

Public and Political Reactions to Regional Government Reforms: A Comparative Analysis



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Chapter 1 – Regional Government Reforms

1.1 Introduction

On March 29th the Dutch minister of Internal Affairs, Ronald Plasterk (PvdA), published a white paper (*visienota*) about the modernization of the internal governmental system of the Netherlands. These plans entail reducing the current twelve provincial governments to five regional administrations (*landsdelen*), and accordingly rescaling the borders of municipalities. The necessity for these reforms was already emphasized shortly after the Second World War by the Commission Koelma (1949). Following this advice, many more commissions (e.g. Commissie-Geelhoed, 2002; Holland Acht, 2005; Commissie-Kok, 2007) concluded that the borders of the twelve provinces no longer coincide with societal and economic issues in the Netherlands. The first step in the process of provincial and municipal reforms is the creation of the first of five regions, by merging the provinces Noord-Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland (Rutte II, 2012). The current timeframe is to complete the implementation of this reform in 2016. However, despite the plan only existing on paper, both provincial politicians and citizens have expressed their discontent with this project. The Dutch national broadcast service (NOS) has conducted an enquiry into the support for the reform plans under provincial politicians. Of 566 provincial politicians in the Netherlands 250 people responded, of who 60 percent oppose the governmental reform plans and only 22 percent support the policy proposal (Van der Parre, 2013)¹. The resistance by citizens against the plans has been voiced

¹ The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions, of which a three showed very strong opposition to the policy plans. Firstly, to the question “A merge as minister of Internal Affairs Plasterk has envisioned will lead to worse governance” (*Een fusie zoals minister Plasterk nu voor ogen staat, leidt tot slechter bestuur*) was supported by 60 percent of the respondents and only 22 respondents disagreed. Secondly, the question “A merge as minister of Internal Affairs Plasterk has envisioned is not an effective austerity measure” (*Een fusie zoals minister Plasterk voor ogen heeft, leidt niet tot bezuinigingen*) was answered positively by 66 percent and only twelve percent thinks the merge will generate money. Finally, the statement “It is good that the provinces are resisting the reform plans” (*Het is goed als de provincies zich verzetten tegen de fusieplannen*) was supported by 57 percent, while 25 percent think the provincial governments are overreacting. The conflicts of interests between different institutional actors will be addressed more elaborately in this thesis.

through different opinion polls that were conducted on national and regional levels shortly after the plans were made official (EenVandaag, 2013; Provincie Flevoland, 2013). In none of these opinion polls the reforms plans were supported by a majority of the participants.

As demonstrated, the debate over provincial reforms has grown to a noteworthy controversy in the Netherlands. However, this stands in stark contrast to the public and political reaction in Denmark where similar reforms were initiated in 2002 and finalised in 2007. At the offset, there was far less resistance of citizens and politicians in Denmark to the reform plans (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012). To the contrary, citizens seemed more eager for the social benefits that would result from the reforms, such as improved health care and the abolishment of county taxes (Bundgaard & Vrangbeak, 2007). This appears contradictory, as the reform plans proposed by the Dutch and Danish government are similar in many ways. Firstly, the Danish Structural Reform (*Strukturreformen*) plan proposed a similar drastic reduction of the number of municipalities in Denmark, from 271 to 98, and merged its 13 counties to 5 regions (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012). Secondly, Denmark and the Netherlands both desired to increase efficiency of their three-tier governmental structure by decentralizing provincial tasks to local governments. Finally, Denmark and the Netherlands are both small countries, with developed welfare states and a strong economical position in Europe (Peters, 2011).

Hence, the Danish and Dutch reform plans present interesting cases where similar aims to reform have evoked different levels of resistance which cannot be easily explained. In addition to its empirical relevance, an investigation of the governmental reform projects in Denmark and the Netherlands will also provide a theoretical contribution to existing political science literature. That is, the ways the Danish and Dutch governments want to reform their provinces is contradictory to the movement of regionalisation in and outside of Europe. Danish and Dutch regions are made larger, but at the same time many of its tasks and

responsibilities are decentralised to local governments. This is in contrast to the regionalisation trend described in political science literature, in which the authority of regional governments is strengthened (Rodriguez-Pose & Gill, 2003; Marks, Hooghe & Schakel, 2008). In Europe in specific, the notion of multilevel governance and Europe of Regions (Pierre & Peters, 2001; Applegate, 1999) have dominated reform literature which has spurred scholars to assert that the nation-state is withering away and its authority will be taken over by regional governments (Jessop, 1990). As a consequence, developments in the Netherlands, Denmark and other Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland and Norway) where regional governments are reduced in authority (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012; Lidström, 2010; Hagen & Kaarbøe, 2006), and regions were abolished in Finland in 2010 (Kettunen & Kungla, 2005) can with difficulty be accounted for or be explained. This thesis, therefore, addressed a gap in literature of a new phenomenon; a new type of governmental reform trend that aims to strengthening local governments instead of regional governments. The theoretical contribution, therefore, lies in the examination why the Danish and Dutch government desire these reforms and which obstacles they have to overcome.

The research question guiding this empirical and theoretical examination is, ‘Why have similar regional government reforms fuelled little resistance by politicians and the public in Denmark, but strong resistance in the Netherlands?’ On the one hand, this question captures an investigation of the type of reforms that the government in Denmark and the Netherlands envisioned, in contrast with theories on regionalisation. On the other hand, the question can be answered through an empirical analysis of the reform plans to explain the different reactions in Denmark and the Netherlands. This research will draw on cross-case process tracing to conduct this study. However, because the Danish government has completed its reforms, the focus will be on the initiation period of the reforms to be able to make a full comparison between Denmark and the Netherlands. Based on an analysis of

literature on regional reforms and policy processes, four elements will be focal points of this research: the policy plan, the pre-decision policy process, conflicts of interest between different institutional actors and the public reaction. The research question will firstly be addressed by providing background information on the situation in the Netherlands and Denmark at the time that the reforms were proposed. After a discussion of relevant literature, the research design of this thesis is laid out. Subsequently, empirical chapters on both cases follow, in which four guiding questions based on the focal points of this study are discussed and results are compared. Finally, the findings of this study are discussed in the concluding chapter. This will demonstrate that the history of critique on Dutch provinces, the important historical position of provinces in the Dutch system and conflicts of interests between the central government and provinces can explain the strong resistance fuelled that the reform plans in the Netherlands.

1.2 Background

This section provides a short overview of the geographical and political background of the Netherlands and Denmark, in order to demonstrate which elements are comparable and different between both cases. In addition, this section maps out the circumstances against which the regional government reforms were proposed in Denmark and the Netherlands.

1.2.1 The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a small country with a large population of approximately 16.7 million inhabitants as of December 2012. Therefore, the Netherlands has a high population density in relation to its geographical size (Centraal Planbureau, 2013a)². The Netherlands has been a

² Approximately 469 people per square kilometre (Centraal Planbureau, 2013a).

constitutional monarchy since 1806, but the monarch has few political responsibilities. The parliament has most political power, and the coalition that has control over the provincial reforms is formed by the Liberals (VVD) and the Labour Party (PvdA). This coalition has been in place since November 2012.

The Netherlands is considered a three-tier decentralized unitary state (*gedecentraliseerde eenheidsstaat*) since 1848. This means that the national government is supported by provincial and local governmental layers (Dijkgraaf, 1998). In the Netherlands the intermediate tier of government is comprised of twelve provinces, and the local tier consists of 408 municipalities as of January 2013 (Centraal Planbureau, 2013b). The size of municipalities has drastically reduced over the past decades. Dutch provinces, however, have grown in number, because of the later establishment of a twelfth province in 1986 (Plasterk, 2013). Despite the lack of fundamental change to the provincial government structure, the size and tasks of provinces have been the subject of debate for centuries. Peters' (2007) book on the *Inflated Government* provides a critical analysis of Dutch provincial governments. She concludes that because provinces have limited governmental power, they attempt to make themselves more important by taking on social services which belong to municipalities. As a result, Peters claims that Dutch provinces have become 'inflated'.

Besides inflated provincial governments, the Dutch governmental system has had struggles with unclear division of tasks and responsibilities between the three tiers of government. As a consequence, the decision-making process of the government as a whole is very inefficient and slow of pace (van Dam, 2006). Moreover, the unclear governmental 'ownership' of overlapping regions has led to a legitimacy deficit, which is illustrated by dropping turnout rates for provincial elections (Plasterk, 2013).

1.2.2 Denmark

Denmark has a population of approximately 5.5 million people as of 2012. The country is similar in size as the Netherlands, but has much lower population density³. Denmark is also a constitutional monarch, but as opposed to the Netherlands the Danish parliament is known for forming minority governments. When the reforms were proposed in 2001, the government consisted of the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Conservative People's Party, with Anders Fogh Rasmussen as Prime Minister (Denmark.dk, 2013). Denmark has a three-tier governmental system with a central, regional and local level of government and is a decentralised unitary state. An important difference with the Netherlands, however, is that Danish provinces are not recognised by the Danish constitution. This makes it easier for the Danish government to make changes to the intermediate governmental layer in comparison with the Netherlands where provinces are enshrined in the constitution.

Before the reforms in 2007, Denmark had structural problems with its thirteen counties and 271 local governments. (Greve, 2006). These issues had been evident for longer, and remorse was especially directed at counties. In the 1980s, the inefficiency of this administrative level was first addressed by the Conservative Party, and remained a topic of dispute during the following years (van Dam, 2006). In her research on the Danish governmental reforms, Van Dam (2006) identified four issues with the Danish government with the governmental structure in Denmark. Firstly, public spending had soared because taxes were levied by the central, regional and local governments. Secondly, there was a lack of clarity which tasks and responsibilities belong to which governmental layers, which increased the inefficiency of the system. Furthermore, similarly as in the Netherlands, the regional governments were restricted by county borders to effectively fulfil their main

³ Approximately 126,4 people per square kilometre (Denmark.dk, 2013).

occupation of hospital health care. Finally, municipalities were too small to function efficiently and were unable to take over regional tasks if necessary.

Thus, the Dutch and Danish governments were challenged with similar regional and municipal struggles which incited the need for reforms. Nevertheless, there are also significant differences in the background against which the reforms were proposed. For example, Denmark has just one important city region, while the Netherlands has several large city municipalities which leads to more problems with imbalance between different geographical regions (Andersen, 2008). Moreover, the time period in which the Danish reforms were proposed was quite different from the Netherlands. The economic crisis which began in 2008, has left its mark on the Dutch reform plans, while the Danish plans were not framed as austerity measures. Hence, these factors will be taken into account in the analysis of the reaction to the reform proposal by the Dutch and Danish government.

