims in the sense that we looked at all actors that explicitly claimed to represent but also those who did so implicitly, e.g. by asking for specific attention for certain groups in the debate. We used the following main codes in our data analysis: (1) actors making representative claims (who makes the claim and on what basis), (2) which groups are claimed to be represented, (3) the basis of representative claims, (4) acceptance of the claims among respondents, (5) used modes of authorization and experience with these, and (6) modes of accountability and the experience with these. The analysis drew a distinction between different types of representation: electoral representation, appointed non-electoral representation and self-appointed non-electoral representation. In the next steps of the analysis, we focused on how the differences in institutional position did or not influence how representation works in practice.

Results

This section first describes the efforts of the municipalities to organize direct participation so that we can explore the value of representation compared to this avenue of democratic decision making. Our findings reveal a number of problems that underscore the importance of representation, which lead us to deal with the questions introduced previously: which actors claim to represent service users and which authorization and accountability mechanisms do they use?



Direct citizen participation

Municipality A, specifically the alderman responsible for social care, took a lot of trouble to listen to citizens directly in the decentralization process. Focus groups, individual interviews, ‘chatterboxes’ and LinkedIn groups were among the methods used to learn about service users’ experiences. The alderman and civil servants said that they used these methods to consider the citizens’ problems in their decision making and they referred to these initiatives in their policy documents. However, the respondents also noted difficulties with the various forms of direct participation. First and foremost, it is not always easy to find people willing to participate, and this, for example, resulted in a focus group with only two participants. Additionally, often only the ‘usual suspects’ showed up, such as members of the municipal advisory councils (more on this below). Hesitance to participate was not only due to lack of interest, but could also be due to shame. For instance, youngsters and parents did not always want to talk about their personal problems in public (document municipality A). Another reason for not participating in the case of decentralization is the fear of discussing problems with civil servants who decide on who is eligible for benefits:

The target group doesn't like telling the municipality what they think, because they're scared, of course. As far as this topic is concerned, that's very important, because they....you live off your benefit. (member, advisory council on social-economic affairs)

Even though civil servants said that direct citizen participation provided valuable insights, they also indicated struggling to translate the stories of individual citizens to policies. One civil servant summed up the problems of direct citizen participation:

Let's say we really tried but it was really hard to find people. We also tried through our network and [my colleague] really tried too.... and it was just as hard to find things in common that you could do something with. (civil servant)

Municipality B did not organize a similarly intensive direct participation trajectory for their decentralization process. However, it is common practice for aldermen, civil servants and city councillors to visit villages in municipality B and talk to citizens to get a feel of the issues of concern. In cases when citizens experience concrete problems directly (e.g. plans to house refugees or demolish houses) fairly large numbers show up at such meetings. However, during the decentralization trajectory this did not happen.

The problems encountered with direct citizen participation underscores the need for representation of citizens’ interests, especially for groups confronted by decentralized policies. We turn to the subject of representation next.



Actors claiming to represent service users

This section explores the type of actors claiming to represent service users and the basis of their claims. We also pay attention to the subject of acceptance of the claims by the municipality and other representatives.

Elected representatives

City councillors are the elected representatives of citizens in municipalities. The claims of elected representatives often remain implicit and their representative role often seems self-explanatory (Saward, 2010). Although in our case study, claims are not often explicated, this does happen, especially at election time. Some claims are generic in terms of who elected representatives claim to represent and speak of citizens or ‘the people’ in general. For example, *The CDA [Christen Democrat party] represents all citizens and companies* (Municipal newsletter). Others are more specific and sometimes focus on the groups affected by decentralization:

‘Our attention goes especially to people who are struggling, for instance, because they have a low income or have to manage on benefits.’ (Party leader in local newspaper).

Elected representatives are mostly accepted automatically by other representatives on the basis of their institutional position, with elections as the self-explanatory justification. Nevertheless, political parties do refute their counterparts for claiming to represent specific groups. For instance, one party criticized another party’s claim to represent the weak and the poor, because it had ‘sold out’ when it joined the local coalition government after the elections (municipal newsletter).

The claims made by elected representatives are partly based on their institutional position (being elected to represent). However, in addition to being elected, some council members base their claims on their knowledge of the problems and preferences of service users gained, for example, through direct contact with citizens, site visits to care organizations, contact with other representatives and their own experience as a care professional or service user. These other sources can also be reasons for others to accept their claims. For instance, one municipal alderman sought out certain city council members to help devise an early stage of policy development *not as politicians but as experts*, because they were working as professionals in the social domain.

