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Pulling the Strings: An Analysis of Informal Local Power Structures in Three Dutch Cities

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ABSTRACT *The study of local power structures is highly relevant for a better understanding of local governance networks. Not only does it draw attention to the power dimension of local governance, it also brings to focus the individuals who play a role on and behind the scenes of governance networks. This article gives a comparative analysis of informal local power structures in three Dutch cities. Drawing on the classical reputational method of Hunter, it presents the 25 most influential persons of each city, their organisational backgrounds and influence resources. The results show that local power structures mainly consist of government executives (mayors, aldermen), entrepreneurs and directors of third sector organisations; local councillors and local civil servants are virtually absent on the lists of influential persons. Comparative analyses demonstrate that the composition of a local power structure is linked with the strategic policy objectives of the city. The article concludes with a brief summary of the findings and points to the value of local power studies for local governance research.*

KEY WORDS: Local power structures, local governance, mayors, councillors, third sector organisations, entrepreneurs

1. Introduction

In a 3-year research project, Tilburg University and regional newspaper *Brabants Dagblad* have investigated the constitution and operation of local power structures in three cities in the Dutch province Brabant: *Oss* (75,000 population), *Tilburg* (200,000 population) and *Den Bosch* (140,000 population). In each city, in-depth interviews have been conducted with local leaders, together with an online survey among local elites and sub-elites who are active in businesses, cultural associations, sports clubs, third sector organisations, political parties and in local government. This methodology builds on a classical approach to local power structures, commonly known as the *reputational method* (Hunter 1953). This article will give a comparative analysis of the results of these studies, in order to characterise local power structures and to assess the value of the

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reputational method in revealing local power structures. After some short remarks about the significance of classical approaches to local power structures for researching local governance networks, the article starts with a brief summary of the theoretical and methodological debate on local power structures. Second, a characterisation will be given of the three examined cities, followed by an explanation of the research method. The research data of the three cities will be compared and presented in the following sections. Who are among the most influential persons in Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch and what are their backgrounds? How many governors, politicians, entrepreneurs and other influential persons are represented in these local power elites? On what influence resources does their influence rest? And what are the main differences and similarities between the local power structures of the three cities? The article concludes with a summary of the findings and points to the value of local power studies for local governance research.

2. Community power studies and local governance

The shift from government to governance – which was in fact more an ontological than an empirical change – took place long before public administration scientists first described it in the early 1990's (Marin and Mainz 1991, Kooiman 1993). The first social and political science studies on local power structures in the 1950's and 1970's already showed that government policies are not only being made by those who hold positions in government: institutions, associations, businesses and others are also involved in it. The 'community power structures' (Hunter 1953) or 'community influence systems' (Laumann and Pappi 1976) of these early studies can therefore be regarded as the local governance networks of today. Going back to these classical community power studies is highly relevant for a better understanding of the operation of today's local governance. First, it draws attention to the power dimension of governance networks. Until now, governance studies hardly assess the distribution of formal and informal influence in governance networks or analyse the influence resources on which it is based (Boogers 2010). Second, it brings in a focus on individual players in governance networks. Governance literature tends to confine itself to organisations and overlooks the role of persons who are setting the tone and are making a difference (Armistead *et al.* 2007). Hence, classical community power studies can help to move local governance research a step forward. The results of this study will give an assessment of this assumption.

The community power debate

The discussion on how power is distributed among society dates back to the early works of Pareto, Mosca and Michels, who started with the existence of power elites and elaborated on the nature and backgrounds of their power (Mosca 1939, Pareto 1966, Michels 1962, Bottomore 1964, pp. 2–22). Later, the debate moved to the characteristics of these power elites, a debate that was

closely connected with a methodological dispute on how to identify those who wield power. Starting with the release of Floyd Hunter's study *Community Power Structure* (Hunter 1953), it became commonly known as the *community power debate*.