1.3 Similar Reforms, Different Responses

This section will discuss the literature that guides this thesis, and is divided into two parts. Firstly, the theoretical relevance of this research in relation to political science literature is addressed. Therefore, it will draw on regionalisation and legitimacy studies in order to demonstrate the gap in the literature which is covered by this research. Secondly, a theoretical framework is presented which informs the empirical analysis of this study. Based on different bodies of literature four guiding questions are developed, which are addressed in the case studies of this thesis.

The reform plans in the Netherlands and Denmark are part of a larger trend in Nordic countries to reduce the authority of regional governments. As pointed out earlier, in many places around the world (ex. India, the USA and China) there has been a tendency to increase the authority, size and responsibilities of regional governments. This movement is termed

regionalisation (Marks, Hooghe & Schakel, 2008), and has been evident within Europe as well. In the 1980s the concept of ‘Europe of Regions’, as opposed to a Europe of nations, embodied the idea that regional governments would become more important in Europe in relation to the supranational organisation of the European Union (Applegate, 1999). Nevertheless, some nations in the European Union do not seem to comply to this idea. In Denmark and Finland governmental reforms in 2007 and 2010 have led to the drastic reduction of regional government authority in the former case, and abolishment of counties in the latter country. In Sweden, similarly to the Netherlands, plans are on the table to radically rescale the number of regional governments. The government of this Scandinavian country is considering to rescale its twenty-one counties to nine or six by 2015 (Lidström, 2010). Finally, in Norway hospital reforms were executed in 2002 which did not completely reconfigure Norway’s regional governments, but decentralised the most important task of its counties (hospital care) to the central state (Hagen & Kaarbøe, 2006).

The interesting feature to these reforms for political science literature is why these governments reduce the authority of their regions. An important and noticeable element which these countries have in common is their governmental structure as decentralised unitary states. As a consequence, in every case the reforms seem to be fuelled by a legitimacy deficit of regional governments due to weak performance of its tasks (Plasterk, 2013; Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012; Lidström, 2010; Hagen & Kaarbøe, 2006; Kettunen & Kungla, 2005). The element of organisational legitimacy could be facilitated by the position of regional governments in between the central and local layers. On the one hand, regions are farther removed from citizens, yet, on the other hand do not possess the control as a central government because of its size and secondary position. This problem is of relevance, as is the particular way the Netherlands and many Nordic countries attempt to solve it. In addition, only limited literature is available on these particular reforms or reform plans, and the number

of comparative analyses between these countries is minimal. The theoretical relevance of this thesis, therefore, stems from its attempt to cover a gap in literature on regional government reforms.

Another important part of this thesis consists of the empirical analysis of the Danish and Dutch regional reform plans. As there is a limited body of literature on regional government reforms as proposed in the Netherlands and Denmark, this will be a hypothesis generating study. The frame of the empirical examination is provided by four guiding questions which together provide an answer to the research question. In the following sections I will draw on different bodies of literature to formulate four key research focuses.

The first guiding question is aimed at measuring to what extent the policy plans proposed in the Netherlands and Denmark are comparable. Accordingly, this question will examine extensively what exact changes the reform proposal in both countries suggest, and against which geographical and societal background. Moreover, the specific aims of the central governments in the Netherlands and Denmark will be contrasted. This allows me to frame the context against which the three other guiding questions should be answered and interpreted.

A second guiding question focuses on the policy process leading up to the moment when the reform plans officially entered the political agenda in Denmark and the Netherlands. This is relevant because the process of policy-making can be unpredictable and is subject to many different interest. Hill (2005) states that “[t]he policy process is a complex political process in which there are many actors: politicians, pressure groups, civil servants, publicly employed professionals, and even sometimes those who see themselves as the passive recipients of policy” (p. 4). Bundgard and Vrangbaek (2007) have attempted to examine this process in Denmark in the period leading up to the executing of the reform plans (2001-2004). These authors concluded that, because the reform plans were presented at a time when different public and private actors supported this idea, a policy window opened. This could then

explain the quick policy process and little opposition by politicians and citizens. Nevertheless, even though Bundgard and Vrangbaek offer valuable information about the Danish regional government reforms, their argument of opening and closing policy windows would be void of meaning for this research. Concluding that the difference between Denmark and the Netherlands is the lack of a policy window opening in the Netherlands would not be valid. Namely, this could turn out to be wrong if the reforms in the Netherlands would be completed according to plan in the future. This demonstrates that the status of a policy window can only be judged after the policy has been implemented. As I aim to research the period before and shortly after the policy plan was presented in Denmark and the Netherlands this theory would not contribute to my analysis.

Nevertheless, the method used by Bundgard and Vrangbaek (2007) to examine the policy process is relevant for this study. The authors draw on Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams theory which considers policy-making processes as composed of different streams of interests. Kingdon recognises three key streams: problems, policy and politics. According to Kingdon these assist in the analysis to uncover why certain policy plans end up on the political agenda in a country, while others do not. Moreover, it allows scholars to research why a policy plan is considered necessary at a particular point in time by investigating the problem, policy and political situation behind this plan. In the Danish and Dutch case different three aspects will turn out to play a important role in the reform policy process. By examining these different streams I can conduct an in-depth analysis of how the reform plans in both countries were developed and what differences there are in this policy process between Denmark and the Netherlands. Therefore, I aim to use multiple streams theory as a structural tool to trace the formulation process of reform policy in these countries. I will address some of the questions also posed by Bundgard and Vrangbaek (2007) for my analysis of the pre-decision policy phase: "How was the structural reform *initiated*? Was it

coincidental or deliberate? Was it triggered by the problems, policy or politics stream?” (Italics in the original, p. 492). This way I aim to examine the policy process as one factor which could explain the diverging reactions of the Danish and Dutch politicians and public.

Thirdly, the resistance by politicians could be accounted for by analysing in which ways the Dutch and Danish government exactly planned to rescale their regional governments and decentralize tasks and responsibilities. The third guiding question, therefore, focuses on the institutional conflicts of interests that were fuelled by the policy plans. This relates to literature on the political importance of territory, its embodiment of power relations and struggles, and the potential for joint-decision traps. *The Production of Space* (1991) as theorized by Henri Lefebvre offers insight into how space and power are strongly connected. Lefebvre introduced the notion that “(Social) space is a (social) product” (p. 26). He demonstrated that space is not empty territory; it is constructed by people, and therefore full of meaning, culture and power. Hence, by decentralizing responsibility to lower levels of government, as Denmark and the Netherlands have done for centuries, territory coincides with governmental power. By rescaling and decentralizing regional governments, the national government attempts to reconfigure its ‘social power’ (Brenner, 1997).

Scott (1998) takes this argument further in his work *Seeing Like a State*. He states that in order for states to execute their highly modernist policy, it makes use of science to make legitimate what will appear to others as illegitimate. This is exactly the process which the third guiding question aims at: what do the national governments want to change, how do they try to make their plans legitimate and what could explain why politicians support or oppose these plans. For example, in the Netherlands strong opposition is coming from the provincial administrations that will have to deal with the reforms first. In particular the youngest province of the three (Flevoland) is afraid it will get swallowed by larger provinces (Noord-Holland and Utrecht) and will become a ‘dump’ (Omroep Flevoland, 2013 February 11).

To be able to research the effect of conflicts of interest on policy decisions I will utilise the theory on joint-decision traps by Scharpf (1988) and Blom-Hansen (1999). This theory was formulated by Scharpf to explain how decision traps can occur in federal states where sub-national governments have a veto right in central government decision-making. However, Blom-Hansen has adapted this theory to unitary states where the decision traps might not occur because of constitutional structures, but because of informal conflicts of interests between the central and sub-national governments. In this thesis the theory by Blom-Hansen will be applied to examine to what extent the Danish and Dutch governments have had the upper hand in the reform policy process in relation to other institutional actors.

Finally, an aspect of great importance in the governmental reforms in the Netherlands and Denmark is the public; the population which is subjugated to the reforms. This last guiding question, therefore, addresses the public reaction to the policy proposal and to extend to which public interests were taken into account in this process. Restructuring of territory and regional administrations is not just a sensitive issue for politicians, but also for citizens, because territorial reforms can form a challenge to regional identities (Toonen, van Dam, Glim & Wallagh, 1998). Government reforms are also a contentious issue because it involves many large changes of which not all outcomes can be predicted. Deborah Stone's (2002) work *Policy Paradox* assists in explaining why political decision-making is not only a rational project. The plans drawn on paper might be formulated through reason, but implementation of this policy never takes place as expected. Therefore, the public can resist heavily to large reform plans, because it is unclear to what extent their interests will be taken into account. As a result, it is important to examine the public reaction and the validity of this reaction in this thesis, in order to provide an informed answer to the research question. This guiding question, consequently, links to the other guiding questions because it tests to what extent public

interests were considered in the pre-decision policy process and in the conflict of interests between institutional actors.

Together these four guiding question will guide an in-depth comparative study of the Danish and Dutch reform plans. More importantly, from a theoretical perspective these will assist in answering why these reforms were considered necessary by the government and what makes these reforms different.

Chapter 2 - Research Design

The following section will lay out the research design of this study that guides this study of regional government reforms. Firstly, I will discuss the case selection and research method utilised in this thesis, process tracing. Subsequently, the exact guiding questions are formulated based on political science theory discussed previously. Finally, I elaborate on the specific concepts which will be measured in the empirical analysis of this study.

2.1 Research Methods

2.1.1 Case selection

This research was inspired by the controversy around provincial government reform plans in the Netherlands. From a comparative politics perspective it seemed valuable to do a comparative study with a second case where similar reforms plans were considered. Therefore I use Mill's most similar systems design for my case selection (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), because the combination of rescaling and decentralization of regional governments is uncommon. Thus, by conducting an in-depth comparative analysis of two cases that are similar this research can contribute to regional government reform literature.

As the Danish government in 2004 put forward a plan which resembles the current reform policy of the Dutch government this seemed a ideal comparison. In addition, Denmark and the Netherlands are both small countries with established welfare states, and three-tier governmental systems. Nevertheless, there are two important practical differences between these cases. Firstly, the reforms have already been implemented in Denmark between 2004 and 2007. In order to compare both countries the focus of this thesis is therefore limited to moment when the reform plans were made official. Secondly, while the Dutch government commences with the reform of its provinces, the Danish government simultaneously rescaled

its municipalities. In this research, the focus is, therefore, only on the regional reforms which Denmark proposed in 2004.