Appointed non-elected representatives

Some actors making representative claims can be described as appointed non-electoral representatives. Key actors in this respect in our study were the municipal councils advising the local executive board of the mayor and aldermen on the



Social Support Act (SSA), social assistance and sheltered work (with the last two areas addressed by a single council in one of the municipalities studied). These councils are appointed by the executive board of mayor and aldermen. The recommendations of these councils are both formal (official advisory reports for the executive board) and informal (casual consultations with aldermen and civil servants). Members of advisory councils claim to represent a broad range of people who would be affected by the various decentralizations, ranging from those receiving social benefits to ‘involved citizens’ (people active in the city or who provide informal care), people doing sheltered work, people with disabilities and vulnerable people (e.g. with multiple problems including psychiatric problems, homeless people and people suffering from abuse). Representatives of this group can base their claim on their institutional position. Similar to municipal councils, members of advisory councils draw on other sources as a basis of their claim, such as shared experiences, formal and informal contacts with their constituency and professional expertise. Respondents in this group stated that local government is open to their representation efforts and actively seeks contact with them. This is supported by the interviews conducted with aldermen and civil servants. The acceptance of advisory councils is also shown by the fact that they are engaged and kept informed informally at an early stage of policy development, which according to respondents allows to make a real contribution to the decision making.

We stressed being able to give casual advice (...) so that [our points] were taken on board (...) at an early stage. (former member of SSA advisory council)

Self-appointed non-elected representatives

We found many actors who claim to represent citizens in the decentralization debate who do not or cannot base this claim on their institutional position. We categorize these as self-appointed non-elected representatives. This category includes such actors as individual professionals, patient organizations, associations of elderly, informal carer organizations, neighbourhood organizations, schools and churches. Some are active only to a limited extent on the local level, such as churches, but are identified by our respondents as potentially important representatives.

These actors claim to represent specific groups using local services, such as people on benefits, people with chronic conditions or disabilities, informal carers, elderly, young people with problems, people with mental health or addiction problems and people with a work-limiting disability. In this case as well, claims are not always explicated, for instance in the reactions of these actors during formal consultation rounds. Self-appointed non-elected representatives base their claims most often on their own experience as clients and/or on the expertise gained



through close contact with clients. For example, the director of the inter-municipal institution providing sheltered work in municipality A actively represented the interests of the people working there, not only on the local level in the municipal council (with the alderman's approval), but also at the national level with respect to the Participation Act, claiming in a local newspaper '*It is not my decision, but as a Dutch citizen I do not think this [act] is correct*'. Although his claim was made on the basis of having the identity of a Dutch citizen, the interview shows that everyday contact with the people concerned was the most important basis of his claim.

Since this category of representatives does not have a formal role in local decision making, they try to influence policies in several ways. Some focus on arranging contact between service users and civil servants. At other times these actors try to represent the interests of service users in decision-making procedures, for example through membership of the SSA council, by providing feedback on draft policy plans of the municipality and by contributing to consultation rounds:

For example, last year [there was] a seminar on citizen debt restructuring and all kinds of professionals were invited, mental health care staff, social neighbourhood teams, district nurses, everyone. And these people set off all kinds of signals: 'Hey, that's not going well or this arrangement is not very smart. We're coming across this, and we keep meeting people with that problem'. (civil servant)

This group of representatives also sought to represent service users informally through contacts with local media, aldermen and council members.

The respondents generally accepted the representative role of these actors. Respondents state that the local government is open to their representation efforts and also seeks contact with them. However, on some occasions there are reservations. For example, health care insurers who claim to represent the interests of the insured at the national level (Van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard, 2015) are viewed with some scepticism: '*Let's put it this way, I have the strong impression that their interest lies somewhere else*' (Alderman). Others, such as health care providers, are also viewed critically at times since they too are said to have the interests of their organization at heart. The director of the organization providing sheltered work noted that he and his colleagues are met with some 'suspicion'. Sometimes self-appointed representatives claiming to represent specific groups question the claims of representatives who make broader claims that include such a specific group as well. For example, one informal carer organization questioned whether elderly organizations really cater for this specific group the way they claim to do. However, this does not mean that the claims made by these actors are not accepted in principle, but that these claims need to be substantiated. Others meet more resistance. For instance, a local action group protested against sheltered workshops, calling the people working there 'camp guards'. The alderman



responsible for this policy called this unacceptable behaviour and considered legal charges as a response. This group has also been subject of debate in the city council. It is important to note that in this case not so much the representative claim of this group was under dispute but the methods chosen to express their claim. One of our respondents agrees that while such methods are unacceptable, he views the representative claim as legitimate because the group in question does express an authentic voice.