Reputational power: attributed power

Hunter's study can be seen as an answer to the limitations of the orthodox formal position method. In this *positional approach*, power was studied by examining people that were in formal and visible positions of power (Trounstine and Christensen 1982, p. 22). Hunter's work was one of the first social science studies that showed that power resides not only in these formal institutions, but also outside these institutions. Hunter's study was also remarkable because for the first time, it focussed not on 'government' (with power as a derivative), but on community power as such. Hunter wanted to find out who wielded power in Atlanta and developed a new methodological approach, later known as the *reputational method*, to do so. The leading question in this approach was: who has among well-informed people the reputation of being powerful? Hunter analysed documents and newspapers to compile a list of more than 175 people whom he regarded as community leaders and activists. With the help of a panel of 14 people who were well-acquainted with the city, he then reduced the list to 40 candidates. He interviewed all 40 on a range of matters including their social contacts and their involvement in projects; he also asked them to nominate other possible leaders who might have been overlooked in the earlier stage. The interviews all led to the conclusion that Atlanta was run by a coherent informal elite that pulled the strings behind the scene, consisting mostly of people from the economic sector. Of the 40 people listed, 28 were from the banking, insurance and legal sectors, five were from the 'community' and four were from government, including two union leaders and one dentist (Hunter 1953). This group constituted a coherent elite in that its members knew each other, belonged to the same social and other clubs and met regularly. Hunter's empirical findings confirm the views of earlier 'elite theories' of politics and power, namely that within a particular community power is exercised by a small elite (see Pareto 1935, pp. 1429–30, Mosca 1939, p. 50, Hunter 1953, pp. 262–271, Polsby 1963, pp. 45–48, Putnam 1976, Trounstine and Christensen 1982, pp. 108–109, Knoke 1990, pp. 120–122).

Decisional power: power in policy processes

Hunter's study received much criticism, mainly from political scientists. Criticism focussed first and foremost on his research methodology. It was argued that studies should not investigate subjective reputations but rather specific actions that can be identified more objectively (Trounstine and Christensen 1982, pp. 27–28). Ontological criticism was also levelled at Hunter. He was accused of focussing too much on a homogeneous power elite and ignoring

rivalry and conflict between local elites. Therefore, political scientist Robert Dahl proposed an alternative methodology for assessing power. Known as the decision method, it has its origins in Dahl's study *Who Governs* (Dahl 1961). Dahl discovered that to measure influence (he used the word 'influence' rather than 'power'), it is necessary to focus on specific decision-making processes. He examined three controversial decision-making processes in the city of New Haven (restructuring, public schools and political appointments), assuming that if a coherent elite existed in New Haven, it would be apparent in all of these areas (Dahl 1961). However, using qualitative methods (e.g. participatory observation, including at the town hall) and quantitative methods (e.g. surveys of voters and of whom Dahl calls 'sub leaders'), his research showed that influence in New Haven was 'specialized'. There was no single elite pulling the strings: in each decision-making process was another power coalition at play. The few actors who played a key role in all decision-making processes operated in the political rather than the economic arena (Dahl 1961, pp. 96, 164, 330–340, Polsby 1963, Trounstein and Christensen 1982, pp. 30–32, Knoke 1990, pp. 122–124). Dahl's method also received criticism, much of which can be traced back to the reputational method. Political scientists argued that the decision method ignores the more subtle ways in which power is exercised. Power is often entirely invisible and need not always be wielded in an active sense. Decision-makers can anticipate the will of the real leaders, without the latter having to carry out specific actions (see, for instance, Bachrach and Baratz 1970, Crenson 1971, Knoke 1990, pp. 128–134).