2.1.2 Process Tracing

The research method that will guide the examination of these cases is process tracing. This is an effective method to do an in-depth analysis of one case, or a comparison of two units (Gerring, 2004). Process tracing is a manner of evidence gathering, which allows examining the causal relation between an independent variable and a number of dependent variables (George and Bennett, 2004). In this case I will conduct cross-case process tracing between the local government reform policy and the response of politicians and citizens in Denmark and the Netherlands. The rest of this section will explain which processes I aim to trace for each guiding question.

Firstly, I will conduct an in-depth analysis of the white papers about the reform plans of the Dutch and Danish governments. Here process tracing is applied by comparing which changes are proposed by both governments, and the aims of both countries to propose these specific changes. This way process tracing will provide insight into how comparable the Danish and Dutch reform plans are. Secondly, for both cases a time-line will be drawn out, in order to acquire knowledge on the pre-decision policy process. The process tracing commences from the moment when discontent with the regional governmental structure in both countries was voiced. Hence, this section elaborates on past regional reform plans and the way the current reform plans have entered the political agenda. Thirdly, I will outline the institutional conflicts of interest that are part of the reform policy process by examining for every institutional actor which interest they have in the reform. Subsequently, this overview demonstrates which clashes could have erupted between different institutions, and to what extent the central government could solve or overrule these differences in interests. Finally,

in order to trace to what extent public interests were incorporated in the policy process, the main objections and supportive claims of the public are examined. I will extract these from newspaper articles which indicate objections and support voiced by citizens. The newspaper articles will need to be published between the moment the reform ideas were on the table until the official announcement of the reform plans. Accordingly, I will research whether these interests were taken into account during the policy-making process by returning to guiding question two and three.

2.2 Theory & Guiding Questions

This thesis is a hypothesis-generating study, because the aim of my thesis is to discover which variables can explain differences in response by Danish and Dutch politicians and the public to regional government reforms. In this section the four key questions guiding this research are specified and visualised.

Table 1 demonstrates which guiding questions addresses what particular part of the policy process. The table represents a time-line consisting of three parts: the pre-decision policy process, the moment the reform plans were officially presented, and the public and political reaction to these official plans. The combination of all four guiding questions shows how the process tracing of the reform plan will be executed. The remainder of this section formulates four key questions and explains how these capture particular moments on the time-line.

1) How similar are the reform policy plans of the Dutch and Danish government?

This guiding question examines the official reform plans as presented to the public and politicians. Therefore, the question captures the middle part of the time-line to establish what elements are similar and differ between the Danish and Dutch reform proposal.

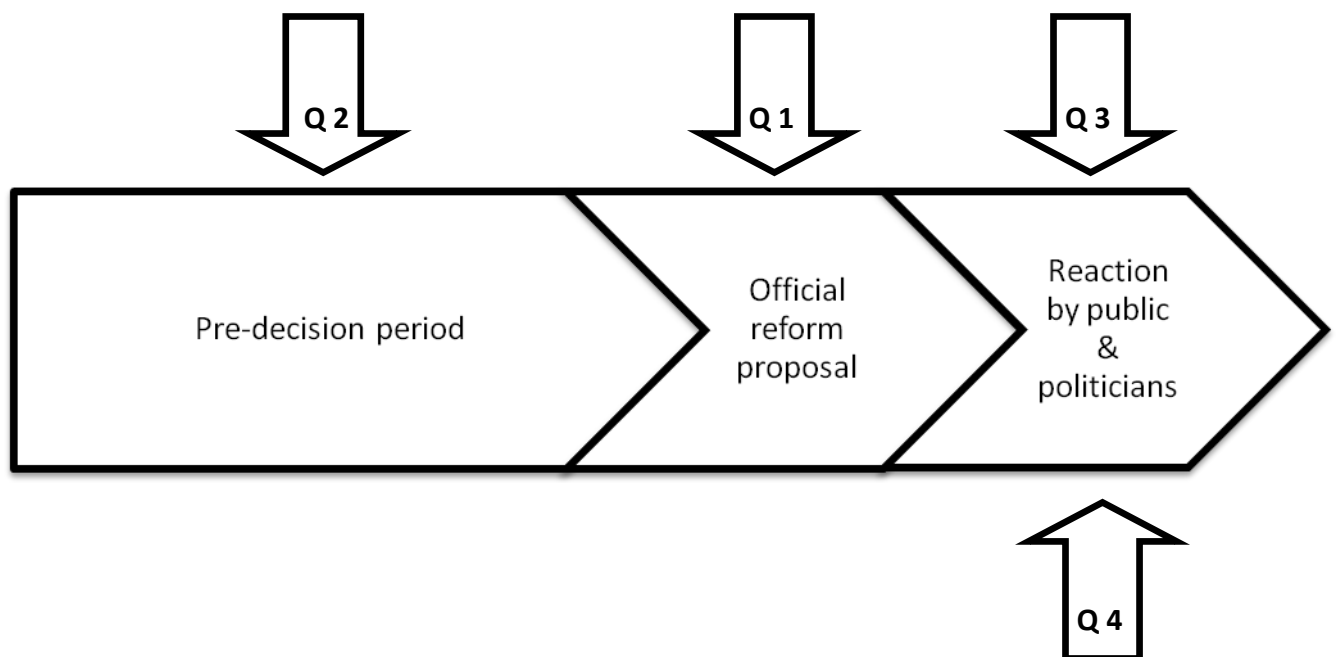


Figure 1: Research Design

- 2) *How was the reform policy initiated in Denmark and the Netherlands? How did the reforms enter the political agenda?*

This key question researches the largest part on the time-line, namely the pre-decision policy process of the reform plans. By drawing a comparison between this process in Denmark and the Netherlands I can examine whether this process has influenced the opinions of the public and politicians on the reform plans.

- 3) *Which conflicts of interest have been involved in the reform policy formulation?*

The rescaling of regions goes hand in hand with a re-distribution of administrative power and tasks. A potential for conflicts of interests of this re-distribution is, therefore, captured by this question.

4) *What has been the public reaction to the policy plan in the Netherlands and Denmark?*

The last part of the time-line is addressed both by guiding question three and four. This question aims to capture if the response by citizens can be explained by the extent to which their interests are represented in the policy process.

2.3 Concepts & Measurement

Based on the four guiding questions discussed above, different concepts will be measured in this study. This section will describe which concept these are and how the outcomes of the empirical analysis will be measured. In addition it will be clarified how the results are interpreted in an attempt to answer the research question.

The first key concept is ‘reform plan’, which will be measured by comparing the Danish and Dutch white papers which explain these plans. Its comparability is tested by examining which proposed changes and vision behind the changes resemble between both countries and which do not. Secondly, a key concept is the ‘pre-decision policy process’. This concept will be measured with the multiple streams theory by Kingdon (1995), which attempts to discover the different streams (policy, politics and problems) were part of making this policy process. In addition, I conduct an analysis of the history of reform plans and the position of regional governments in both countries. Subsequently, the key concept to measure the third guiding question is ‘conflict of interests’. In this study conflicts of interests are defined as different stakes which actors have in a plan that cannot be reconciled. This is measured by utilising the joint-decision trap theory as adjusted by Blom-Hansen (1999). Finally, the last key concept that will be measured by the fourth guiding question is the ‘public reaction’. This is examined through the arguments made by the public pro and against the reform plans as represented by the media during the policy formulation process. In order to explain this reaction, I will investigate whether these arguments were represented in the

reform plans. This way I can measure whether the public opinion was taken into account by the government.

Chapter 3 – The Netherlands

This section conducts an empirical analysis of the provincial reform plans in the Netherlands, and what fuelled strong resistance to this project. To enhance comparability both this chapter and chapter four on Denmark are structured according to the same guiding questions and sub-questions.

3.1 Policy Plan

This section examines in detail what exact adjustments the Dutch government wants to make to its internal governmental structure. There are three sub-questions guiding this analysis: what structural changes are proposed? What changes will be made to responsibilities and tasks of governments? And in which context, or for which reasons have these changes been proposed? These questions are based on the table designed by Bundgaard and Vrangbaek (2007), and together provide an overview of what changes are proposed and the rationale behind these adjustments. In comparison with Denmark this allows me to determine how much these plans resemble, and how drastic the changes are. Table 1 was assembled based on government documents (Rutte II, 2012; Plasterk, 2013) and answers the first two sub-questions for the Dutch reform plan. After a discussion of the general vision of the Dutch government, I elaborate on the results of the table. Table 1 also includes the reforms which Dutch municipalities will undergo. These changes are discussed to sketch the context in which the provinces are reconstructed, even though this paper is focussed specifically on regional government reforms.

One of the key ideas behind the Dutch policy plan is a resistance to a grand restructuring scheme of the whole government. Instead, the minister of Internal Affairs aims to take smaller steps in the process of policy implementation. Hence, a ‘blue-print approach’

	Municipalities	Regions	The Central State
Structural Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The 408 municipalities with on average 40.000 inhabitants in 2013 will be rescaled to municipalities of approximately 100.000 inhabitants. – Reduction of the number of municipal officials with 25%. This is to restore the number of employees from before dualisation of the governmental structure was introduced. – Abolishment of city-regions (<i>Wgr+</i>) which functioned as another layer of government formed by cooperating municipalities. – De-constitutionalisation of the appointment of majors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Twelve provinces will be merged to five regional governments. The first merge is of the provinces Utrecht, Noord Holland and Flevoland in 2016. – The ‘Water Boards’ (<i>Waterschappen</i>) will be united with the regional governments – Elections for the Provincial government and Water Boards will be on the same day. – Reduction of the number of provincial officials with 25%. This is to restore the number of employees from before dualisation of the governmental structure was introduced. – De-constitutionalisation of the appointment of commissioners of the queen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A new minister is introduced at the ministry of Internal Affairs. This the minister position for Living and Government Service (<i>Wonen en Rijksdienst</i>).
Changes in Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Retains control over how to spend its financial means (open household) – Gains full responsibility for youth care in troubling families (<i>Bureau Jeugdzorg</i>). – The law on societal support (<i>Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning</i>) is broadened to include home care for elderly (<i>extramuraal zorg</i>). – The establishment of town and neighbourhood boards is stimulated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Gains governance over Water Boards. – Loses control over how to spend financial means (closed household). – Tasks are reduced to spatial planning, traffic and transportation, nature and regional and economic policy. – Social policy will only be executed by the province if it exceeds local interests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Gains responsibility over governmental treasure financing (<i>schatkistbankieren</i>).

Table 1: Changes in structure and tasks proposed for municipality, province and the central state by the Dutch government.

