

ARTICLE

Behind closed doors. Informal politics in Dutch municipalities

Simon Otjes, Denny van der Vlist & Thijs Vos¹

Abstract

Despite generous attention at the national level, we know surprisingly little about the extent to which informal politics occurs at the local level and what drives this. This study addresses this gap by investigating the presence, variation and explanations of informal discussions between politicians in Dutch municipalities. Following a mixed-method design that includes semi-structured interviews in three carefully selected municipalities and a survey with answers from over a thousand Dutch councillors, we identify informal discussions amongst local politicians as highly prevalent in Dutch municipalities, particularly for coalition parties. Coalition members describe these informal meetings as crucial for decision-making, indicating how decisions tend to be made before entering the 'formal' political arena. We show these patterns to be consistent irrespective of coalition type – minimum winning, oversized or a council-wide agreement – and the population size of the municipality. These findings provide important first insights into the prevalence of these informal discussions at the local level, thereby developing a more comprehensive picture of how local democratic politics functions.

Keywords: Informal politics, Local politics, Coalitions, Government-opposition, Population size

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Leiden University, the Netherlands. Corresponding author: t.j.vos@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Introduction

The popular image of politics often features negotiations and dealmaking in dimly lit backrooms, hallways, or even at the bar. Politics is rarely confined to official discussions inside the legislature. This informal dimension of politics – a kind of politics that takes place outside the ‘formal’ channels (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) – is observed with different sentiments. On the one hand, informal politics is conceived as problematic, raising serious concerns about democratic accountability as backrooms are opaque, exclusive, and shrouded in secrecy. On the other hand, informal politics is deemed essential for facilitating political decision-making in fragmented political landscapes (Lijphart, 1968). Either way, understanding these informal patterns is crucial for developing a comprehensive picture of how democratic politics functions.

At the national level, informal politics – as manifested in continuous bargaining and closed-door coordination among parties – is widely recognised as central to consociational democracies such as the Netherlands (Holzhacker, 2002; Louwerse & Timmermans, 2024; Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000). Following Helmke and Levitsky (2004, p. 727), we consider these practices to reflect informal institutions, defined as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” such as plenary sessions of the legislature, its committees, or executive meetings. We focus on what we variously refer to as informal politics, informal coordination and informal institutions. While research at the national level highlights the importance of informal coordination among governing coalitions and suggests the inclusion of opposition parties only under particular conditions (Koole, 2021; Otjes & Louwerse, 2024), its prevalence at the local level remains largely unexplored. We currently do not know whether and when these patterns of informal coordination between the coalition and the opposition also exist at the local level. Existing studies of local politics focus on formal arenas (Egner et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2025), with few examining informal institutions and practices (exceptions are Copus & Erlingsson, 2013; Karlsson, 2013). This absence is especially notable given that informality is associated with greater social proximity typically found at the local level (Oliver et al., 2012).

To address this gap in the literature, we set out to investigate informal politics at the local level by answering our main question: *To what extent and under what conditions does informal politics occur in Dutch municipalities?* From the national level, we know that informal politics is pervasive but mainly focuses on the coalition, while opposition parties are only involved in coordination with coalition parties under specific conditions (Otjes & Louwerse, 2024). Therefore, we specifically seek to examine two sub-questions: *Firstly, to what extent are opposition parties involved in informal coordination with coalition parties? And secondly, under what conditions does this occur?*

In their seminal paper, Helmke and Levitsky (2004) suggest two ways to investigate informal political institutions: 1) qualitative research focused on a rich understanding of a small number of cases and 2) large-N survey research. We adopt their suggestion and combine the two into an exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine patterns of informal coordination between parties in Dutch municipal councils. First, we conducted interviews with municipal councillors in three carefully selected municipalities, which feature different coalition types but are as similar as possible in population size, institutional, geographic, economic, and demographic backgrounds. These interviews allow us to gain insight into the manifestation and prevalence of informal politics and coordination between coalition and opposition. Second, our quantitative analyses use a survey of more than a thousand councillors. Based on the qualitative interviews, our focus in the quantitative analysis is on coordination between coalition and opposition councillors prior to council meetings. The survey allows us to systematically examine the prevalence of informal coalition-opposition contacts, thereby providing valuable descriptive patterns and an answer to our first sub-question. Moreover, we attempt to identify municipal, institutional, and party-system drivers of this informal coordination. While individual characteristics such as formal position, role perceptions, and personality likely matter significantly for informal coordination (e.g. Boogers, 2014), our data unfortunately does not allow us to integrate individual-level characteristics, leaving us to investigate the structural factors that influence patterns of informal coordination. This allows us to answer our second sub-question.

Since literature on informal political decision-making at the municipal level is sparse (Copus & Erlingsson, 2013; Karlsson, 2013), our findings have a distinct value beyond the borders of the Netherlands. Local government in the Netherlands is characterised by coalition government, making our findings also representative of other countries where coalition government is the norm, such as the Nordic countries, some German states, and Belgium. Moreover, the longstanding tradition of coalition bargaining in the Netherlands, the relatively strong position of the council according to councillors themselves (Plüss & Kübler, 2013),² and the absence of a strong mayor (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Navarro et al., 2017) make the Netherlands a likely case for observing a complex network of informal coordination among council politicians – instead of a model centred around a mayor. The Netherlands can thereby serve as an insightful exploratory study of informal politics at the local level, shedding light on the importance of informal dynamics for local decision-making.

2 Though this view is not shared by Dutch mayors according to Navarro et al. (2017).

Informal Politics at the Local Level

There is a growing body of quantitative research on the formal aspects of legislative politics at the national (Louwerse et al., 2017), European (Hix, 2002) and local levels (Vos et al., 2025). These studies share a bias typical of this kind of 'behaviourist' research: The formal politics that are visible and quantifiable do not always reveal where the most significant political action takes place. Formal voting patterns may not capture crucial political divisions as disagreements may already be resolved in other fora (Roger et al., 2017). In fact, there are good reasons to believe that informal politics is even more critical for actual decision-making.