Coalitional power: urban regimes, policy communities and issue networks

A further criticism was that Dahl's approach pays little attention to the aims of power wielding. Such a focus within power studies would reveal the reasons behind the rise and fall of powerful coalitions of politicians, administrators, organisations, institutions and companies with the same interests and views (Laumann and Pappi 1976). These notions regarding power coalitions were later elaborated in the urban regime theory. The theoretical concept of urban regimes is based on the work of several authors, with Clarence Stone (1989) as its chief architect. Stone defines an urban regime as 'an informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions' (Stone 1989, p. 4). The concept of urban regimes differs from pluralism and elitism. It challenges the notion that community power is concentrated in the hands of a single coherent group, and shows instead that it rests with different autonomous actors who form a governing coalition. And in contrast to pluralists, urban regime theorists do not regard coalition formation as an open process. An urban regime is for the most part a group that does not allow access to outsiders (Stone 1993, Harding 1994). Related concepts are policy communities and issue networks; the former are closed and stable like urban regimes, the latter have a more open and fluid nature (Rhodes and Marsh 1992, p. 251, Hillier 2000).

The reputational method re-examined

For this research, the reputational method has been chosen, most importantly for research efficiency reasons. Studying perceived power was expected to provide more valid results than a research that is only based on formal positions in offices and memberships of advisory and executive boards (formal position method), and is less demanding than reconstructions of policy processes (decisional method) or analyses of coalitions of government, institutions and business (urban regime analysis). Using the reputational method also gives a chance to re-examine its strengths and weaknesses; not only by applying it in a different time and place (2008–2011, the Netherlands), but also by comparing three Dutch cities to see whether the reputational method leads to similar outcomes.

3. Research method

The research method that has been applied in the study of local power structures in Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch, is a refined version of Hunter's original reputational method. According to what has been discussed in the theoretical section, some methodological weaknesses are to be expected. As public relations and spin doctoring have become important leadership assets (Genasi 2002), perceptions of power might not coincide with real power wielding. Therefore, it is possible that the research methodology has a bias towards visible leaders who attract much media attention. The design of study was intended to overcome these potential problems. The predominance of well-known popular leaders in the results of the study, will show if this attempt has been successful. For each city study, the following six steps were taken:

1. The research team (a university researcher and a research journalist from the newspaper) started with a group interview with the editorial staff of the regional edition of the newspaper and with thematic editors of the newspaper's editorial board (economy, arts and education). This session resulted in an inventory of possibly important local policy issues and in a long list of approximately 100 (Oss), 200 (Tilburg) and 150 (Den Bosch) potentially influential persons.
2. From this long list, the researchers chose a small number (6–15) of informants who understood the comings and goings within the city and who could identify the key players in governance networks. Together, the informants covered a broad range of areas: government, business, health care, social welfare, education and arts. The selection of these informants was based on the judgments of the researchers and advices of the aforementioned newspaper editors.
3. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with each informant about the challenges of the city, the key players that are taking up these challenges and their relations. Each interview ended with an inventory of the most influential people in the city. The interviewees were asked to react on the initial list of influentials and to give their own top-10 of influential persons. To

encourage the informants to give as much inside information as possible, all interviews were strictly confidential. In Oss, six interviews were carried out, 12 interviews were carried out in Tilburg and 15 interviews were carried out in Den Bosch. These interviews resulted in an overview of the main political, social, economic and other developments of the city and in a limitation of the long list to a shortlist of 50 influential persons.

4. In contrast to Hunter, who used a small number of well-informed ‘judges’ to rank the 10 most influential persons on the shortlist (1954, p. 265), in this research an online survey was conducted among local elites and sub-elites: people who know who are calling the shots in the city. All local leaders in businesses, cultural associations, sports clubs, third sector organisations, political parties and in local government were asked to participate in the survey.¹ In the survey, respondents were asked to rank five influential persons from the shortlist of 50. Furthermore, respondents were asked about the power resources of these five influential citizens.
5. The questionnaire results were used to calculate influence scores for all the candidates that the respondents selected. First, each respondent’s ranking of the five most influential people was converted into individual scores by the formula: 11 minus the position on the list. For example, a candidate who was ranked number one received 10 points ($11 - 1$), someone ranked number two was given 9 points ($11 - 2$), and so on. Candidates, who did not appear in the respondent’s top-five, received 0 points. The influence score of each candidate was then computed by adding up the points awarded by all respondents. This meant that a candidate who appeared 50 times at the top of the lists received $50 \times (11 - 1) = 500$ points, while a candidate who was ranked as second influential by 100 respondents received $100 \times (11 - 2) = 900$ points. This resulted in a top-25 list of most influential persons in the city.
6. In order to validate the outcomes and to test their ‘face value’, we finally asked the members of the top-25 (in Den Bosch: de preliminary top-30) to give a personal top-10. In all three cities, the results of this test showed no significant differences with the original top-25.