Authorization and accountability

This part of the analysis focuses on the relationship between the different representatives we identified and the groups they claim to represent in terms of authorization and accountability.

Elected representatives

In terms of authorization and accountability, elections are obviously important for this group of representatives. However, several problems have been identified with this avenue. First, low voter turnout raises concerns. In both municipalities studied, voter turnout in the last local election was around the national average of 54%. In terms of descriptive representation, highly educated white men are overrepresented in municipal councils (Schaap, 2015). In both municipalities, around 30% of council members are women, and the share of minority ethnic groups in council members seems lower than in the general population. Yet, being elected does not provide the whole story. We have seen above that some elected representatives draw on claim sources that can be seen as alternative means of authorization, for instance, basing their input on the direct contact they have with citizens in their daily working lives. In municipality B, the smaller of the two under study, it seems that the ties between council members and citizens are stronger as here we found more examples of citizens contacting representatives directly.

If I go for a walk or a bike ride around here, well that's 10 K and normally you'd do that in half an hour, 45 min by bike. But it takes me half a day.
(social council chairman and former city council member)

Municipality B also organizes regular contact between the executive board, the city council and citizens from the various villages now contained in the amalgamated municipality. Other council members authorize themselves differently. Some put a lot of effort into visiting health care centres, organizations providing sheltered work and juvenile detention centres, to inform themselves.



Because we [the speaker and another council member] were always going places, to every meeting organized by youth care. We went to care farms, we went to.... you name it. We wanted to know what we're talking about. (city council member)

In both municipalities, some parties opened contact points for citizens to report issues related to the decentralization they were struggling with, or discussed such issues with patient organizations or professionals. Some city council members drew on their own experience of working in health care organizations or of using services themselves.

Time and again we meet the arrogance of the institutions, really unbelievable. And then it's convenient that you've walked around there as a service user for a couple of years. (city council member)

The large difference in the extent to which council members use alternative authorization mechanisms should be noted. A councillor's decision on whether to actively use alternatives seems to be informed somewhat by party politics and somewhat by different personal ideas about what it means to be a good representative.

Citizens also have various means to hold council members to account besides and in between elections. The work of council members is transparent in a number of ways. Council meetings are open to the public, can be followed on the internet, and the minutes of council meetings are publically available. Also, especially in municipality A, the local media reports on council meetings, although local media are disappearing in many Dutch municipalities, which limits the transparency of local politics (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers, 2012). In terms of accountability, this problem is intensified in the case of the decentralization because municipalities often cooperate in regional schemes. The media covers the meetings of these schemes less frequently and councillors usually scrutinize them less often. Sporadically, council members are approached by citizens who want to express their discontent with their representative. Some council members report critical reactions from voters: *'Angry people who say I voted for you and then you do this'* (city councillor). However, in general citizens do not seem to be very interested in accountability:

People come to me with lots of questions for help (...) but accountability? No, I've never had the feeling that people ask for that... People lose interest sooner than they come and ask for accountability. (city councillor)

Appointed non-elected representatives

The advisory councils in the municipalities make different choices with regard to authorization. For example, the social affairs councils emphasize the importance of



experiential knowledge. Experience as a client authorizes them to represent the interests of other service users.

Because they have the experience, and when you're on the other side then you probably don't understand what goes on the client's world. (member, social affairs advisory council)

However, it is not easy to find service users willing to participate in these councils. First, the 'good' ones are often available only for a short period because they find another job. Second, according to one respondent, service users do not always have a very high opinion of these forums and regard the people active in them as arrogant, which makes membership not necessarily an attractive proposition. In contrast, the SSA councils of both municipalities consist of representatives of various organizations for patients, the elderly, tenants and informal carers and an 'independent' chairperson, selected through an open application procedure. This means that members of these councils can be service users themselves but this is not necessarily the case. Indeed these council members emphasize that experiential knowledge is not enough for councils to function properly. They also need members with professional expertise since the council needs to discuss abstract policy issues. Council work often means that members have to read a lot of complicated policy papers in a short time, which can be a struggle. Therefore, people are needed who have expertise in policies issues and political decision making. However, opting to professionalize raises new problems, since the council will miss people with everyday practical knowledge:

It's becoming more and more abstract. And the Social Support Act council is steadily writing more abstract advisory reports and because of that, it attracts people who can think in abstract administrative terms. (...) I saw this trending in the past six years. Basic knowledge (...) is disappearing a bit. (former council member)

However, respondents' note that the SSA councils work quite well and can limit this problem by putting effort into learning about the experiences of the people they claim to represent. One way of doing this is through their organizations. The idea is that members can draw on their 'constituency' (the members of the organizations they are representing) to inform their council work. One member explains: *Tenants come to us as a tenant organization. And if it concerns general issues then we'll take that on board [in the SSA council].* Another council member reports on the contacts that help in her work, but acknowledges that this does not mean she knows everything:

As a patient I have lots of contact with fellow patients. I have lots of contact with homeless people because I do volunteer work. But I'm not under the illusion that you make it that way; that you really know it all. (former SSA council member)



Although council members draw on various contacts for their representation work it often proves difficult to arrange this in a structural way when a recommendation needs to be given. Reasons mentioned for this include time constraints or lack of interest of the members of the organizations. Council members therefore draw on other sources to authorize their claim. For instance, they go on site visits and ask experts or other representatives to provide information during council meetings.

Appointed non-elected representatives try to be accountable to those they claim to represent. Respondents feel the need to account for their actions and do so in a number of ways. Minutes of meetings, reports of their activities and recommendations sent to the alderman can in most cases be found on websites (although not all of them are up to date). Additionally, SSA council members who belong to a patient organization, for instance, have meetings with their members which they can use to give an account of their actions. Moreover, council meetings are open to the public. However, similar to the accountability efforts of city councillors, there is not much interest in accountability activities. Moreover, despite the official position of the advisory councils, much of their representation work happens informally, through for instance reciprocal informal contacts with aldermen or civil servants, which enables them to influence policies at an early stage. Yet, these informal contacts are difficult to account for.

A lot happens before the requested recommendation is drawn up. That's not visible to anybody else [but] you already have a lot of influence. (ex-chairman social support council)

Self-appointed non-elected representatives

The claims of this group of representatives draw primarily on personal experience and expertise as a means of *authorization*. For instance, many respondents point to health care professionals as capable of representing the interests of service users, since they can signal the problems that citizens encounter—‘*they are on the front line*’. Based on their everyday contacts, they know what the problems of service users are. However, respondents noted that healthcare professionals are still somewhat hesitant or not inclined to represent their patients on the local policy level since they focus on providing daily care to their patients and are not organized on the local level. Patient, elderly and informal carer organizations can also play a role in representing service users. In our case study, several regional patient organizations claimed to represent the interests of service users. Some are patients, elderly or informal carers themselves and can therefore draw on their own experience. In addition, these representatives authorize through contacts with their members. For instance, they organize contact points, polls and meetings with their constituency.

Yes, because we know that as the board [of the organization] you can fall into the trap of going along to very interesting meetings and saying nice



things, but losing touch with the people it concerns. (...) So, yes, for us it's very important that we listen to those informal carers and keep in touch with them. (informal carer organization)

These actors undertake a number of *accountability* efforts. In the case of organizations, this includes publishing minutes, annual reports, organizing meetings with their members and distributing newsletters. Their own contributions and that of individual representatives to municipal consultation rounds are publicly available and sometimes they make themselves heard through the media. This means that in theory their representative claims can be refuted. One respondent notes that this occasionally happens in practice.

For instance, when you have to say something in the press about something or other, we get phone calls right away, like: He speaks for the elderly but I don't agree with what he said. (respondent, patient organization).

However, respondents note that people generally show very limited interest in their accountability efforts: *'They can see [reports, etc.] and read them, but the response is minimal'* (respondent, patient organization). Also, in this category, part of representation work happens informally which again raises the problem of how difficult it is to account for such actions.

The varied nature of representation in decentralization

Concluding from our results, a variety of representative claims are made in the discussion on the decentralized policies. These claims vary in terms of the actors making the claims (elected, appointed non-elected and self-appointed non-elected), the groups that are claimed to be represented (general or specific groups of citizens), the basis of the claims (elections, expertise, direct contacts, etc.), and the authorization and accountability mechanisms used (formal and informal). Table 1 summarizes the results.