As early as the 1960s, Lijphart (1968) showed that continuous informal coordination was an important part of the political norms in Dutch consociational democracy at the national level. The defining features of this coordination were that it occurred behind closed doors, outside formal parliamentary meetings, and out of the public view. Lijphart (1968) emphasised that such coordination could transcend the division between coalition and opposition, particularly on important issues. The importance of such internal coordination has only increased since the 1980s, as 'political monism' has become the norm. Parties negotiate extensively over a coalition agreement; Dutch coalition negotiations are, on average, the longest in Europe (Ecker & Meyer, 2020). Coalition agreements are an essential tool for managing coalition governance, rendering the decisions in the agreement as set in stone (Andeweg, 2004; Holzhaacker, 2002; Louwerse & Timmermans, 2024; Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000). Coalition MPs and ministers continually coordinate on the parliamentary agenda, the implementation of agreed-upon policy compromises in the coalition agreement, and new policy issues that arise (Holzhaacker, 2002). These negotiations tend to be institutionalised in a weekly meeting of the prime minister, vice-prime ministers and the chairs of party groups, which have been labelled as "turret meetings", "mini-summits", or "cockpit talks" (Louwerse & Timmermans, 2024). This political reality is henceforth labelled political monism because the two formally separate bodies, cabinet and parliament (or at least the MPs belonging to the coalition majority), operate politically as one, in contrast to the practice of political dualism, where parliament and the cabinet operate separately.

The evidence on the importance of such informal coordination at the local level is far less consistent. The literature on local politics tends to focus on how differences in formal institutional structures between countries affect behaviour and attitudes (Egner et al., 2013; Heinelt et al., 2018; Loughlin et al., 2010; Swianiewicz, 2014). Various typologies of local government exist, most of which are primarily based on local-level formal institutions. Moreover, local institutions and their formal responsibilities have been a key area of recent research (Ladner et al., 2023), and are part of broader explanations of local decision-making (e.g. Mortensen et al., 2022). While offering essential explanations of local political behaviour, these studies either omit

or only implicitly incorporate the dynamics of informal politics at the local level, leaving us with a partial understanding of local politics.

There are, however, a few studies that have pointed to the importance of informal practices at the local level. Drawing on a survey of European local councillors, Karlsson (2013) argues that informal institutions shape the political practice of local government as much as formal institutions do. Local councils are not regarded as the key arenas of decision-making, as decisions are made through informal coordination among members of the local executive and of the local council. These patterns are likely to align with certain formal institutions: In two-party systems, the locus of decision-making is informal bargaining within the governing party; in coalitional systems, it occurs between parties; while systems with a strong mayor tend to focus on those in direct proximity to the mayor (Copus & Erlingsson, 2013). A report on how politicians use their time can also be used as a proxy for coordination: Plüss and Kübler (2013) show that local representatives have frequent contacts with councillors outside their own parliamentary party group, without specifying whether these contacts are between coalition and opposition councillors or within the coalition. Similarly, Navarro et al. (2017) show that Dutch mayors spend more time than any other mayors in Europe in meetings with other politicians.

Structured research into the role of informal politics in local government, both within the Netherlands and more broadly, remains limited. Peters and Castenmiller (2018, p. 223) note that our knowledge about coalition politics in the Netherlands is based on “all kinds of images which are based on little empirical evidence”. Boogers et al. (2021) present the most systematic study of the ‘culture of local government’ in the Netherlands, identifying two different dimensions of local government: the level of formality and the level of politicisation. When it comes to formality, they describe two ideal types: an informal culture, characterised by a family culture that is strongly oriented towards personal relations, and a formal culture focused on administrative, political and government procedures.³ This distinction, though analytically useful, does not deny that even in a municipality with an informal culture, the council remains the formal arena for decision-making and that even in a municipality with a formal culture, informal coordination can help to speed up decision-making. None of these studies, however, can systematically untangle patterns of informal politics, neither in cross-country comparisons nor in specific studies of Dutch local politics.

3 Sadly, these data about political culture are not available systematically at the municipal level. Boogers et al. (2021) indicates that there are strong differences between perceptions of culture between politicians in the same municipality, raising doubts about the extent to which these patterns are meaningful.

Correlates of Local Informal Political Institutions

Our first expectation concerns the overall prevalence of coordination between coalition and opposition councillors.⁴ Before 2010, when Dutch governments nearly always held majorities in parliament, the literature emphasises that informal coordination occurred *within* the coalition (Timmermans & Andeweg, 2000). The goal of coordination was to prevent coalition parties from surprising each other with initiatives and to develop solutions to issues outside the coalition agreement. Our expectation is that patterns of informal politics in Dutch local government will align with the national level in the sense that most informal coordination occurs between members of coalition parties. Coalition parties require greater coordination due to their collaborative nature, whereas opposition parties can operate more independently. Other studies of the behaviour of local coalition and opposition parties also show that their dynamics tend to overlap significantly with those of their national counterparts (e.g. Debus & Gross, 2016; Van Well, 2025), leaving us confident that this is likely to be true for informal coordination as well.

1. **Coalition coordination hypothesis:** coalition councillors will more often informally coordinate with councillors of coalition parties than with councillors of opposition parties.

The following three hypotheses concern the conditions under which opposition councillors are included in informal coordination with coalition councillors. Recent national-level research shows that coordination increasingly occurs between the coalition and the opposition (Otjes & Louwerse, 2024). Studying the period when Dutch governments relied on the support of opposition parties to secure legislative majorities in the Senate, Otjes and Louwerse (2024) argue that parties used the existing ‘political-cultural infrastructure’ developed for majority government to facilitate bargaining between the coalition and the opposition. Coalition types thus seem to matter for patterns of informal coordination.