The results of the local power studies were presented in publicly accessible talk shows (organised by *Brabants Dagblad*) in Oss (April 2009), Tilburg (January 2010) and Den Bosch (May 2011) and in the regional editions of the newspaper. In various newspaper articles, the list of influential persons was contextualised by background stories about social, economic and political developments of the city and their impact on local power structures, and reconstructions of one or more local policy processes that reveal the influence of some top-25 members (see Van den Hout 2009, Boogers and Van den Brand 2010, Van Gorkum and Van Lith 2011).

4. A tale of three cities

Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch are the main cities in the distribution area of the regional newspaper *Brabants Dagblad*. The selection of the cities was therefore

given by the newspaper that participated in this research. To clarify the contexts in which local power structures have developed, some remarks will be made about the main political, economic and demographic characteristics of each city, based on publically accessible data and on expert interviews.

Oss

Oss is a small city of about 70,000 inhabitants, situated in the northeast of the province Noord-Brabant (North Brabant). Traditionally a strong industrial centre, Oss has seen a sharp decline in the number of jobs within industry, which has not been offset by the growth within other economic sectors. As a consequence, Oss's unemployment rate of 10% is high compared with the region and with the Netherlands as a whole (below 3% at the time of the study). Strengthening the local economic structure is therefore the main objective of local government. At the time of the research (2008), the orthodox left-wing socialist party had a strong position in the local council and in the executive board of mayor and aldermen.

Tilburg

Tilburg is situated in the southern part of the province Noord-Brabant. With more than 200,000 inhabitants, it is the second city of the province and the sixth city of the country. Economically, Tilburg has moved from an industrial centre to a service oriented economy, a development promoted by the growth of the university and applied science universities. This economic transformation is related with demographical and electoral changes. The traditional strong position of the christian democrat party in local government has been outshined by the growing political power of the social democrats. This shifting balance of political power has caused political instability. During the research (2009), Tilburg witnessed a profound political crisis, which led to the resignation of two aldermen and the mayor.

Den Bosch

Den Bosch (aka '*s-Hertogenbosch*) is the capital city of the province Noord-Brabant and has a population of 140,000. Its mediaeval city centre attracts many tourists and is regarded as a strong asset. The local economy has a mixed nature with no dominant employers: traditional industry (e.g. a Heineken brewery), building firms, government and hotel and catering firms. Den Bosch ranks high on many national benchmarks of economic growth, local business climate, public safety and cultural climate. As a consequence, local politics tends to aim at the preservation of the status quo. This conservatism is augmented by a strong political stability, resulting in a long lasting coalition of christian democrats, social democrats, liberals and the green party. The Den Bosch study has been conducted in 2010–2011.

5. Influential persons in Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch

The research method resulted in a list of most influential people in each city. They are categorised by their backgrounds into five groups:² *politicians* (local councillors, provincial councillors, MP's, board members of local branches of political parties), *governors* (mayors, aldermen, the Queen's commissioner), *civil servants* (city managers and other local civil servants), *directors of third sector institutions* (in the field of education, care, housing and culture) and *entrepreneurs* (directors of businesses).