(*blauwdrukbenadering*) is specifically avoided, which is demonstrated by the many open ends this policy plan still has. In 2013 only the first of five provincial mergers is scheduled, while the remaining nine provinces are still uncertain about their fate. A second main aim of the policy plans is to restore the governmental three-tier structure. Namely, over the years a number of other layers have been added to the traditional three-floor building of the Dutch government. This building has gained a fourth floor (the European Union), and over the years a number of entresols have been added (twelve water boards and eight city regions). The aim is to abolish or merge these entresols with other layers to re-establish a strong three-tier government, to improve communication with the European Union. Both aims drive the reform plans in Denmark as well.

3.1.1 Municipalities

The reforms of Dutch municipalities are driven by the goal to strengthen local democracy. As a consequence, municipalities are made stronger in their governmental power by enlarging their territory and population, and are simultaneously given more responsibility for social tasks. The measures that are proposed to accomplish this goal are directed at decentralising health care tasks to a local level, cooperation between municipalities, and stronger town and neighbourhood boards. However, at the same time the number of municipal officials is reduced, as are the financial means of municipalities.

Therefore, there appears to be a contradictory trend in these reforms. On the one hand, municipalities will need to take on more social tasks in light of local democracy. The past years Dutch municipalities have already gained responsibility for governmental aid (*Wet Werk en Bijstand*) and home care (*thuiszorg*). However, in order for municipalities to execute these tasks the most efficiently, the government plans to create municipalities of 100.000 or more inhabitants. Before the reforms the Netherlands was the second country with the largest municipalities, but after these reform plans it would challenge Denmark's first position

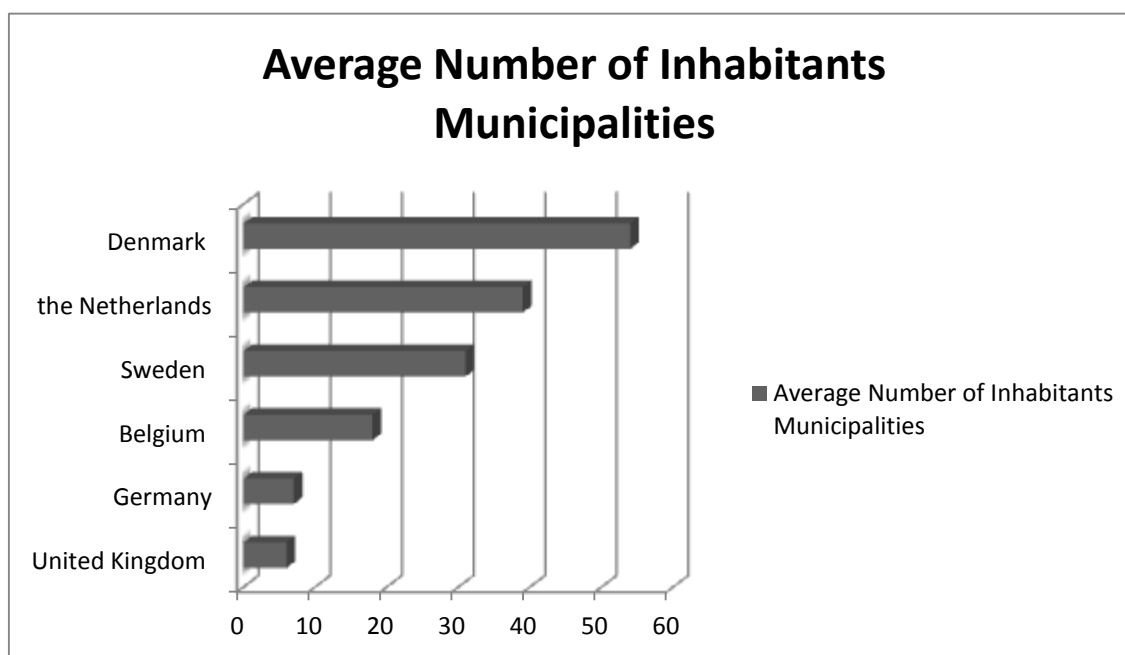


Figure 1: Average number of inhabitants per municipality in a number of European Countries (Keuning, 2013)

(Figure 2). However, while the number and weight of tasks, and the size of municipalities are increased, the size of its official boards are decreased with twenty-five percent and its financial means are not stimulated. The Dutch government, therefore, presents its municipalities with an enormous challenge.

3.1.2 Regions

In contrast to the municipalities, the Dutch provinces will undergo a reduction in tasks and responsibilities. Even though the provinces are enlarged in size, its tasks are reconfigured to the classic provincial responsibilities of spatial planning, traffic and transportation, nature and regional and economic policy. Over the years Dutch provinces have taken on cultural tasks, however, the policy plan does not consider social or cultural tasks as important for provinces unless these exceed municipal borders. More importantly, a significant form of control is taken away from provincial boards; the independence to decide how to spend its financial means. Even though provinces and municipalities have always been restricted to fit their

spending within the central government's laws, these policy plans will significantly reduce independence of provincial governments. Nevertheless, provinces will be enlarged with one entresol of the Dutch governmental building, the water boards. These administrations work specifically with the innovation and containment of water in the Netherlands. The extent to which the Dutch provinces challenge these changes will be discussed in section 3.3.

3.1.3 The Central Government

The central state in the Netherlands will not obtain many new tasks, beside the execution of its reform plans. In order to manage the decentralisations and changes in governmental structure a new minister will be appointed for Living and Government Services (*Wonen en Rijksdienst*). In addition, the government becomes a 'central bank' for its sub-national governments by introducing so-called 'governmental treasure financing' (*schatkistbankieren*). This means that all public money is channelled through the central government. Provinces and municipalities will not be able to invest their money in a foreign bank to benefit from lowest interest rates. The governmental advantage of treasure financing, therefore, is that provinces and municipalities can invest at low-risk and on advantageous terms (Ministerie van Financiële Zaken, 2013). However, a disadvantage for provinces and municipalities is their loss of control over the management of their finances.

3.1.4 Comparison to Danish reform plans

There are a number of similarities between the Dutch and Danish reform plans. A few of these are the many loose ends the reform plan still has and the intentional decentralisation of social tasks to municipalities to stimulate local democracy. However, there are also a number of differences between the reforms in Denmark and the Netherlands. The Dutch government has drawn up the plans for its reforms but has only scheduled the first of five regional mergers.

The Danish government executed all reforms within the same timeframe (2004 until 2007). In addition, the Dutch government only merges its governments, and does not plan to re-draw borders as done with Danish counties. Finally, there are general differences between the division of financial means and specific decentralisations of tasks between both countries.

3.2 Policy Process

“...Nobody has a monopoly on ideas. They come from plethora of different sources. Thus the key to understanding policy change is not where the idea came from but what made it take hold and grow” (Kingdon, 1995, p. 72).

The key question of this section focuses on the way reform policy was formulated and introduced in the Netherlands. The main questions guiding this section are: How was the structural reform *initiated*? Was it coincidental or deliberate? Was it triggered by problems, policy or politics streams? (Bundgard and Vrangbaek, 2007). These key questions address the period from demands for provincial reforms, to the announcement of official reform plans.

3.2.1 How was the structural reform initiated?

The policy plans were made official on December 14, 2012 by Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Liberal Party (VVD). This was his second attempt at government reforms, after a failed effort to place the plans on the political agenda in the first coalition he formed. This coalition came into office in September 2010, and consisted of coalition partner the Christian Democrats (CDA) and minority government partner Freedom Party (PVV). In April 2012 this coalition fell apart, because the parties were unable to reach agreement on budget regulations. Nevertheless, in his second term in 2012 Rutte formed a coalition with the Labour Party (PvdA). This time the plans to reform the Dutch governmental structure featured clearly on the governmental programme (Rutte II, 2012). Once in office the Minister of Internal Affairs,

Plasterk, commenced with designed a reform plan and encouraging provinces and municipalities to examine their preferences for, possibilities to merge with neighbouring regions. Therefore, within five months, Plasterk published a white paper on the structural reforms summarised in table 1. The reform bill is under review of the Dutch senate (*Eerste Kamer*) until December 2014, which would allow the execution of the first provincial merge to commence at towards the end of 2014. According to these plans the new region would be a fact in 2016.

3.2.2 Was it coincidental or deliberate?

The reform plans formulated by Rutte II in 2012 entered the political agenda after decades of discussion on the efficiency of the current provincial structure. Therefore, there is no question that the plans of Rutte were a deliberate attempt to finally put these ideas into practice. Shortly after the Second World War the first commission investigated the possibility to reform the governmental structure of the Netherlands. In light of financial problems of the government and a changing society, the government assigned the commission Koelma in 1946 to perform an advising role on the arrangements of large cities and smaller towns. In 1949 the commission advised to create a fourth governmental layer of districts, in order to accommodate growing city regions in the west of the Netherlands (Commissie-Koelma, 1949). The government did not follow up on these plans, but the Netherlands still struggles with stronger growth of cities in the west as opposed to the rest of the country. This area in the west is referred to as the Randstad. Table 2 provides an overview of the bulk of proposals and advices that have been provided between 2002 and 2012 by special commissions and organisations on the provincial structure. This synopsis was also addressed in the white paper on the government reforms (Plasterk, 2013).

Commission/ Organisation	Problems	Advice
Commission Geelhoed (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional government small and weak in comparison to other European countries - Regional matters exceed provincial borders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase size of provinces and decentralise more responsibilities and tasks to provinces, as in other European countries
Teisman, van Twist, Schulz & Puma (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Randstad plays no role in Europe, and its governance is splintered - Provinces are powerless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enlarge provinces to restore balance in relation to large city municipalities (four largest cities are Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht)
Holland Acht (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Netherlands lacks a strong governmental structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce the number of governmental layers
Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current four Randstad provinces (Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Utrecht & Flevoland) are unable to handle the scale of governmental tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Necessary to form two Randstad regions, a Northern and Southern region, which would work together to make governing the Randstad more effective and powerful
Ministry of Internal Affairs (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the Randstad a large problem is governmental clutter - The urgency is largest to reform the Randstad 	
Commission Kok (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Governmental clutter is a problem in the Randstad. - The current structure is failing as different governments are not able to attune effectively to each other - The Randstad lacks governmental ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to form two Randstad regions, a Northern and Southern region, which would work together to make governing the Randstad more effective and powerful
OECD (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The problem is slow governmental decision making, and lack of political leadership 	
Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provinces are suppressed between two governmental layers, and are thereby unable to function properly - There is a lack of incentive to change in politicians and political parties 	
TNO (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Because of the current provincial structure the edge in growth of GRP (Gross Regional Product) the Randstad used to have in Europe has plummeted to an average level. 	