At the national level, in minimal-winning coalitions, coalition politicians chiefly coordinate with politicians from other coalition parties (Otjes & Louwerse, 2024). There is no need to involve the opposition in these bargains, as the coalition already has a majority. Moreover, as stated earlier, coordination within the coalition helps ensure that initiatives by one party do not catch another coalition party by surprise (Holzhacker, 2002). We expect that, similar to the national level, the nature of the

4 Given the lack of literature about intra-opposition coordination in democratic systems (but see Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020), we do not include expectations about whether opposition politicians coordinate with opposition councillors. It also falls outside the remit of our study.

governing coalition is related to the inclusiveness of coordination. However, at the national level, we compare minimal-winning coalitions with (effectively) minority coalitions, whereas at the local level, we mainly compare minimal-winning coalitions with oversized coalitions, as minority governments are extremely rare in the Netherlands (only six minority coalitions formed after the 2022 elections, which were held in 333 municipalities). The literature suggests that, in oversized coalitions, less coordination is required than in minimal-winning coalitions because these coalitions can afford to lose one party, creating a less restrictive dynamic between the coalition and the opposition (Lijphart, 2012). Yet coordination between coalition and opposition parties may also be low under both minimal-winning and oversized coalitions, as in both cases the coalition has a majority and coordinates to prevent breakdown. Cognizant of the possibility of no difference between the two setups, our hypothesis states that under a minimal-winning coalition, contacts between coalition and opposition councillors will be less intense than otherwise. Our expectation is explicitly mirrored. That is: We expect that what boosts coalition councillors reporting contacts with opposition councillors also boosts opposition councillors reporting contacts with coalition councillors.

2. **Minimal-winning coalition hypothesis:** coalition/opposition councillors will informally coordinate with councillors from opposition/coalition parties less often under a minimal-winning coalition than under other coalition types.

So-called “council-wide agreements” take the logic of oversized coalitions to the extreme. This is a label for several different ways of organising the relationship between the council and the executive that depart from the traditional coalitional model. Under a council-wide agreement, parties commit to transforming the political culture by opening the political process to issue-driven deliberation and shifting majorities in council decision-making, rather than establishing a clearly demarcated coalition and opposition (Van Kalken, 2025). In some councils, this arrangement is combined with a long-term policy agenda; in others, the municipality’s key challenges are diagnosed without offering detailed solutions, leaving policy development to the executive (Van Kalken, 2025, pp. 125-126). Likewise, in some municipalities, the executive is selected in a non-partisan manner, while in others the largest parties supply members of the executive. In some cases, a formal coalition is formed alongside the council-wide agreement, and these parties select the executive members (Van Kalken, 2025, pp. 117-122).

Council-wide agreements are not merely programmatic documents, but instruments aimed at reshaping the political culture and the governing process. Compared with traditional coalition agreements, they place greater emphasis on the respective roles of the council and executive, as well as on ideals of inclusiveness, transparency,

and consensual policymaking (Van Kalken, 2022). Earlier studies show that council-wide agreements reduce voting cohesion among coalition parties. If there is a disagreement between the parties supplying members of the local executive under a council-wide agreement, the parties accept the outcome of the vote, as there is no mutual expectation that they must reach an agreement. Council-wide agreements thereby facilitate shifting majorities and weaken the coalition-opposition divide (Van Kalken, 2022; Vos et al., 2025).

Theoretically, such agreements may have distinct implications for patterns of informal coordination. On the one hand, council-wide agreements explicitly aim to establish the local council as the central arena for substantive debate (Van Kalken, 2022). This ambition entails shifting the locus of decision-making from informal to formal meetings to advance deliberation and transparency. On the other hand, these agreements open up opportunities for alternating majorities. In this respect, council-wide agreements resemble minority governance arrangements, in which no stable majority can be taken for granted (Vos et al., 2025). Just as in minority coalitions, this may require more (informal) coordination among the various parties to achieve majorities on an issue-by-issue basis. Parties may therefore rely more heavily on informal contacts across party lines, involving both parties that do and do not supply members of the executive. Mindful of the possibility that council-wide agreements may lead to less informal politics, our hypothesis states that under a council-wide agreement, the contacts between coalition and opposition councillors will be more intense than they otherwise would be.

3. **Council-wide agreement hypothesis:** coalition/opposition councillors will informally coordinate with councillors from opposition/coalition parties more often under a council-wide agreement than otherwise.

Finally, the prevalence of informal coordination at the local level may correlate with the population size of these municipalities. Smaller sizes are well known to facilitate a more informal and personalised form of politics (Oliver et al., 2012; Van der Vlist & Veenendaal, 2025). Smaller democratic polities have denser social structures, in which personal connections and overlapping social roles are more common (Corbett, 2015; Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Denters et al., 2014). Local politicians are more likely to meet each other outside of the council chambers in different roles (e.g. as coaches of the local football club), creating more opportunities for informal coordination. In smaller-scale polities, political conflict as well as political cooperation are likely to be built on existing social relationships and connections within the same community (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). In contrast, larger municipalities offer politicians a higher level of anonymity, which reduces the likelihood of informal coordination. Moreover, the literature has repeatedly shown that population size is correlated

with social heterogeneity (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Gerring & Veenendaal, 2020). As Skoog and Karlsson (2018) observe in larger municipalities, this heterogeneity may result in more political dissent and antagonistic behaviour among politicians. While this may strengthen the need for informal coordination, it is even more likely to prevent constructive informal contacts altogether.

4. **Size hypothesis:** coalition/opposition councillors will informally coordinate with opposition/coalition councillors in smaller municipalities more often than in larger municipalities.