Local power structures: an overview

Comparing the list of top-25 influential persons (see Table 1) in each city reveals striking similarities and differences. What stands out first is the limited influence of local councillors. In Oss and Tilburg there are just a few of them in the top-25,

Table 1. Top-25 influential persons in Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch

No.	Oss	Tilburg	Den Bosch
1	Governor <i>Alderman (socialist party)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (social democrats)</i>	Governor <i>Mayor (christian democrats)</i>
2	Governor <i>Mayor (social democrats)</i>	Governor <i>Mayor (social democrats)</i>	Civil servant <i>Urban development advisor</i>
3	Governor <i>Alderman (local party)</i>	Entrepreneur/politician <i>(Christian democrats)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (liberals)</i>
4	Entrepreneur <i>Director biochemical firm</i>	Governor <i>Queen's Commissioner (christian democrats)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (green party)</i>
5	Entrepreneur <i>Dir. shipbuilding company</i>	Institution's director <i>University manager</i>	Institution's director <i>Chamber of commerce</i>
6	Institution's director <i>School director</i>	Politician <i>Local councillor (local party)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (social democrats)</i>
7	Institution's director <i>Dir. housing corporation</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Oil company, cultural mecenas</i>	Governor <i>Queen's Commissioner (christ. democrats)</i>
8	Governor <i>Alderman (socialist party)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (liberals)</i>	Entrepreneur/inst's director <i>Chamber of commerce/theatre</i>
9	Entrepreneur <i>Bank director</i>	Institution's director <i>Dir. housing corporation</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Cultural businesses</i>
10	Governor <i>Alderman (social democrats)</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Dir. transport company</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Bank director</i>
11	Entrepreneur <i>Dir. construction company</i>	Politician <i>Local councillor (christ. dem.)</i>	Entrepreneur <i>(printing industry), board member theatre</i>
12	Institution's director <i>Director cult. Institutions</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Bank director</i>	Entrepreneur/inst's director <i>Bank dir., board member schools</i>

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

No.	Oss	Tilburg	Den Bosch
13	Institution's director <i>School director</i>	Entrepreneur/pol. party <i>Business, party official</i>	Institution's director <i>School director</i>
14	Entrepreneur <i>Dir. construction company</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Technical industry</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Director Heineken</i>
15	Civil servant <i>City manager</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Recruitment agency</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Chair assoc. of local companies</i>
16	Politician <i>MP (socialist party)</i>	Governor <i>Alderman (social democrats)</i>	Institution's director <i>Director theatre</i>
17	Entrepreneur <i>Restaurants and cafés</i>	Entrepreneur/inst's director <i>Business, board university</i>	Politician/inst's director <i>Former alderman (soc. dem)</i>
18	Entrepreneur <i>Workforce integration agency</i>	Institution's director <i>School director</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Real estate developer</i>
19	Politician <i>Local councillor (socialist party)</i>	Institution's director <i>Director theatre</i>	Institution's director <i>Dir. local hospital</i>
20	Entrepreneur <i>Chair association of shop owners</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Construction company</i>	Civil servant <i>City manager</i>
21	Entrepreneur <i>Printing industry</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Dir. insurance company</i>	Institution's director <i>Director housing corporation</i>
22	Civil servant <i>Economic development advisor</i>	Civil servant <i>Economic development advisor</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Architect, local think-tank</i>
23	Institution's director <i>Dir. health care inst.</i>	Politician <i>Local councillor (soc. democrats)</i>	Entrepreneur <i>Entertainment sector</i>
24	Civil servant <i>Economic development advisor</i>	Politician/inst's director <i>Party leader (christ. dem)/cult. inst.</i>	Politician/entrepreneur <i>Provincial councillor (lib.), lawyer</i>
25	Politician <i>Local councillor (local party)</i>	Institution's director <i>Director concert hall</i>	Politician <i>Former alderman (liberal party)</i>