Table 2: Problems with, and Advices for the Dutch Provincial structure 2002-2012

Table 2 demonstrates the problems that were observed with the provincial scale and structure, especially in the economically important area of the Randstad. Issues that were recurrently pointed out are the weak political leadership of provincial governments, and their inefficient governance. Noticeably the Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur (2010) pointed out another important factor: the willingness of politicians to introduce change. Their report states, “The board has to mention that the lack of success to change can also be explained by the lack of incentive to change by politicians and political parties. Rescaling, merging and/or changing borders undermine direct power and influential positions. Hence it would lead to the subverting of the power foundation of this country” (p. 32)⁴. In addition, TNO’s (2012) research demonstrates that the ineffective provincial structure has led to a decline of economic growth in the Randstad. The provincial government cannot handle governance over this important economic area due to their small size and ineffective cooperation. From table 2 one can deduce that cabinet Rutte II initiated the policy process in order to solve the governmental problems with provinces that have been proven multiple times. More importantly, Rutte most probably deliberately aimed to address the abstention from politics to change, and initiate an actual plan to bring movement in provincial government reforms.

3.2.4 Was it triggered by problems, policy or politics stream?

The pre-decision policy phase in the Netherlands will be examined based on the multiple streams theory of Kingdon (1995). Three different streams are recognised by Kingdon, that together can explain whether and why a policy plan is accepted or not. Therefore, it seems

⁴ Translation Dutch: “De Raad kan er niet omheen de geringe slaagkans van verandering mede te verklaren door het gebrek aan veranderingsgezindheid van politici en politieke partijen. Opschaling, samenvoeging en/of het verleggen van grenzen ondermijnt direct machts- en invloedspozities en betekent het ondergraven van de eigen machtsbasis in het land” (Raad van Openbaar Bestuur, 2010, p. 32).

relevant to apply the multiple streams theory to the Dutch and Danish policy process. This section provides an elaborate account of the policy, problem and political streams in the Dutch policy process.

The work by Kingdon (1995) investigates why certain themes enter the political agenda, while others do not. Moreover, he examines how the political agenda changes, and what influences this. The theory he has developed, therefore, analyses the different processes and actors which are part of the pre-decision policy process, and how certain ideas are pursued as policy plans while others are rejected. Three streams or processes are recognised by Kingdon, that conceptually fit in a chronological order: problems, policies and politics. These streams should be treated independently, yet influence the policy process together.

Policy-making usually addresses a problem in society. This is why the first stream that will be analysed of the reform policy process are the problems which fuel need for new policy. In order to recognise these problems, Kingdon (1995) emphasises the importance of indicators of problems. In the Dutch case the policy plan seems to have entered the political agenda due to four different problems. Firstly, as shown in table 2 the provincial governments in the Netherlands have demonstrated to work inefficiently and with little political leadership. Secondly, the decline in growth of the Randstad is an indicator of weak economical policy in this region (TNO, 2012). Thirdly, a strong indicator of low legitimacy of provincial governments is the low turnout of voters to provincial elections (56 per cent in 2011) (Parlement & Politiek, 2013). Finally, an important indicator is related to the financial situation of the Netherlands. Kingdon (1995) points out that indicators of problems are often crises that occur. In this case the economic crisis is less of an acute situation, as is Kingdon's example of the collapse of a bridge. Nevertheless, the governmental debt which the Netherlands has is an important and influential indicator for the need for reforms as part of

austerity measures. Thus, for the Dutch government the reforms of provincial governments is not only to modernise the government structure, but also measure to stimulate budget cuts.

Problems lead to policy-making, however this process is often victim to fragmentation and different incentives of different policymakers. Kingdon (1995), therefore, describes the policy stream as an interplay between different actors and policy communities. The conflicts of interest which can arise in this process will be discussed in more detail in the next section. In addition, ideas are mutated and re-combined in the policy-making process. Similarly in the Dutch case, where the pre-decision phase has covered more than a decade. Many proposals have been made on how to reform the provinces in the Randstad region. The proposal by Commission Kok (2007) and the Raad van Openbaar Bestuur (2006) to create two Randstad regions to enhance the efficiency of this region is one example. Cabinet Rutte II has reformed and re-combined these plans to a proposal that merges three of the four Randstad provinces (Noord-Holland, Utrecht & Flevoland).

Finally, a policy process is influenced by the political stream. Kingdon (1995) has divided this stream into three different aspects: the national mood, organised political forces and government in the political stream. Firstly, the national mood, or the climate of the country is considered an important influence on whether a policy plan will enter the political agenda. Kingdon argues that policymakers and politicians assign high value to the opinion of the nation, which is generally measured in an opinion poll or through referenda. Both in Denmark and the Netherlands these opinion polls were conducted before an official plan was announced. Based on these polls the Danish public was receptive to the reforms, while the majority of Dutch participants opposed the idea (EenVandaag, 2012 November 7; Berlingske Tidende, 2002 July 14). Organised political forces are considered of political influence on whether a plan is accepted, because interest groups generally have the necessary power. If there have been organisations lobbying for certain policy, which is in line with the plans of

the government it will stimulate the policy process. Noticeably there is not clear sign of interest groups lobbying for provincial reforms in the Netherlands, again in contrast to Denmark. Finally, government in the political stream attempts to capture the influence of governmental politics on the policy process. In both cases of the Netherlands and Denmark the policy plans were proposed very soon after a new government had come in office. Hence, this appears to have been a large influence on getting the plans onto the political agenda.

3.3 Conflicts of Interest

The third key factor which are examined is the conflict of interest between different institutional parties in the policy process. On the time-line of the policy process these conflicts are linked to specifically to the initiation period when the official governmental reform plans were made official. Conflicts of interests that might have arisen involving municipalities will not be addressed in order to conform to the scope of this thesis. The sub-questions guiding this analysis are: Which institutional actors participated? What are their interests in the provincial reforms? Is there potential for a joint-decision trap? These questions will allow an in-depth examination of the potential conflicts of interests and the influence this could have had on the reform policy process.

3.3.1 Which institutional actors participated?

This section provides an overview of the main institutional actors that were involved in the policy plan, in order to grasp which interests were represented by the plan. The formation of the initial policy plan was led by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but was very explicitly done in cooperation with the governmental boards of provinces Flevoland, Utrecht and Noord-Holland. In addition, the water boards were involved, and the Association of Provinces of the Netherlands (IPO) which is an interest group that represents all Dutch provinces. Societal

organizations and citizens were given a voice in the initial policy process, because these were invited to open meetings with the minister of Internal Affairs.

3.3.2 Intuitional Interests

The theory which will support this section on conflicts of interest is that of the ‘joint-decision trap’, which was firstly proposed by Fritz Scharpf (1988), and adjusted by Blom-Hansen (1999). Firstly I will address the theory of joint-decision traps to then analyse which interests the institutional actors in the reform policy process in the Netherlands seem to protect.

Scharpf (1988) introduces the notion of joint-decision traps in relation to federal states, and uses Germany and the European Community as examples. This decision-trap occurs in states where a central government requires unanimous support from sub-national governments in order to make a decision. The situation that can easily arise is stagnation of the decision making process, and therefore joint-decision traps can occur. Blom-Hansen (1999) acknowledges the evidence of joint-decision traps, however, extends this theory from federal states to unitary states. Hence, Scharpf did not consider the joint-decision trap relevant to unitary states because these are not constitutionally dependent on the support of sub-national governments to make a decision. However, Blom-Hansen demonstrates that the informal structures and conflicts of interest in unitary states can create a joint-decision traps very similar to constitutional traps which federal states encounter. Blom-Hansen divides the interests in the political arena into two types: the parliamentary interests and corporatist interests. Based on the construction of a political system (e.g. minority or majority government) there is an extent to which both the parliamentary arena and corporatist arena can influence political decision-making. According to Blom-Hansen, whether a joint-decision trap will occur relies to a great extent on whether a central government has an ‘exit’ option, to accept policy via a different route. For example, a minority government could have this exit

option, because it could either find a majority in parliament or use support from the corporatist arena as leverage to find this majority. The Netherlands and Denmark are examples of unitary states that include sub-national governments in their decision-making. Therefore, there is a potential for joint-decision traps which could assist in explaining the difference between the Danish and Dutch response to the reform plans.

The institutional structure of the Dutch central government is first considered, in order to gain insight in the potential for joint-decision traps in the Netherlands. The cabinet of PM Rutte that leads the reform plans has a majority in parliament (*Tweede Kamer*), but is in a minority in the senate (*Eerste Kamer*). Thus, while the cabinet of Rutte II is able to get these policy plans through parliament, it will need to find a majority in the senate to support the plans. Only with this majority in the senate can the parliament execute its reform policy. More importantly, in the Netherlands the senate is indirectly elected through provincial elections. Citizens elect provincial representatives, and these representatives then choose which 75 members will compose the senate. As a consequence, provincial interests are indirectly represented in the senate. Chapter four will demonstrate that the governmental structure in Denmark is quite different from the Netherlands, which considerably influences the potential for joint-decision traps.

Accordingly, the interests of the Dutch central government will be considered, in order to examine whether conflicts of interest between institutional actors have had a paralysing effect on the reform policy process. These interests feature significantly in the white paper of the Dutch minister of Internal Affairs (Plasterk, 2013). Firstly, the central government aims to strengthen the legitimacy of provincial governments, as this affects the legitimacy of the entire governmental system. The proposed reforms comply to this goal by enlarging the provinces to increase its scale, but decentralise its social and healthcare tasks to municipalities to bring these tasks closer to citizens. The second interest, therefore, is stimulating local

democracy in the Netherlands and relates to the reduction of provincial tasks. On the one hand, decentralisation to municipalities aims to make the Dutch welfare state more efficient. On the other hand, decentralisations are entwined with a third aim of the government: executing austerity measures. Health care in the Netherlands has become too expensive, and as a result the government attempts to decrease costs by stimulating personal responsibility of citizens in healthcare (*zelfregie in de zorg*). Finally, an interest of the central government is to protect and enhance the position of the Netherlands in Europe. The reforms of Dutch provinces are planned to stimulate economic growth in the Randstad. Simultaneously, larger provinces could attract more foreign investors or gain European subsidies.

Dutch provincial governments share interests with the central government, and need to comply to these interest as well. However, the provinces have also been struggling for one particular interest not necessarily shared with the central government: their right to existence. Peters (2007) has written a controversial book about the functioning of provinces in the Netherlands. She describes how Dutch provinces have been struggling to retain their important position in the governmental system and in this attempt have blown themselves out of proportion. Peters, therefore, argues that provinces are presenting themselves as more important than these governments in fact are. The many commissions researching the provincial structure have posed threats to these government's current form, as do the current reform plans of the government.