Local Government in the Netherlands

Dutch local government differs from local government elsewhere in Europe and beyond. As of the time of writing (2026), the Netherlands consists of 342 municipalities, each with identical institutions. The municipal council is elected every four years under a quasi-open list proportional representation system (Van der Kolk, 2022). Most municipalities feature a multi-party system in which parties rarely achieve outright majorities and, as a consequence, governing coalitions are a nearly universal feature of Dutch local politics (De Blok et al., 2024). Like at the national level, these governing coalitions form after negotiations; the largest party generally takes the initiative, though it does not necessarily itself end up in the coalition. The outcome of the negotiations is often a coalition agreement with policy commitments, as well as an allocation of the two to nine alderpersons, who, together with the mayor, form the executive and are responsible for the day-to-day management of the municipality. Members of the executive tend to be full-time politicians, while councillors are expected to perform their functions part-time.

An exceptional feature of Dutch local government is that the mayor is appointed by the central government through a non-partisan procedure and is not involved in coalition negotiations (Van der Kolk, 2022). Mayors are appointed for a term of six years, which does not align with council terms. Moreover, the mayor is expected to act in a non-partisan manner, to chair both the municipal council and the local executive, and to have separate responsibilities for public safety. Relationships within the executive, between the mayor and alderpersons, are considered collegial (Heinelt et al., 2018).

Municipal councils meet regularly; the frequency of meetings is set by the council itself, and plenary council meetings are typically preceded by public committee meetings and closed-door party meetings. An important subject of debate is the relationship between the council and the executive board: The board of mayor and alderpersons has clear advantages over the council in terms of access to information and available time. Therefore, in 2002, reforms were implemented to more

clearly distinguish the responsibilities of both and to strengthen the council (De Blok et al., 2024). These changes included requiring alderpersons to step down from the council after being appointed to the board and appointing a council clerk responsible for ensuring equal access to council information. Their respective functions would be more explicitly distinguished: The council sets the general direction of policy and oversees the executive, while the executive implements policy. The intended outcome of this reform was that institutional dualism would end the “inclusive and closed culture” that characterised Dutch local government at the time (Staatscommissie Dualisme en Lokale Democratie 1999, pp. 448–449). By “inclusive”, the commission meant that various actors held distinct roles yet operated in close proximity to one another, leading to role confusion, particularly among coalition parties. The aim was to establish a clearer distinction between the council and the executive; its implications for opposition-coalition contacts were not considered.

In sum, the enduring tradition of coalitional government in the Netherlands, the comparatively strong position of the council, and the collegial nature of local government make Dutch municipalities likely to exhibit a complex network of informal coordination. Patterns of informal coordination are likely to resemble those of other political systems that combine collegial government with list-PR, but differ from those of political systems that offer a more majoritarian form of democracy featuring a strong mayor.

Qualitative Analysis

To determine to what extent and under what conditions informal politics occurs in Dutch municipalities, we employed a mixed-methods design using both qualitative interviews and a survey of local councillors. In particular, we used an exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). That is, we started with our qualitative analysis and subsequently used those insights to conduct a broader quantitative test. Such a design is a good fit for a situation where there are no existing measures. Our goal was to develop quantitative measures that are grounded in the experiences of local councillors and culture of Dutch local government (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Specifically, we used qualitative interviews to gather descriptive insights into the manifestation and occurrence of informal coordination. This gave us a first insight into the extent to which opposition parties are involved in informal coordination with coalition parties. Our interviews served to determine to what extent councillors engage in informal coordination at all and how they understand it. In the subsequent quantitative section, we use a large-N survey to determine how common informal coordination is in the population and to identify and test our expectations about the circumstances under which it occurs. Our interviews were thereby a crucial first step as they informed the formulation of the survey questions below.

Qualitative Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews with Council Members

In total, we have interviewed nine members of municipal councils across three municipalities.⁵ As presented in Table 1, the municipalities reflect the three most common coalition types at the local level in the Netherlands: minimal-winning coalitions, over-sized coalitions, and coalitions based on council-wide agreements. On other aspects, the municipalities are as similar as possible regarding their population size,⁶ region and urbanity (avoiding a strong contrast between urban and rural municipalities), average income, and not having recent experience with municipal amalgamation. We conducted semi-structured interviews in the fall of 2023, and given that the new coalitions had been in office for only a year by then, we selected councillors who had been part of the coalition in the previous term, between 2018 and 2022.

In each of these municipalities, three interviews were conducted with individuals who served as municipal council members for a coalition party group during the 2018–2022 period. These interview respondents were carefully selected: One member per coalition party group was interviewed, council members from both national and local parties were included, both party group leaders and regular council members were interviewed, and both male and female council members were represented. As we sought to get a grasp on coordination involving the coalition, we focused our interviews on coalition councillors. The interviewees participated on the condition that they would remain anonymous. In our description of the results, we present anonymised excerpts from the interviews to illustrate our findings.

5 These interviews were part of a broader study on the relations between opposition and coalition in the Dutch municipal councils (Vos et al., 2023). The interview questionnaire is included in the appendix.

6 We acknowledge that this does not allow us to explore the size hypothesis in the qualitative section, but we did not have the capacity to conduct interviews in more than three municipalities. This will be examined in depth in the large-N analysis.