in Den Bosch councillors are even completely absent. Although the local council is legally the most powerful institution in local government, just a few councillors make a difference individually. Governors, on the other hand, have the highest ranks on the top-25. Aldermen are most influential in Oss and Tilburg, and the mayor is most important in Den Bosch. All in all, the executive power of mayors and aldermen exceeds the political power of councils. In Tilburg and Den Bosch, the Queen's commissioner (the head of the provincial government)³ is also on the list of influential persons. This can be explained by the fact that provincial policy programmes are often linked to local policies (and vice versa). In any case, local power structures sometimes have a multilevel character. When it comes to the distribution of influence in a city, entrepreneurs play an important role too. More than one out of three influential persons is director of a business company. In Tilburg, some of them are also active in politics; in Den Bosch, many entrepreneurs are also active as board member of local cultural or charity

institutions. The local power structure of the three cities also consists of directors of third sector institutions; especially in Oss and Tilburg, where directors of housing corporations or educational institutions rank high on the list of local influential persons. This is in line with the results of other community power studies and studies on local governance, that revealed the prominent position of business firms and third sector organisations in local power structures, urban regimes or local policy networks (e.g. Hunter 1953, Dahl 1961, Stoker and Mossberger 1994, Goss 2001, Saward 2005). The last category, the civil servants, is hardly represented in the local elite. Notwithstanding their assumed role in policy processes (see Alderbach *et al.* 1981), there are just a few civil servants on each list. Den Bosch is an exceptional case with a civil servant in a number two position. Contrary to popular criticism against the reputational method, all top-25 lists show that local power structures are not dominated by well-known leaders with a well-developed media profile. People, who wield power behind the scenes, also appear on the lists of influential persons.

Comparative analysis

The composition of the power structures in the three cities have been analysed by calculating the average influence scores of all members of a category (not only those ranked in the top-25). After computing these average scores, governors – already the dominant actors at the top of all the three cities' rankings – turned out to be most influential. As Table 3 shows, the influence of the local executives towers high above the influence of other categories. The next influential category differs from city to city: directors of institutions are the second influential group in Oss, politicians in Tilburg and civil servants in Den Bosch. A comparison of the influence of each group between cities shows that politicians are relatively influential in Tilburg, governors are more influential in Oss civil servants are more important in Den Bosch, directors of institutions rank higher in Oss and entrepreneurs are also relatively more influential in Oss.

'Old boys networks' or a gender biased research methodology?

In all three cities, there is hardly any woman among the most influential persons. In Oss there is only one listed in the top-25, in Den Bosch two, in all cases on low positions. In Tilburg women are even absent on the list of influential persons. This raised lots of criticism on the research and the applied method, not surprisingly especially in Tilburg. The research method was condemned to have a gender bias: 'interviewing the old boys network about local power will result in an old boys network'. Other criticism was expressed more directly against the reputational method. Because women do not put enough effort in their reputation of being influential – and are not helped by the local media who focus more on influential men – the reputational method prejudices female community leaders (e.g. De Weyer 2010). However, this criticism is somewhat

countered by the fact that also female interviewees came up with the lack of women in local power elites. Just as female respondents of the surveys did not rank female leaders much higher. Moreover, other elite studies show a strong underrepresentation of female leaders as well (Lips 1991, Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995). Nonetheless, the possible gender bias of the research method deserves to be analysed more thoroughly in future research.

6. Influence resources

In the surveys, respondents were asked about the most important influence resource of each person that they have ranked as influential. Four types of influence resources are distinguished: *function*: influence derived from formal tasks and responsibilities; *popular support*: influence based on popular support or on the ability to mobilise it; *network*: influence resulting from contacts with other influential persons or from the ability to bring influential people together; *expertise*: influence connected with professional knowledge and expertise; *money*: influence grounded on investment capacities.

The power of networking

A comparison of the most important influence resources of each city (see Table 3) shows that influential positions in local power structures are mainly based on one's ability to connect (to) other influential persons (network) and on ones formal tasks and responsibilities (function). In Tilburg and Den Bosch the former influence resource is most important, in Oss the latter. It underlines the key role of networking capacities in local governance networks. The ability to bring people together with different formal tasks and responsibilities and other influence resources, seems to make a difference in local policy processes. It confirms the findings of Laumann and Pappi (1976), which revealed a connection between the position of influential persons in a social structure and their influence.