The main interests which the provincial governments, therefore, safeguards in relation to the reform plans are concerned with conserving the province in its current state. Firstly, provinces want to retain their 'open household', the freedom to spend government money on the projects and services it finds most important. The current plans entail changing the provincial household into a closed system, where the central government prescribes on what the provincial means should be spend. Secondly, Peters (2007) demonstrates that the

provinces in the Netherlands have attempted to increase its legitimacy by taking on more social tasks, for example related to culture. In 2008 the provinces gained the responsibility over youth care in cooperation with the municipalities. Peters argues this was considered a ‘victory’ for the provinces, and a way to show its usefulness and necessity. Nevertheless, the current reform plans include decentralizing youth care completely to municipalities. It seems to be in the interest of provincial governments to be in direct contact with citizens, and by decentralizing provincial governments to their classical tasks of nature, travel and environment this element disappears.

The final important institutional actor in the reform process is the Association of Provinces (IPO), which protects and supports the interests of all Dutch provinces in parliament and in the European Union (EU) (Interprovinciaal Overleg, 2013). Hence, the IPO can exercise considerable influence over Dutch politics and has been lobbying for the provincial interests for many years, also in times when provincial reforms were under consideration. Hence, the IPO has similar interests to the provincial governments, yet, while provincial deputies are connected to political parties which have different interests, the IPO functions as a strong corporatist actor with a centralized interest in the political arena.

3.3.3 Joint-decision Trap

According to Blom-Hansen (1999) a joint-decision trap can occur when a central government cannot execute a decision due to resistance from sub-national governments. In the Netherlands there appears a potential for a joint-decision trap because of the clearly opposing interests of the provinces and central government. While the central government attempts to solve problems with provincial legitimacy by decreasing the authority of regional governments (Plasterk, 2013), provinces have lobbied for more social tasks to increase its importance (Peters, 2007).

However, opposing interests between different layers of government is not uncommon. Blom-Hansen points out that the joint-decision trap is the consequence of the way a parliament has leverage over a conflict of interest through an 'exit' option. In the case of the Netherlands, this exit option does not seem to exist. The parliament has to lobby for its support in the senate, and cannot divert this majority. Resistance can be voiced through the political parties that are not part of the coalition, and provincial interests can be supported indirectly by the senate. In addition, the IPO exercises a strong influence on the decision-making process, and can lobby against the plans. As a result, the Dutch government can end up in a joint-decision trap if it cannot find support for its reform plans in the senate. The government does not have clear leverage over the senate and IPO to find a majority in another way. In comparison to Denmark, the Dutch government is in a weaker position in relation to its sub-national governments also because provinces have a long and strong cultural history. With this knowledge, provincial government could, therefore, execute strong resistance to the plans in order to dismantle the government's reform plans.

3.4 Public Reaction

The final guiding question that will be examined in relation to the reform plans in Denmark and the Netherlands relates to the public reaction to the plans. In the Netherlands the public reaction has partially fuelled the controversy around the reform plans. However, in Denmark the public reaction does not appear to have been an obstacle to implementing the reform plans. Therefore, in order to answer the research question of this paper, it is relevant to examine the main arguments in support and against the reform plans. I will obtain this national sentiment through media coverage in newspapers. Secondly, It will investigate whether the interests of the public were part of the pre-decision policy process and were voiced in the conflicts of interests between different institutional actors.

Spatial reforms are not only sensitive issues for political actors, as discussed in the previous section. For citizens territorial reforms are delicate as well, and it often incites discussions on the threat spatial reforms can pose to regional or local identities (Toonen, van Dam, Glim & Wallagh, 1998). Hence, as the multiple streams theory by Kingdon (1995) showed earlier, the national mood is an important influence on the policy process. If the public idea about a policy plan is negative this can lead to the neglect of the plans. However, the public reaction in this study is not measured as the opinion of every citizen in the Netherlands and Denmark to the reform plans. Instead, the public reaction is measured from the point of view of the central government. Hence, the Dutch government will measure the national mood through its representation by the media. The remainder of this section, therefore, conducts an analysis of the public reaction in national broadcast and regional broadcast in the provinces which will undergo the first reform.

3.4.1 Public Reaction to Reform plans

The media sources that were used in this analysis are both national papers and regional broadcasts from the three provinces that will undergo the first merge. I have conducted an investigation of the online archives of news sources, in a search for all articles that refer the public reaction of citizens to the reform plans. The results from this analysis are firstly discussed from a national perspective, and secondly from a regional perspective. This analysis will demonstrate that only few articles were written on the public reaction, however, these are generally negative and are stronger in regional broadcasts than in the national media.

The national newspapers that I analysed for news articles that express a public reaction were the Volkskrant, NRC, the Telegraaf and het Parool. In total I only found three articles that express the national sentiment in relation to the reform plans in three of these newspapers (Volkskrant, Telegraaf and Parool). Firstly, the Parool featured an article describing the

results of an opinion poll conducted by EenVandaag under 29.000 participants. The poll demonstrates that the largest opposition comes from Limburg, Zeeland, Friesland and Flevoland. The strongest opposing arguments in the questionnaire were that the reforms would increase the distance between the government and citizens. In addition, people fear a loss of their provincial identity and they suspect that the reform will cost more money than expected (Het Parool, 2013 February 18). The extent to which this opinion poll represents the public opinion of the Netherlands is questionable, but the arguments provided are brought up in other media sources as well. The Volkskrant has published an opinion piece of an inhabitant of Friesland, who feels that the reform plans challenges the identity of his province (Volkskrant, 2013 February 11). Finally, the Telegraaf published one of the few more positive articles, which states that because inhabitants of Noord-Holland have a weak provincial identity they do not have a problem with the reform plans (Telegraaf, 2013 February 28).

Regional broadcast services in Flevoland, Utrecht and Noord-Holland featured a lot more articles on the reform plans. An analysis of all the articles on the broadcast service of Flevoland (*Omroep Flevoland*) demonstrates that most public remorse involves the fear of the provincial identity withering away, and Flevoland ending up in a secondary position after the merge. In addition, the same news article voiced the opinion of inhabitants of Flevoland argued that there was no open discussion about the reforms (Omroep Flevoland, 2013 March 26). Another feature stated that there would be no gains for private companies after the reform, and it is questionable whether the reform will actually lead to budget cuts (Omroep Flevoland, 2013 February 18). The broadcast network of the province Utrecht (*RTV Utrecht*) featured fewer articles on the public reaction to the reform plans. However, the articles this broadcast published online discussed the discontent of the public with the compilation of regions through mergers. An opinion poll by EenVandaag, RTV-Noord-Holland and Omroep Flevoland is mentioned that demonstrates that the majority of participants who live in Utrecht

would rather merge with Gelderland than Noord-Holland and Flevoland (RTV Utrecht, 2013 February 18). In addition, an article refers to the petition which a provincial representative drew up on December 14, 2012 against the reform plans. The aim of the petition was to collect 40.000 signatures to force the central government to hold a referendum (RTV Utrecht, 2012 December 14). Nevertheless, by the beginning of June 2013 the petition was signed by only 787 people (Petitie Tegen Vorming Superprovincie, 2013). An analysis of broadcasting service of Noord-Holland (*RTV Noord-Holland*) again shows different responses to the reforms by the public. Besides the argument of provincial identity, people are unsure how much money these plans will cost (RTV Noord-Holland, 2013 March 4). However, simultaneously there was an article which argued that there was little interest of the citizens of Noord-Holland in the reform plans. During open meetings with the minister less than 25 people attended (RTV Noord-Holland, 2013 February 18).

3.4.2 Public Interests in Policy Process

The results of the analysis are double. On the one hand, the newspapers and broadcasts have generally only published articles which voice the opposition of citizens to the reform plans. On the other hand, these papers and broadcasts have not published a lot on the public reaction, but have mainly focused on the political opposition against the plans. By relating these two observations to the policy process some interesting conclusions can be drawn.

The public reaction of Dutch citizens is generally negative or indifferent towards the reform plans. This could be explained, because the public was not involved much in the plans. Only after the reform aims were made official in December were citizens asked to participate in provincial meetings with the minister of Internal Affairs in the first three provinces that should be merged by 2016. However, as one article pointed out, not many citizens attended these provincial meetings at which they could voice their concerns and ask questions. The

negative public reaction could also be explained by the limited gains for citizens of the reforms. Even though the government frames the reforms as stimulating for local democracy, the rescaling of municipalities to an average of 100.000 moves these administrates farther away from citizens. In addition, people appear sceptical because these plans are paired with budget cuts, but it remains unclear how money will be saved.

Nevertheless, it was noticeable that only few articles were available on the public reaction of citizens. In addition, the opinion polls that were executed can only represent a part of the Dutch public. In contrast, the negative responses of national and regional politicians to the plans were represented to a much greater extent. This could be explained by the mobilisation of provincial governments to create the reform plans into a controversy. Namely, the argument against the plans which is provided most is that the reforms pose a threat to the provincial identity. However, Peters (2007) has argued very strongly in her work on Dutch provincial governments that people who feel they have a provincial identity are not automatically related to the provincial government.

“A mistake that is often made is that the existence of regional identity would mean that people also have a connection with the province and the provincial government...Firstly, if there would be something like a provincial identity, this would mean that people feel connected to an area and everything related to this: physical traits, the people, the products and events. This is something different than being connected to a government... In addition, for most Dutch people ‘their region’ and the province are not the same thing. Provinces consist of diverse regions each with an own history, traditions and a dialect: an own culture...Therefore, a regional identity is not a provincial identity.” (p. 36-37)⁵

⁵ Translation from Dutch: “Een denkfout die vaak wordt gemaakt is dat het bestaan van een regionale identiteit zou betekenen dat mensen ook een band hebben met de provincie en het provinciebestuur...Allereerst is het zo dat als er al sprake is van een provinciale identiteit, dan betekent dat dat mensen zich verbonden voelen met het gebied en alles wat daar voor hen bij hoort: fysieke kenmerken, de mensen, producten en evenementen. Dat is iets anders dan een verbondenheid met het bestuur...Daar komt bij dat voor de meeste Nederlanders ‘hun regio’ en de provincie niet samen vallen. Provincies bestaan van oudsher uit diverse regio’s met elk een eigen

Therefore, the public reaction does not necessarily pose a threat to the reform plans, as changes to provincial governments do not in fact affect the regional identity in an area. However, because provincial politicians mobilise citizens not to attend the information meetings or sign petitions against the reforms, the reaction of the public is changed into a force against the plans. In Denmark there was also some resistance, mainly to the municipal reform plans, however, there appears to be a difference in the way the public reaction was represented and utilised by the political sphere.