Table 1. Overview of the Municipal Cases and Their Coalition Composition

Municipality	Lisse	Pijnacker-Nootdorp	Wijdmeren
Inhabitants	23,015	56,572	24,494
Seats	19	31	19
Average income	35,400	40,000	41,400
Province	South-Holland	South-Holland	North-Holland
Type of coalition	Minimal-winning coalition	Council-wide agreement	Oversized coalition
Composition of coalition (with seats)	CDA (5), <i>Nieuw Lisse</i> (4), D66 (4)	VVD (6), <i>Eerlijk Alternatief</i> (5), CDA (5), D66 (4) ⁷	CDA (4), <i>Dorpsbelangen</i> (4), VVD (3), D66 (2)

Results of the Qualitative Analysis: Informal Politics in Three Municipalities

In the municipality of Lisse, a minimal-winning coalition was formed, consisting of CDA, D66 and an independent local list named *Nieuw Lisse* (New Lisse). Interviews in Lisse emphasised the existence of a strong consensual culture in the municipality, suggesting that both coalition and opposition parties were actively involved in the decision-making process. Surprisingly, this consensual culture seemed to be most evident at moments when political stakes were high. Decisions about budget cuts, for example, were explicitly approached through a search for broad majorities, extending beyond the existing coalition. As one councillor explained:

There is always a very constructive approach to what is important for the village. For years, we have struggled with difficult financial circumstances. Because of this, in the previous term, the entire council, together with the entire executive board, worked together multiple times to find ways to implement budget cuts that would cause as little harm as possible while still aligning with the necessary tasks at hand.

Crucially, these consensual norms were firmly attributed to – and maintained through – extensive patterns of informal coordination. Reflecting a desire to secure

⁷ In Pijnacker-Nootdorp, the coalition composition was not the same throughout the entire period between 2018 and 2022. The member of the local executive from *Eerlijk Alternatief* (a local party whose name means ‘Honest/Fair Alternative’) resigned early and was replaced by a member from another party.

broad majorities, much of the decision-making hardly reached the council, being handled in informal and formal coordination before the actual council meeting. Most decisions were made informally beforehand between the parties and subsequently formalised in the 'formal' committee meetings, leaving the actual council meeting a mere formality.

While this informal coordination structured coalition politics in Lisse, similar arrangements were observed in a context without a clear coalition-opposition divide. In the municipality of Pijnacker-Nootdorp, all parties in the council reached a council-wide agreement, indicating the main priorities for the next four years. The executive branch was composed of members from four parties, offering some form of a coalition and opposition divide, but without a formal coalition agreement between them. In an ideologically diverse council, our respondents considered the council-wide agreement as a starting point rather than a strongly binding commitment. In fact, some interviewees considered the agreement so vague that, as one coalition councillor indicated, they "never read that agreement again in those four years". While this agreement offered little substantial value directly, it prevented the creation of a more traditional coalition agreement, offering more room for informal coordination, as indicated by a councillor:

Everyone had party group meetings on Monday. [...] If you had just had your own party group meeting, you would walk over to the other party group and ask, 'What do you think, and what are you going to do?'

Finally, in Wijdemeren, an oversized coalition was formed between CDA, D66, VVD, and a local independent list, *Dorpsbelangen* (*Village Interests*). Respondents from Wijdemeren also reported a practice of widespread informal coordination. Oversized coalitions should offer the potential for parties to break with their coalition partners, something that seemed to be facilitated by informal coordination beforehand, as described by a local councillor:

We didn't have coalition discipline in the strict sense of the word, as it was rarely enforced. But we did have an agreement not to catch each other off guard.

In fact, these agreements seemed to go beyond mere information sharing, as they also involved direct bargaining. In that sense, the oversized coalition in Wijdemeren displayed more stringent coalitional dynamics than observed in Lisse or Pijnacker-Nootdorp. As one council member lamented:

By the time the vote took place, so many phone calls had already been made between all the [coalition] parties that we pretty much knew where it was going. And of course, that's difficult for the opposition, the feeling that there's nothing to gain.

Even when dealing with the opposition, informal coordination orchestrated outcomes significantly. According to the interviews, personal connections mattered in these cross-coalitional discussions. As one of the council members remarked:

In a village like this, you have council members who have been there for twenty or thirty years. And I sometimes noticed that the old politics, those who had been around for a long time, had a lot of contact with each other. If they thought something was good, then it was good. And that had nothing to do with party lines. I would sometimes sit there thinking, 'How is this even possible?' We had come up with something as a coalition, and everyone was on board. Then it would be five or six o'clock, and at seven, the meeting would start. And suddenly, a call would come from the party group leaders of the Liberal Party and Labour Party/GreenLeft, who weren't even in the coalition, saying it wasn't going to happen. I felt it very strongly: There was a council within the council.

In sum, all three municipalities revealed the crucial importance of informal politics. In all three cases, informal coordination served to facilitate information-sharing and decision-making before the start of the 'formal' council meetings. These discussions do not only occur between councillors of coalition parties, but, crucially for our study, also between coalition and opposition. Even in the municipality where the division between coalition and opposition is sharpest, and the coalition tends to 'pre-cook' decisions informally, coalition councillors report that opposition councillors use informal coordination to influence or block decisions.

Quantitative Analysis

We now turn to the quantitative analysis. The goal of the quantitative analysis is to determine to what extent opposition councillors are involved in coordination with coalition councillors, and to determine under which municipal-level conditions this occurs.

Quantitative Methods: Survey of Councillors About Informal Coordination

To identify the extent and conditions under which informal politics occurs, we use a survey fielded by the Dutch Association of Municipal Councillors (*Nederlandse Vereniging van Raadsleden*) in the Spring of 2024. The survey was sent to all 8462 councillors in the Netherlands, of whom 1139 responded, resulting in a response

rate of approximately 13 per cent. This response rate is low but comparable to that of other elite surveys in the Netherlands.⁸ The survey responses were shared on the condition of anonymity, meaning that we know the municipality of respondents and the answers to our questions, but no background information, such as age, gender, education level, or political experience. This means we can only look at municipality-level differences between councillors and not at individual-level explanations of behaviour.