Democratic influence and accountability assessed

The results of the analysis of the various influence resources open another perspective to the democratic character of local elites. Although most of them are not directly elected, public support is an important influence resource for all categories, except for civil servants. What adds to this, is that the most influential groups (see Table 2) rely more than others on popular support. Like in any democracy, the influential elite cannot do without the support of the masses. Nonetheless, Oss and Den Bosch seem to have some democratic problems in this respect. In Oss the influence of directors of institutions is relatively high, but it rests less than other groups on popular support. Civil servants in the Den Bosch' elite are nearly as influential as governors, but their influence is not at all granted by citizens.

Table 2. Average influence score of politicians, governors, civil servants, directors of institutions and entrepreneurs; controlled for the number of respondents; $N = 93$ (Oss), 251 (Tilburg) and 203 (Den Bosch)

	Oss	Tilburg	Den Bosch
Most influential	Governors (348) Direct. of institutions (116) Entrepreneurs (84) Politicians (33)	Governors (272) Politicians (87) Entrepreneurs (55) Direct. of institutions (37)	Governors (298) Civil servants (275) Entrepreneurs (35) Direct. of institutions (29)
Least influential	Civil servants (32)	Civil servants (27)	Politicians (21)

Note: Because influence figure of (categories of) elite members are computed by summing up all attributed influence scores of respondents, it is necessary to control for the number of respondents to compare the influence figures from the three cities.

7. Local power structures compared

A comparison of Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch reveals that the composition of a power structure is in some way connected with the strategic policy objectives of each city. This seems to be in line with the aforementioned urban regime theory of Stone and related theories about policy communities and issue networks, according to which power structures are held together by joint policy agendas. In this theoretical perspective local elites form coalitions based on shared values and interests. This is likely to be the case in all three cities, although it is not clear whether each power structure fits into the aforementioned definition of urban regimes (Stone 1989, p. 4).

Oss: development

According to the expert interviews, Oss is focussing on economic development. This development programme is initiated by local government and supported by local businesses and third sector organisations (especially in the field of education). This explains why governors, entrepreneurs and directors of institutions have higher influence scores (see Table 3) than in other cities. If an urban regime exists in Oss, it will consist of at least these three groups.

Tilburg: transition

Many interviewees have stressed that Tilburg is facing an era of social, economic and political transition. This entails making choices between strategic policy objectives, resolving conflicts between the views and interests that are involved and finding support for it. Political processes are more important at this stage, which is underlined by the comparatively strong influence of politicians in Tilburg. If an urban regime should be present in Tilburg, governors, politicians and entrepreneurs would be a part of it.

Table 3. Influence resources of the elite in Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch: politicians, governors, civil servants, directors of institutions and entrepreneurs

Category	% Function	% Popular support	% Network	% Expertise	% Money
Oss					
Politicians	80	67	53	33	7
Governors	88	52	40	40	5
Civil servants	81	25	75	56	6
Direct. of institutions	79	19	77	57	18
Entrepreneurs	55	26	79	24	46
Total	77	38	44	39	20
Tilburg					
Politicians	55	58	75	32	10
Governors	95	39	70	41	4
Civil servants	97	7	59	55	7
Direct. of institutions	84	22	81	60	7
Entrepreneurs	50	42	89	43	31
Total	67	41	77	43	14
Den Bosch					
Politicians	57	61	80	52	5
Governors	92	42	75	47	8
Civil servants	95	1	60	73	10
Direct. of institutions	64	38	85	66	13
Entrepreneurs	59	25	90	47	41
Total	77	31	79	55	17

Note: Example: 80% of the people that name a politician as an influential person, say that he or she owes this influence to the position he or she holds.

Den Bosch: preservation

The expert interviews in Den Bosch showed that this city is strongly focussed at maintaining and strengthening existing assets. As Den Bosch is performing well in many respects, there is no need for new comprehensive policy programmes. Governing Den Bosch is about preserving the status quo, and civil servants are playing an important part in this. Conceiving of an urban regime in Den Bosch, it mainly should consist of governors, civil servants and entrepreneurs.