Discussion

Reflecting on the results presented in our study teaches us a number of things. First, we can conclude that representation is indeed varied in nature. Looking at representation through a claim-making lens shows the dynamics and variety of representation practice (Saward, 2010). This is seen in the variety of actors who claim to represent (which can change over time and place), the multiplicity of what these claims are based on (elections, formal position in legislative procedures,



Table 1: Overview of representation channels

<i>Actors</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Basis</i>	<i>Authorization</i>	<i>Accountability</i>
Electoral City councillors	Generic: citizens, 'the people' Sometimes specific: e.g. 'vulnerable people'	Institutional position: elected Direct contact with citizens Own experience	Elections, electoral manifesto, campaign activities Informal contacts, site visits, contact points Contact with other representatives Own experience as service user or professional	Elections Meetings council open to the public Information activities publicly available Local media
Appointed non-electoral Advisory councils appointed to give advice on issues concerning the decentralizations	Those affected by the decentralizations, e.g. people on benefits, informal carers, people with disabilities and homeless people.	Institutional position Shared experiences Formal and informal contacts with constituency	Shared experience Professional expertise Member's organizations Informal contacts Site visits Consultation with experts	Minutes, reports, advice, annual accounts publicly available Meetings with members of their organizations Meetings open to the public
Self-appointed non-electoral Patient/informal carer/elderly organizations; healthcare professionals, civil servants, churches, schools, district organizations	Specific groups using local services: people on benefits; people with a chronic condition or disability, with mental health issues, with a work-limiting disability, informal carers, elderly, problem youth	Own experience Experience gained in close contacts with constituency	Everyday contacts Own experiences Membership Polls, meetings, focus groups, contact points, etc.	Publicly available annual reports, etc. Meetings with members Newsletters, websites Accounts in the media



direct contact with service users, or personal and professional experiences and in most cases a combination of these) and the variety in terms of authorization and accountability. This variety ensures that citizens have access to a range of representatives (Brown 2006; Warren 2006). It also ensures that a wide variety of groups and causes can be and are heard in the debate. As expected we saw that appointed and self-appointed non-electoral representatives do indeed play an important role in representing the specific demands of specific groups who might otherwise be heard less often through electoral channels and they can thus redress inequalities in participation and representation (Saward, 2010).

Secondly, we can use the insights gained into the diversity and dynamics of representation to assess the democratic nature of representation in terms of responsiveness (Pitkin, 1967; Young, 2000; Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Montanaro, 2012). All actors claiming to represent service users acknowledge the importance of authorization and accountability and use mechanisms to guarantee both. Authorization not only takes place through elections, but also through reference to specific knowledge (either professional or experiential) or contact with constituents in order to learn what is going on in practice. In terms of accountability, claims are made transparent to a broad audience that can question and pass judgment on those claims (Bovens, 2007). This again can happen through elections but also through public debate, by making documents publicly available and by organizing meetings with constituencies. Therefore, individuals have various opportunities to object to what is said in their name (Pitkin, 1967). What became clear is that representatives feel the need to *account for* of their actions, their position in the debate and their reasons for taking such a position (Brown 2006). However, elected and non-elected representatives feel they are *held to account* to a very limited extent. Moreover, the informal nature of many contacts between representatives and their constituency also warrants reflection. On the one hand, informal contacts are very important to link the representatives with citizens and service users. Formal avenues alone are not enough for this and informal contacts ensure that there are many avenues in which citizens can authorize representatives and hold them to account (Young, 2000). On the other hand, the informal nature makes the relationship between representatives and the represented vulnerable since it depends largely on individual representatives acknowledging the importance of and establishing these contacts. Our study shows large differences between representatives in this regard. The fact that representative claims can be subject to debate and can be accepted or rejected in the *public* debate may be of added value here (see also Montanaro, 2012; Schrijvers and Couperus, 2013). The debate on the legitimacy of claims—think, for example, of the discussion on whether you need to be a service user yourself to represent the interest of users on an advisory board or whether certain self-appointed representatives such as professionals do not have only self-interest at heart—has the advantage that representative claims need to be explicated, accepted and thereby legitimated in public, which can strengthen the representation relationship. However, this public



debate only happens occasionally in practice. Increasing the frequency of its occurrence could be an important way to strengthen the representative relationship. As said, this debate between representatives is only a first step in assessing the democratic contribution of representative claims. The views of citizens themselves are crucial. Future studies should therefore focus on the claims that citizens accept as legitimate, the reasons for this acceptance and the authorization and accountability mechanisms they are interested in.