We employ two sets of survey questions. First, to gain a descriptive sense about the prevalence of informal coordination, we asked respondents about the occurrence of informal coordination between coalition parties, opposition parties and joint meetings involving both. Specifically, we asked: “In some municipalities, there is (informal) coordination to substantively prepare decision-making on items on the council’s agenda. How often do the following situations occur in this context?” with the following situations as answers: “Coordination between coalition party groups”, “Coordination between opposition party groups” and “Joint coordination between coalition and opposition party groups”.⁹

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	S.D.	Min.	Max.	N
Reported coalition-opposition contacts	3.35	3.00	1.04	1.00	5.00	1084
Coalition party	0.56	-	-	0.00	1.00	1103
Minimal-winning coalitions	0.44	-	-	0.00	1.00	1150
Council-wide agreement	0.22	-	-	0.00	1.00	1145
Net debt quote	0.54	0.55	0.35	-1.38	2.11	1109
Logged population size	10.69	10.66	0.77	7.16	13.41	1150
Effective number of council parties	6.37	5.93	1.90	2.02	12.74	1145
Number of coalitions	3.70	3.00	1.01	3.00	9.00	966
Number of coalition parties	3.85	4.00	1.51	0.00	14.00	1150

Next, we asked respondents whether and to what extent, in the case that they are preparing a proposal to change policy during a council meeting (e.g. a motion or

8 The response rate is higher than that of the 2021 National Municipal Councillors study, which was 9%.

9 Answer options are: “(Almost) never”, “Usually not”, “Sometimes yes, sometimes no”, “Usually” and “(Almost) always” and the option “Don’t know”.

an amendment), they coordinate with different actors. Specifically, we asked: “How often do you coordinate with the following parties before the meeting if you want to submit a motion or amendment to change the municipality’s policy?” with the following actors: “Councillors from coalition parties” and “Councillors from opposition parties”.¹⁰ We present these data descriptively below and include a significance test for the coalition coordination hypothesis. We then follow this by a regression analysis, which tests the three remaining expectations. As noted above, our expectations are explicitly mirrored: We expect that what increases contacts with opposition councillors reported by coalition councillors also increases opposition contacts with coalition councillors. We therefore constructed a variable of reported coalition-opposition contacts, which are coalition contacts for opposition councillors and opposition contacts for coalition councillors. We define a coalition party as one that has signed a coalition agreement and/or supplies members of the local executive. Opposition parties are those that did not sign the coalition agreement or supply members of the local executive. Respondents could indicate the status of their own party.¹¹ As there may be structural differences between reported contacts between coalition and opposition councillors, we include a variable that captures whether the councillor is a member of a coalition party.

We examine a range of municipal characteristics to determine under what conditions coordination between coalition and opposition parties occurs. Firstly, we examine the formal nature of the coalition agreement (the *council-wide agreement hypothesis* and the *minimal-winning coalition hypothesis*), based on data from the Netherlands Local Coalition Database (NLCD). Here, we contrast minimal-winning coalitions with other coalitions (mainly oversized coalitions). In a minimal-winning coalition, all parties are necessary for a majority. In an oversized coalition, at least one party is not required for a majority. In total, 44% of the coalitions are minimal-winning coalitions. Secondly, we identified the municipalities that employed a council-wide agreement, which accounted for 22% of the total coalitions. The presence of a council-wide agreement is separate from coalition type. As we noted above, there are different kinds of council-wide agreements: Some include an extensive policy agreement and others only an agreement about coalition processes. Only when a policy agreement is present do we count all signatories as coalition parties.

We also investigate the effect of municipal population size (*municipal size hypothesis*), measured as the logged population size on 1 January 2024, with the expectation

10 Answer options are: “(Almost) never”, “Usually not”, “Sometimes yes, sometimes no”, “Usually” and “(Almost) always” and the option “Don’t know”.

11 4 percent of respondents indicated that there is no formal distinction between coalition and opposition in their municipality. These cases are coded as missing on their coalition status variable.

that politics is less formal in smaller municipalities. We use the logged population size to prevent larger outliers from biasing the results. These data are collected from the Central Bureau of Statistics. Appendix 1 includes an overview of possible alternatives or potential mediators for population size, based on correlations: population size (non-logged) and council seats (which increase with population size). We conclude that no factor performs better than logged population size, which we use in the remainder of the article.

We include four control variables: firstly, the municipality's financial situation (we specifically use the Net Debt Quote¹² available from the Ministry of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations), under the expectation that financially less robust municipalities are more likely to see coordination (as the excerpt about Lisse shows). Our second control variable taps into the nature of the political culture. We seek to capture this by the number of coalitions that have been forced to step down in recent council periods. We count the Number of Coalitions that the municipality has seen since 2010, without an explicit expectation about the direction of the relationship: A history of political instability may be associated with continued poor relations inside the coalition, or alternatively, councillors, bearing in mind that previous coalitions were unstable, may invest more in coordination. These data are available from the NLCD, but in municipalities that were amalgamated in this period this could not be calculated. Thirdly, we examine the Number of Coalition Parties from the NLCD, expecting that more parties would require greater coordination. This variable is the absolute Number of Coalition Parties. Finally, we look at the Effective Number of Council Parties from the data of the Electoral Council under the expectation that more parties in the council require more coordination. We use the well-established approach of Laakso and Taagepera (1979): inverse of the sum of squared seats shares.

Descriptive Patterns of Informal Politics in Dutch Municipalities

To determine to what extent informal politics occurs in Dutch municipalities, it is useful to look at descriptive data. We asked with whom councillors informally coordinate when working on a policy initiative. The results of these questions are displayed in Figure 1 and Table 2. We report contacts within the coalition (as reported by coalition councillors) and coalition-opposition contacts (as reported by coalition and opposition councillors). Eight out of ten coalition councillors report usually consulting other coalition councillors. They also report that informal coordination

12 The Net Debt Ratio reflects the level of the municipality's debt burden in relation to its own resources and provides an indication of the pressure of interest payments and repayments on the operational budget. We have divided it by 100 for interpretability.

with other opposition councillors is more common than not: Fewer than one in five coalition councillors report that this never or usually does not happen; just around half of the coalition councillors reports that this happens sometimes; and a similar share reports that this happens usually or always. The numbers for informal coordination with coalition councillors as reported by opposition councillors are roughly similar. Table 3 shows the average scores on this consultation variable. Crucially for our study, coalition councillors on average consult more with other coalition councillors than with members of the opposition (a t-test shows that this is significant at the 0.001-level ($t = 16.54$)). This supports the *coalition coordination hypothesis*, which posits that coalition councillors are more likely to consult with members of the coalition than with members of the opposition.