Chapter 4 – Denmark

This chapter analyses the reform policy process in Denmark in a similar way as in the Netherlands. Throughout this section the same guiding and sub question are used, and the results will be compared to the Dutch case in chapter five. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine whether there are different causal factors that can explain why the Danish politicians and citizens offered less resistance to the reform policy plans than in the Netherlands.

4.1 Policy Plan

The Danish government (the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party) in cooperation with the Danish People's Party arrived to an agreement over the governmental reforms in June 2004, which has been documented in English (Danish Ministry of the Interior & Health, 2004). The aim of these three parties was to, "...maintain and develop a democratically governed sector with a sound basis for continued development of the Danish welfare state" (p. 5). Exactly how the Danish government planned to do this is summarised in table 3, which is compiled by Bundgaard and Vrangbaek (2007). In order to answer the sub-questions of this section⁶, the general vision of the Danish government and behind the reforms and table 3 are discussed.

Similar to the Dutch government, the Danish central state attempts to strengthen its three levels of government by enforcing a stricter division of tasks between municipalities, counties and the central government (see table 3). In addition, both governments do not resort to a 'blue-print approach', nevertheless, they utilise this concept in a different manner. The

⁶ The sub-questions are: What structural changes are proposed? What changes will be made to responsibilities and tasks of governments? And in which context, or for which reasons have these changes been proposed?

	Municipalities	Regions	The Central State
Structural Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By means of mergers, the number of municipalities is reduced from 271 to 98 [with at least 20.000 inhabitants] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 new 'regions' replace the existing 13 counties. - The greater Copenhagen Authority (HUR) and the Copenhagen Hospital Corporation (HS) are also abolished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The 14 offices of the county governors and the Prefect's Office of Copenhagen are replaced by 5 bodies of regional state administration
Changes in Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keeps existing portfolio of tasks, except collection of taxes and debt to public authorities. - Establish local health centres responsible for preventive treatment and rehabilitation - Establish new job centres run jointly with the state - Receive authority and total responsibility for financing social services and special education - Receive authority and control over nature and environmental protection - Charged with physical planning, public transport, roads, culture, local business services, airports, harbours and ferry routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hospital services (hospitals, psychiatry, general practitioners, specialists and health insurance) - Regional development plans - Set up regional growth forums Operate a number of institutions for exposed groups and groups with special needs for social services and special education - Coordinate the operation and development of a range of basic education programmes - Responsibility for coordination on environmental issues and for soil pollution and raw materials mapping and planning - Establishment of transport companies throughout the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assume full responsibility for the collection of taxes and debt to public authorities - A range of educational institutions are transferred from the counties - Assume general tasks in relation to nature and environmental protection from the counties - Establish 7 regional environmental centres - Establish a national knowledge and special counselling organisation (VISO) - Assume responsibility for the general road network from the counties - Assume responsibility for subsidising cultural institutions and events

Table 3 – The Danish Structural Reform in Overview (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007, p. 497).

Dutch government leaves its plans very open by only executing one reform at a time, as opposed to the Danish government. However, the latter country utilised referenda in order to make a decision on the mergers of specific regions and municipalities for which the central government was unable to make decision. The Dutch minister of Internal Affairs has decided that referenda will not be used in the reform execution process.

4.1.1 Municipalities

Based on table 3 a comparison can be drawn between the reform of Dutch and Danish municipalities. The largest difference lies in the specific tasks which the reformed municipalities will obtain. However, these different plans both are implemented for a similar aim between both countries, to stimulate local democracy. The Danish governmental parties have decided that, “The municipalities will be responsible for tasks that involve the citizens directly and therefore become the primary access point to the public sector for citizens and companies” (Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2004, p. 6).

In order to attain this goal, Danish municipalities will gain responsibility for social tasks as healthcare, employment, youth and culture. In light of increasing sizes of municipalities the Danish government also attempts to give village associations a more important role in local politics. However, besides social tasks municipalities are also given responsibility for themes as nature, transport and roads. This is in stark contrast to the Dutch reforms, where environmental tasks are considered classical responsibilities for provinces. However, the aim of the Danish government is, for example, to have roads managed by the government that is closest to it. Therefore, the responsibility for county roads is divided up between municipalities, while the central state retains the management over the general road network (Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2004). A similar argument is used in the decentralisation of tasks evolving around nature. The Danish government aims to increase

local involvement in the maintenance of nature, and therefore decentralises nature and environment tasks to municipalities. Again the central state manages these tasks from above. Thus, the aim is to link social tasks of municipalities with policies in other fields as the labour market and environment (Andersen, 2008). This might have an effect on the satisfaction of provincial and municipal officials with the policy plans in the Netherlands and Denmark.

4.1.2. Regions

The regional reforms proposed by the Danish government are as drastic as the ones put forward in the Netherlands. However, there are fundamental differences between the structural changes and shifts in responsibility between both countries. The structural differences relate to the re-drawing of borders in order to create five regions out of thirteen counties. In the Netherlands the governments of existing provinces are merged, but borders between provinces remain intact.

In addition, the Danish government attempts to involve different layers of government in multiple themes. As a result, one of the tasks of regions is its role in hospital services and responsibility for groups with special needs. The service for hospitals is deliberately rescaled to a higher level (it was previously managed by municipalities), to increase the quality of hospital care. Regional governments will have more governmental power and financial funds to manage hospital more effectively and efficiently. Hence, this was used as a positive feature of the policy plan to gain support for the reforms. More importantly, the Danish government proposes to abolish the taxes which counties used to levy. Even though the Dutch provinces are not able to levy heavy taxes, this shed a positive light on the Danish policy plan.

4.1.3. The Central Government

The reform plans in Denmark involve centralisation too, as the Danish central state is will gain more responsibilities as a result of this reform. The Danish central state will become stronger in its directive role, for example, related to the general road network and environment tasks. In addition, taxation and debt collection will now become a task partially shifted from the counties to the central state. Finally, the central state gain full responsibility for EU structural funds.

4.1.4. Comparison to Dutch Reform Plan

In comparison the Danish and Dutch reforms are very similar in their aims and goals. However, the difference lies in the decentralisation of health care tasks to regions and the decentralisation of transport and environment tasks to municipalities. Thus, the goals of both governments are similar, but the execution in measures is different. This can partially be explained by the diversity in scale between both countries. While Dutch municipalities will have on average 100.000 inhabitants, Danish municipalities will consist of approximately 20.000. Even though in relation to population numbers both countries have large municipalities (figure 2), however, in order to function properly different task divisions are more effective.

4.2 Policy Process

This section proceeds to research the pre-decision policy process in Denmark, in order to examine whether the policy process has influenced the response of politicians and citizens to the reform plans. An essential differences between Denmark and the Netherlands in the history of weak performance of provinces in the Netherlands as opposed to Denmark. This

influences the whole policy process, and can therefore assist to explain differences between these processes in both countries.

4.2.1. How were the reforms initiated?

On August 9, 2002 the Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced that a Commission on Administrative Structure would be formed to examine the possibilities to reform the municipalities and counties in Denmark. In the summer of 2002 a debate had risen on administrative reforms, shortly after Rasmussen had formed a minority cabinet with his Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Conservative Party in 2001 (Blom-Hansen, 2009). The commission commenced its study in October 2002 and published a rapport with four reform models in January 2004 (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007; The Commission on Administrative Structure, 2004).

The four models that were researched by the commission ranged from governmental systems where most tasks were decentralised to regions ('the broad county model'), municipalities ('the broad municipality model') or the state ('the state model'). The models that strengthened municipal authority were represented most, while the commission had also proposed the abolishment of counties in the state model (The Commission on Administrative Structure, 2004). After the commission presented its advice, the minority government went in discussion with Danish political parties to find a coalition partner. The negotiations with the Social Democrats and Social Liberals collapsed, because they could not agree on the reform plan. However, a week later Venstre and the Conservatives signed with the People's Party, and the plans were firmly set on the political agenda (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007). After the reform plan was decided on, a white paper of over 100 pages was published which explains in detail the reform plans (Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2004).

4.2.2. Was it coincidental or deliberate?

In comparison to the Dutch history of critique on the provincial governmental structure, in Denmark the need to reform the county governments was not as pronounced. In Denmark only two organisations had attempted to put territorial reforms on the political agenda since the 1980s (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012). This might be because Denmark executed local government reforms in 1970s, in order to decentralise tasks closer to citizens (Hansen, 2001). In contrast, these reforms were highly contested and fuelled emotional responses from the Danish public (Peters, 2011).

In 1995 the first commission examined the structure of metropolitan areas. The commission advised the amalgamation of municipalities on the island of Copenhagen. However, Blöchliger and Vammalle (2012) state that because this commission was led by civil servants, their advice did not make it to the political agenda. To the contrary, the suggestions by this commission fuelled strong opposition, and the plans were neglected. A second attempt was made in 1998, when a new commission was established to investigate the governmental distribution of responsibilities. However, this commission did not acquire the power to suggest a change to the governmental structure. Therefore, even though this commission was able to demonstrate that the structure of Danish municipalities and counties was flawed, it did not lead to any of the necessary changes (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012).

Since these policy proposals have not made a large impact on the political agenda, it seems quite unexpected that in 2002 the government under Rasmussen decided to push through governmental reform plans. These plans were not on the governmental agenda, but seem to have been born from the circumstances in Denmark (Peters, 2011). Greve (2006) provides an explanation by arguing that Denmark has been gripped by New Public Management (NPM) reforms for longer. These modernization and marketization reforms have led to the Danish government to focus on the performance aspect of governance. As a result,

diverting attention to the performance of municipal and county governance does not appear to come from nowhere.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the Dutch government, the Danish plans do not appear as deliberate as in the Dutch case. In the Netherlands, the government attempts to finally take up on the many calls by commissions and organizations that the current provincial structure is inefficient. The cabinet of Rutte II is one of the first in a long time to actually attempt the implementation of provincial reforms, and the planning of these reforms appears thought out. In Denmark, to the contrary, the pressure on the government for reforms has been considerably less. However, once the government assigned the Commission on Administrative Structure to investigate the possibilities, the government was set on its execution.

4.2.4 Was it triggered by problems, policy or politics stream?

When applying the multiple streams theory of Kingdon (1995) to the Danish case, the results are quite different in relation to the Dutch pre-decision policy period. These differences seem to be the result of the different histories of regional government performance in both countries.