Thirdly, our study makes clear that the institutional position of representatives is important, but it only partly influences representative claims. Saward states (2010, p. 18) that if representations are a product of representative claims then the definition of representation as a property of certain institutions should be relaxed. The fact that within a certain category claims draw on multiple bases and on different authorization and accountability mechanisms and at the same time similarities exist across categories subscribes to this view. However, our results show that drawing a distinction between different types of representatives based on the institutional position of the actors making representative claims, as we have done in this paper, allows us to better understand the varied nature of representation. It also helps us obtain a view of the representative system as a whole, which is said to be especially important in assessing the democratic nature of representation (Pitkin, 1967; Parkinson, 2006). We saw that differences in institutional position have an impact on who representatives claim to represent, the basis, acceptance, potential influence, and authorization and accountability mechanisms (Chapman and Lowndes, 2014). The distinctions can be used as a heuristic tool to better understand the multifaceted nature of representation and the interactions between the various actors making representative claims should be further explored to assess the function of the entire representative system (Lord and Pollak, 2010; Kroger and Friedrich, 2013).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the respondents who participated in this study. They also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, the participants of the workshop on local politics at the *Politicologen etmaal 2015* and the participants of the ECPR Joint Sessions on democratic innovations 2015 for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

About the Authors

Hester van de Bovenkamp is an associate professor at the Health Care Governance department of the institute of Health Policy and Management at the Erasmus



University Rotterdam. Her research focuses on the participation and representation of citizens in health care at different levels of decision making and on the governance of health care quality.

Hans Vollaard is a lecturer in Dutch and European politics at Leiden University. His research focuses on local democracy, European disintegration, the Europeanization of the Netherlands and European health care policies.

Notes

- 1 In fact, some authors argue that because of the limited number of people active in participation processes, these processes should be seen and analysed as a form of representation in themselves, with these people acting as *citizen representatives* (Brown, 2006; Warren, 2006; Parkinson, 2006).
- 2 Decentralization is said to serve multiple goals, an important one being the reduction of public spending (Boogers *et al.*, 2009). In our case, cost reduction was an important reason to transfer tasks to the municipal level. The transferred tasks cost about € 10 billion annually, whereas the municipalities received about € 8 billion collectively in the first year.

References

- Boogers, M.J.G.J.A., Schaap, L., Collignon, E.D. and Karsten, N. (2009) Decentralisatie als opgave, *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 63: 29–49.
- Bovens, M. (2007) Analysing and assessing accountability: A conceptual framework. *European Law Journal*, 13: 447–468.
- Bovens, M. and Wille, A. (2011) *Diplomademocratie: Over de spanning tussen meritocratie en democratie*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker.
- Brown, M.B. (2006) Survey article: Citizen panels and the concept of representation. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14: 203–225.
- Canel, E. (2001) Participatory democracy: Building a new mode of urban politics in Montevideo city? *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 71: 25–46.
- Chapman, R. and Lowndes, V. (2014) Searching for authenticity? Understanding representation in network governance: The case of faith engagement. *Public Administration*, 92: 274–290.
- De Wilde, P. (2013) Representative claims analysis: Theory meets method. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20: 278–294.
- Decreus, T. (2013) Beyond Representation? A critique of the concept of the referent. *Representation*, 49: 33–43.
- Held, D. (2006) *Models of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hendriks, C.M. (2009) The democratic soup: Mixed meanings of political representation in governance networks. *Governance*, 22: 689–715.
- Hibbing, J.R. and Theiss-Morse, E. (2002) *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Freedom House. (2016) *Freedom in the World 2016: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure*. New York: Freedom House.
- Kroger, S. and Friedrich, D. (2013) Introduction: The representative turn in EU studies. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20: 155–170.