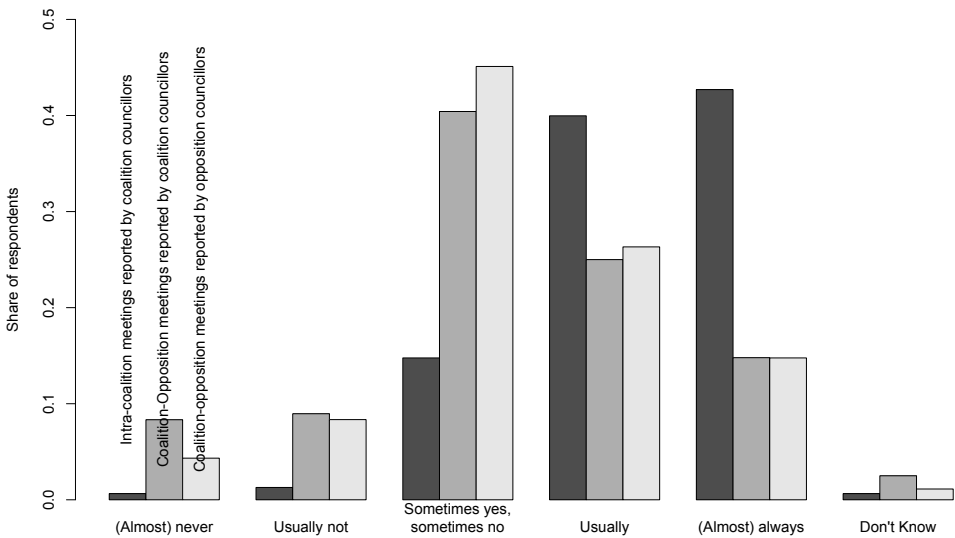


Figure 1. Reported Meetings

Table 3. Averages

Group	Coordinates with	Mean (SE)
Coalition	Coalition councillors	4.24 (0.03)
Coalition	Opposition councillors	3.39 (0.04)
Opposition	Coalition councillors	3.29 (0.05)

Mean values with standard errors. Scales run from 1 to 5.

Correlates of Informal Politics in Dutch Municipal Councils

We next look at the conditions under which coordination occurs between coalition and opposition politicians. Table 4 presents a regression that analyses what structures informal coordination between coalition and opposition councillors. Our dependent variable is coordination with coalition councillors reported by opposition councillors and coordination with opposition councillors reported by coalition councillors. We look at two possible hypothesised drivers: the nature of the coalition agreement and (logged) population size. We control for the municipality's financial position, the number of coalitions (as a measure of political stability), the effective number of council parties, and the number of coalition parties.¹³

As established previously, coalition councillors tend to foster contacts with other coalition councillors. The *minimal-winning coalition hypothesis* proposes that such coordination occurs less often under a minimal-winning coalition. The regression indicates that municipalities with these coalition types are not significantly associated with fewer contacts within the coalition or fewer contacts outside of it. Coalition type does not affect these patterns at all. Moreover, we also expected greater contact between councillors from opposition and coalition parties in the case of a council-wide agreement than in its absence. Again, we find no significant difference. We find no evidence of the minimal-winning coalition hypothesis or the council-wide agreement hypothesis.

Table 4. Regression Model Explaining Coalition-Opposition Contacts

Model	1
Intercept	2.89*** (0.60)
Coalition party	0.09 (0.07)
Minimal-winning coalition	0.04 (0.08)
Council-wide agreement	-0.15 (0.09)
Logged population size	0.04 (0.06)

13 The Variance Inflation Factors are all below 5, indicating no issues with multicollinearity.

Model	1
Number of coalitions	-0.02 (0.04)
Effective number of council parties	-0.01 (0.03)
Number of coalition parties	0.08* (0.04)
Net debt quote	-0.27*** (0.10)
R-squared	0.02
N	895
AIC	2638.88

OLS regression. Coefficients with standard errors. *** < 0.01; ** < 0.05; * < 0.1

Our *size hypothesis* concerns the effect of population size on the level of contact between coalition and opposition councillors. Our general expectation was that smaller municipalities would see more informal coordination between coalition and opposition councillors due to their closer social proximity and potential overlapping social roles. Again, we find no significant patterns.

We controlled for four factors: firstly, the number of coalitions (as a measure of political stability), which is not related to informal coordination between coalition and opposition; secondly, the effective number of council parties, which is also unrelated to the occurrence of coalition-opposition coordination; thirdly, the number of coalition parties is significantly and positively related to coalition-opposition coordination. Perhaps it is the case that if there are more parties in a coalition, there is more capacity to coordinate with opposition parties. Finally, the Net Debt Quote, which is a measure of the financial position of the municipality. We find that a high debt is negatively related to reported informal coordination between the coalition and the opposition. One possible explanation is that in times of financial constraint, decision-making becomes more tightly coordinated within the coalition itself, leaving less room or necessity for informal coordination with opposition parties.

Possibly the most striking outcome we observe in our analysis is the low R-squared (0.02). This shows that the municipality-level factors that we have analysed do not capture all the variance, indicating that factors at another level of analysis (perhaps the individual level) provide a stronger explanation for the occurrence of informal coordination.