8. Can results be generalised?

Although this study has an explorative nature, is it relevant to elaborate on the possible particularities of the local power structures as described in this article. Because the three cities are located in the same region in the Netherlands, it is reasonable to question the generalisability of the results to other regions and other countries. To what extent are the results typical for the Dutch institutional context and the regional political culture that Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch have in common?

Institutional factors

Notwithstanding the evidence for the impact of policy agendas on local power structures, there might be other factors at play too. First, institutional factors can be important, regarding the formal positions within local government and the position of local government vis-à-vis other actors. In France, where local government is stronger embedded within regional and national government, more supra-local officials can be expected in the local power structure (Cole 2008). In Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland that have comparatively powerful municipalities with many welfare state tasks, directors of schools and health care organisations would be better represented in local elites (Svallfors 2004, Pihlaja 2010). Nonetheless, some studies suggest that policy sectors have a greater impact on the composition of local power structures than institutional factors (e.g. John and Cole 2000).

Cultural factors

Second, cultural factors can have an impact on local power structures too. The three examined cities are located in the catholic southern part of the Netherlands, with an allegedly distinct political culture that is characterised by a strong focus on local community life and close ties between formal and informal networks (Prud'homme van Reine and Dankbaar 2011). These cultural factors might explain the dominance of entrepreneurs in the local power structures of Oss, Tilburg and Den Bosch, although other studies have shown that in other cities in the Netherlands and in other parts of the world, private actors have decisive roles in local governance networks as well (Kickert 1997, Kjaer 2004).

Generalisability

After scrutinising the impact of institutional and cultural factors, the results of the community power analyses seem to be not very typical for the three examined cities. Although institutional and cultural characteristics may bear upon the functioning of local power structures, there is no strong evidence that these factors influence the composition of local power structures that have been analysed in this study.

9. Conclusion

In this research, Dutch community power structures have been analysed in three cities. By using the reputational method, the applicability of this method has been tested in Dutch practice. The reputational method turned out to be a relatively easy way to analyse local power structures that led to validated results with high face value. In contrast to what many critics of the reputation method would expect, the method showed no strong bias towards highly visible leaders. To the contrary, the study also revealed the power behind the scenes of civil

servants, entrepreneurs and directors of institutions; people who are not commonly known in the city. The characteristics of the local power elites in the three cities differ from Hunter's original work, and from each other. Thus, the reputation method seems to be able to give an accurate picture of the characteristics of local power structures. The disclosure of these networks of formal and informal power by revealing the top-25 of most influential persons, is not only relevant for journalists who want to know who are pulling the strings in the city, but also for scientists who study local governance networks as well. The study of local power structures gives a highly relevant further detailing of local governance networks, which can open up new research perspectives. First, an in-depth insight into local power structures shows the organisational backgrounds and influence resources of local elites. Comparisons of these organisational backgrounds and influence resources between cities and time periods can give more information about the relation between the composition of local power structures and the content of strategic policy objectives. This can deepen and broaden the body of knowledge of the urban regime theory that is now mostly single case based (Stoker and Mossberger 1994, Pierre 2005). Second, analysing local power structures brings individual leaders to the front. It gives attention to the personal characteristics (age, gender, and education), professional backgrounds (carrier) and leadership competences that affect one's position in a local power structure. This research focus can help to elaborate emerging theoretical frameworks about facilitative leadership and metagovernance in local governance networks (Svara 1994, Sørensen 2006).

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. 195 in Oss, 490 in Tilburg and 400 in Den Bosch. The response rate was 48% in Oss, 51% in Tilburg and 50% in Den Bosch.
2. Leaders with multiple roles were classified into more groups.
3. The Queens commissioner is the chair of the provincial council and the chair of the provincial board of deputies (executives), a function that can best be described as a provincial mayor.

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