- Lijphart, A. (1990) *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek*. Haarlem: Becht.
- Lord, C. and Pollak, J. (2010) The EU's many representative modes: Colliding? Cohering? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 17: 117–136.
- Maia, R.C.M. (2012) Non-electoral political representation: Expanding discursive domains. *Representation*, 48: 429–443.
- Mair, P. (2005) Democracy beyond parties. Center for the Study of Democracy (paper 05'06).
- Manin, B. (1997) *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mansbridge, J. (2003) Rethinking representation. *American Political Science Review*, 97: 515–528.
- Mansbridge, J. (2011) Clarifying the concept of representation. *American Political Science Review*, 105: 621–630.
- Michels, A. (2011) De democratische waarde van burgerparticipatie: Interactief bestuur en deliberatieve fora. *Bestuurskunde*, 2: 75–84.
- Michels, A. (2012) Citizen participation in local policy making: Design and democracy. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 35: 285–292.
- Michels, A., and Binnema, H. (2016) Hoe divers, invloedrijk en deliberatief is een G1000? Het ontwerp van een burgertop en de verwezenlijking van democratische waarden. *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 70: 17–36.
- Michels, A. and de Graaf, L. (2010) Examining citizen participation: Local participatory policy making and democracy. *Local Government Studies*, 36: 477–491.
- Montanaro, L. (2012) The democratic legitimacy of self-appointed representatives. *The Journal of Politics*, 74: 1094–1107.
- Parkinson, J. (2006) *Deliberating in the Real World: Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pitkin, H.F. (1967) *The Concept of Representation*. Berkely: University of California.
- Pitkin, H.F. (2004) Representation and democracy: Uneasy alliance. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 27: 335–342.
- Plotke, D. (1997) Representation is democracy. *Constellations*, 4: 19–34.
- Posthumus, H., den Ridder, J., and de Hart, J. (2014) *Verenigd in verandering: Grote maatschappelijke organisaties en ontwikkelingen in de Nederlandse civil society*. Den Haag: SCP.
- Randeraad, N. and Wolffram, D.J. (1998) De Nederlandse bestuurscultuur in historisch perspectief. In F. Hendriks and T. Thoonen (Eds.), *Schikken en Plooiën: De stroperige staat bij nader inzien* (pp. 35–49). Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Rehfeld, A. (2006) Towards a general theory of political representation. *The Journal of Politics*, 68: 1–21.
- Saward, M. (2008) Making representations: Modes and strategies of political parties. *European Review*, 16: 271–286.
- Saward, M. (2009) Authorisation and authenticity: Representation and the unelected. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17: 1–22.
- Saward, M. (2010) *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaap, L. (2015) *Lokaal Bestuur*. Dordrecht: Convoy.
- Schrijvers, E. and Couperus, S. (2013) Voorbij verkiezing en parlement Alternatieve representatie in Nederland na 1870. In R. Aerts and P. De Goede (Eds.), *Omstreden Democratie: over de problemen van een succesverhaal*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Severs, E. (2010) Representation as claims-making: Quid responsiveness? *Representation*, 46: 411–423.
- Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers (2012) Meer nieuwsaanbod, meer van het zelfde nieuws: De positie van nieuwsvoorziening in de regio anno 2012: Een algemene aanbodsanalyse. Retrieved 23 Nov 2015.
- Street, J. (2004) Celebrity politicians: Popular culture and political representation. *BJPIR*, 6: 435–452.
- Urbainati, N. (2006) *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.



- Urbinati, N. and Warren, W.E. (2008) The concept of representation in contemporary democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11: 387–412.
- Van de Bovenkamp, H.M. and Vollaard, H. (2015) De democratische vertegenwoordiging van cliënten en patiënten bij de decentralisaties. *Beleid en Maatschappij*, 42: 102–121.
- Van de Bovenkamp, H., Vollaard, H., Trappenburg, M. and Grit, K. (2013) Voice and choice by delegation. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 38: 57–88.
- Van Oenen, G. (2011) *Nu even niet! Over de interpassieve samenleving*. Amsterdam: Van Gennep.
- Veldheer, V., van Jonker, J.J., Noije, L. and Vrooman, C. (2012) *Een beroep op de burger: Minder verzorgingsstaat, meer eigen verantwoordelijkheid?*. Den Haag: SCP.
- Verba, S. and Nie, N. (1972) *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Warren, M.E. (2006) Citizen Representatives. http://www.politics.ubc.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/poli_sci/Faculty/warren/Citizen_Representatives_Revised_Sept_2006.pdf.
- Wolff, C. (2013) *Functional Representation and Democracy in the EU: The European Commission and Social NGOs*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Young, I. (2000) *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.