In the Appendix, we present two additional sets of analyses. We use these analyses as robustness checks to assess whether our findings are sensitive to alternative

specifications, alternative operationalisations, or the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. Firstly, we present a number of bivariate correlation models between coalition-opposition coordination and a number of variables in Table A1. The first eight concern the independent variables in Table 4. These indicate that bivariately logged population size, effective number of council parties, the number of coalition parties and net debt quote are all significantly related to these kinds of interactions. The following correlations concern alternative measures not included in the model. We included population size (not logged) and number of council seats as alternatives to population size. Though the latter is significantly correlated, there is no indication that it is more closely related to coalition-opposition coordination than logged population size. We also included dichotomous variables for possible organisation models of the council. None of these is significantly related to coalition-opposition coordination. Finally, we included the share of seats held by the coalition as an alternative measure of coalition type. This is also not significantly related to coalition-opposition coordination.

Secondly, we present three alternative regression models in Table A2. The first model is an empty multilevel model with municipalities as levels. This indicates that the variance is not concentrated at the municipal level. It does not indicate that a multilevel model is necessary. The second is a multilevel model that replicates Model 1 in this paper, showing the same significant coefficients as in Model 1. Finally, we have added an ordered logistic regression. Instead of treating our dependent variable as an interval-ratio variable, this model respects the ordinal nature of the variable. It shows, like in Model 1 in this paper, that the coefficients for the net debt quote and the number of coalition parties are significant. The coefficient for council-wide agreements is negative and significant, indicating counterintuitively less coalition-opposition interaction when there is a council-wide agreement. Both the correlations and the alternative regression models sustain the notion that net debt quote and the number of coalition parties are significantly related to informal coalition-opposition coordination.

Conclusion

In this article, we sought to determine the extent to which and under what conditions opposition parties are involved in informal coordination with the coalition. Regarding the prevalence of coordination between the coalition and the opposition, our qualitative analysis provided promising initial results, with councillors from all three municipalities reporting informal coordination that crossed coalition-opposition lines. Our quantitative evidence suggests that coordination aligns strongly with the coalition-opposition divide: Coalition councillors often coordinate with other coalition councillors. Consultation between opposition and coalition councillors occurs

less often than coordination within the coalition: Coalition coordination occurs usually or nearly always, while coalition-opposition coordination occurs sometimes. In other words, while informal coalition coordination is a common, institutionalised feature of most local councils, informal coordination involving the opposition is more incidental.

We also investigated possible municipal-level correlates of informal coordination. Our key expectation was that formal coalition types would matter. However, the qualitative evidence already cast significant doubt on these expectations, as informal coordination was observed in all three municipalities and appeared independent of the formal coalition type. Our quantitative results confirm that this observation is correct: we do not find that coalition type affects informal coalition-opposition coordination.

Our second expectation was that population size would influence informal coordination, particularly across the coalition-opposition divide, meaning that such coordination would be more common in smaller municipalities than in larger ones. Again, we do not find that this is the case for Dutch municipalities. This outcome might be the result of dual pressures: In small-scale polities, the coordination may truly be due to seeing others at the proverbial sports club, while politicians in larger municipalities have more time to coordinate, as they spend more time on their work (Van Zuydam & Boogers, 2024).

One of our control variables did show significant results: Municipalities that are in dire straits financially see less interaction between coalition and opposition. This may indicate that when municipalities are under financial stress, decision-making becomes more tightly coordinated within the coalition itself. It may be a fruitful avenue to study how municipal finances affect patterns of opposition-coalition cooperation both formally and informally.

Our study stresses the relevance of informal politics at the local level. In Dutch municipalities, we show that informal politics is primarily present in the coalition, which is in line with the importance of the coalition-opposition division in terms of voting in the council (Vos et al., 2025) and the use of council tools (Otjes et al., 2023). Our results suggest that such 'formal' outcomes reflect decisions made beforehand through informal coordination among coalition councillors. Our results thus reinforce the impression that the division between the coalition and the opposition dominates local politics. In this respect, the local political culture reflects the national political culture in the Netherlands.

What do our results say beyond the borders of the Netherlands? In the sparse literature on informal politics at the local level, the Netherlands is a likely case to observe informal politics, given the need for coalitions. Moreover, due to the absence of a strong mayor, we expected and found that informal coordination would occur between many different (coalition) politicians. The patterns we found in the

Netherlands are likely to occur in countries with a similar political and institutional system, such as the Nordic countries, Belgium, and many German cities, making informal coordination particularly relevant to incorporate when investigating local decision-making in such contexts.

The central weakness in this article is obviously that our theorised mechanisms – size, coalition type – do not offer a strong explanation for the prevalence of informal politics. Perhaps individual-level factors (e.g. formal position, role perceptions, or personality), party-level variables (e.g. ideological centrism or populism), or alternative municipality-level variables (e.g. the elusive idea of local political culture) can better explain these patterns than the variables we examined here.

In sum, our study is a first systematic inquiry into the prevalence of informal politics at the local level in the Netherlands, leaving ample room for future research. Future research could systematically examine how important informal coordination between the coalition and the opposition is in shaping democratic governance at the local level. Does it facilitate more inclusive decision-making and broader support for decisions within the council and beyond? Or does it, on the contrary, diminish political debate and the accountability of local government, and thereby its legitimacy? Another promising line of study would be to connect perceptions and reports of informal coordination with actual behaviour: do politicians who report more informal coordination use their formal tools (questions and motions) less often? Do we see a stronger division between coalition and opposition in municipalities where politicians report fewer contacts with the opposition? By connecting observations of such informal patterns of politics with formal political outcomes, their relative importance can be further assessed, offering important advances in our understanding of political decision-making. As informal politics is omnipresent at the local level, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the formal and the informal could offer crucial insights into our broader understanding of local political decision-making.

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