The first step in analysing the pre-decision phase of the reform policy plans is to examine which problems led to the formulation of this plan. The first difference between the Netherlands and Denmark is the evidence of problems with the governmental structure. Only two commissions examined the possibilities in Denmark, but both had little influence on the government to recognise the problems these commissions saw. In the Summer of 2002 the problems that were pointed out were mainly issues of scale. The counties were too small to manage hospital care, and municipalities had similar problems related to its responsibilities. In addition, the exact division of responsibility was too vague, was led to inefficient governance

(Van Dam, 2006). However, there had not been an overwhelming amount of critique on the Danish regional structure.

Bundgaard and Vrangbaek (2007) present similar findings in their research. They argued that reform policy was already formulated before significant problems were recognized with the governmental structure. They conclude from an interview with member of the Commission on Administrative Structure, Prof. Poul Erik Mourtizen, that the commission was unable to find big problems that would make governmental reforms necessary. “The basic problem was that there were no big problems. In other words, you can say that the Commission searched high and low for problems, and anything that could justify that you would be able to say there were problems – was added [to the recommendation]” (Mourtizen cited in Bundgaard & Vranbaek, 2007, p. 505). Thus, this seems to put the Danish reforms in a different context than the Dutch reform plans.

Thus, while the problems stream was less pronounced the policy stream was very influential on the entire reform policy process. Different actors were part of the policy stream, and attempted to influence the reform plans of the government. Namely, besides different political parties within in the central government, the interest organisations of the Danish regions (ARF) and municipalities (LGDK) were trying to influence the plans. In addition, the Confederation of Danish Industries and the Danish Economic Council were strong advocates of the reduction and abolishment of local and county governments (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007). Nevertheless, as Kingdon (1995) indicates, a large number of actors can lead to fragmentation, and a conflict between different interests and incentives. Especially in Denmark, because the government is headed by a minority government, the policy process was open to influences from parliamentary and corporate actors. Nevertheless, the central government exercised a strong influence over the actual policy plan. The government assigned the members of the Commission on Administrative Structure which had a noticeable

number of persons who supported the reform plans (Andersen, 2008). After the commission published its rapport, the government decided on the final government plan and was not inclined to make concessions to other political parties or institutional actors.

Finally, the political stream was of great importance in the pre-decision phase on the Danish reform plans. Firstly, the national mood in Denmark seemed different from the Netherlands. The newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* (2002, July 14) conducted an opinion poll in Denmark, which showed that 53 percent was in favour of the merger of the Danish municipalities. Only 33 percent thought this was a bad idea, while 14 percent was in doubt. Even though an opinion polls cannot represent the whole country, its results are in clear contrast with the Dutch opinion poll before the reform plans were made official. Secondly, in Denmark there were more organised political forces that lobbied for the reform plans. Besides the media interfering in the debate, also the Confederation of Danish Industries and the Danish Economic Council publicly expressed their interests in the plans. More importantly, a strong advocate came from the organisation for municipalities (LGDK) which was in favour of Danish municipalities gaining more responsibilities and tasks. The organisation of counties, to the contrary, was less receptive of the plans, however has less political power than in the Netherlands. This will be addressed more elaborately in section 4.3.

Finally, the third element in the political stream is the role of the government. This gives an interesting twist to the policy plan in Denmark. Namely, the government that led the reforms had been elected in 2001, and took on the plans shortly after its election. Nevertheless, these plans had not been part of the election campaign or had been mentioned as of interest to the new government before (Peters, 2011). Unfortunately it is not clear whether the newly elected Danish government had these reform plans on a hidden agenda, or whether the conditions were considered convenient to advocate for governmental reforms.

As a result, a comparison between the Dutch and Danish reform plans shows that in the Netherlands the strongest stream was that of problems with provincial governments, while in Denmark the policy stream was strongly represented. In addition, the Danish government has a strong influence on the political stream, which could assist in explaining the difference in reactions to the reform plans in both countries.

4.3 Conflicts of Interest

The previous sections described what the Danish reform plan entailed, and the policy process that led up to its formulation. However, a plan is never made without the necessary conflicts of interest between different institutional actors. Nevertheless, even though similar interests were conflicting in Denmark as in the Netherlands, it appears that the Danish government was more effective at solving or avoiding the paralysing effect of conflicts on decision-making. The sub-questions guiding this analysis examine whether there was potential for a joint-decision trap in Denmark, as seems to be the case in the Netherlands.

4.3.1 Which institutional actors participated?

In Denmark there were many institutional actors involved in the reform policy process. Firstly, the central government in which Prime Minister, Rasmussen and the minister of Internal Affairs played an important and powerful role in placing the structural reforms on the political agenda. The government assigned the Commission on Administrative reform, a second important institutional actor in the policy formulation process. In the commission several interest groups were represented. Firstly, the LGDK (KL) functioned as interest group of Danish municipalities, and was made up of municipal politicians. In addition, the thirteen counties of Denmark were represented, who safeguard very different interests than the previous two institutional bodies (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007).

4.3.2 Institutional Interests

Blom-Hansen (1999) in his article on the joint-decision trap in Sweden, Denmark and Norway examines the way the Danish government is able to avoid stagnation in decision-making caused by conflicts of interest. The most important factor which could help avoid this, is that “...the Danish central government has used corporatist as well as parliamentary means of influence” (p. 55). Therefore, Blom-Hansen states that in comparison to Sweden and Norway, the Danish government can most effectively control parliamentary and corporatist actors in decision-making processes by creating an exit-option for itself. It can decide to cooperate with one of the two actors, or both, creating an incentive in institutional actors to work together with the central government and compromise with state interests.

The interests of the minority government in Denmark during the reforms were quite similar to the Netherlands. Firstly, the government aimed to strengthen local democracy and the Danish welfare state (Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2004). This goal was fulfilled by rescaling municipalities and granting authority to local governments on a larger range of themes. Secondly, the position of Denmark in and outside Europe was an incentive for the government to desire a stronger state. Andersen (2008) argues that the Danish government attempted to stimulate the competitiveness of its central and sub-national governments through the reforms. This is part of a ‘neo-liberalism lite’ trend sweeping through Europe, which prescribes economic motives and at the same time a strong welfare state. Finally, the reforms are aimed to improve the government structure for future challenges. An important interest which the Danish and Dutch government do not share is one of financial restraint. The Danish reforms were initiated before the economic crisis hit Europe, and therefore austerity measures are not one of its main interests.

A second important institutional actor is the Commission on Administrative Structure. This body is closely tied to the interests of the central government, even though this

commission formally had to conduct an objective investigation of the necessity and possibilities for reform. The chair of the commission, Johannes Due, was former top civil servant, and had a strong opinion in favour of diminishing county responsibilities.

The commission, therefore, protected the interests of the state to draw up different reform plans and was also criticised for this. However, the commission was more objective in the range of reform models it developed, which left the options open for the government to reduce the authority of either municipalities, regions or neither of these (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007).

The Danish regions, to the contrary, had a very strong incentive in which reform measures it supported. Similarly as in the Netherlands the county governments protected their rights to remain the same, or to enhance its authority with more tasks. Therefore, as members of the commission, county representatives downplayed the problems which they experienced with governmental tasks, specifically in health care. An important reason for this was the competition with municipalities over reform models. While the regions preferred the 'broad county model', municipalities favoured the 'broad municipality model'. Nevertheless, the Danish counties were more willing to compromise with the Danish government, than Dutch provinces. In 2003 14 county majors proposed to reduce the size of Danish counties to either seven or nine counties. This was an attempt to find middle ground on the reform plans, and to prevent drastic changes to county authority (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007).

4.3.3 Joint-Decision Trap

Blom-Hansen (1999) argues that a joint-decision trap can be most successfully avoided if the central government has an exit-option. According to this scholar, Denmark has less potential for joint-decision traps, because the central government is very effective at creating an exit-option for itself. In the case of the reform policy process this appears to be the same. This can

be explained for two reasons. Firstly, because the Danish government is led by a minority coalition, the debate over the reforms are necessarily more open. In contrast to the Dutch government, where a majority coalition can decide on a plan without the input of opposition parties, the Danish government has to negotiate to find a coalition partner. The debate over the reforms was, therefore, more open and also included the interest of political parties, municipalities and counties in the Commission on Administrative Structure. As a result, the Danish government did not veto the decision-making process, even though it exercised its influence on the vision of the commission. This might reduce the incentive of other institutional actors to counter-act the plans of the central government.

Secondly, as a consequence of this open debate structure, the government had created an exit-option for itself. Many different interests were voiced over the measures the reforms should entail, but nevertheless the central government had the leverage over the final decision. A number of political parties did not want to cooperate with the central government, but one of the parties, the People's Party, could agree on the terms with the central government. In addition, the interests of the municipalities and counties were conflicting, and both made attempts to find a compromise between their interests and those of the government (Bundgaard & Vrangbaek, 2007). Consequently, the decision-making process was less victim to a joint-decision trap as the Danish central government had control over who to cooperate with. Another important element in comparison to the Dutch situation, is the cultural history of counties in Denmark. Whereas Dutch provinces have a long history of governance, and can still draw on their past status of independent governments to demonstrate their significance, Danish counties lack strong historical roots. Their authority was never as strong as that of municipalities, and therefore the central government can with greater ease neglect the interests of the regions (Van Dam, 2006). As a result, the Danish central government reached a compromise on the reform plans and was able to execute these within a short time-span.

4.4 Public Reaction

The final section of this analysis addresses the public reaction of the Danes to the regional reform plans. In specific, I will elaborate on the little resistance that the Danish public presented to the regional reforms. However, a newspaper analysis of Danish national newspapers will demonstrate that there was a stronger public resistance to the mergers of municipalities in Denmark. Nevertheless, the national mood in Denmark of the public and politicians presented less resistance than in the Netherlands. This section will first discuss literature on the public reaction in Denmark, followed by an analysis of Denmark's main national newspapers.

4.4.1 Public Reaction to Reform Plans

On July 14, 2002 a poll was conducted in Denmark which demonstrated that a bit over fifty percent of the Danish population supported governmental reforms (Berlingske Tidende, 2002). Even though opinion polls cannot represent a whole population, its results are generally similar with the Danish public reaction to the reforms. A number of researches conducted on the governmental reforms in Denmark mention that the reform plans did not raise strong resistance from the public (Blöchliger & Vammalle, 2012). In addition, van Dam (2006) argues that the level-headed and law-abiding mentality of the Danes had a positive effect on the Danish reforms. This might explain why less resistance was raised in Denmark by citizens who opposed the plans. However, there is an important difference between people's opinion on the municipal reforms as opposed to county reforms, which is demonstrated by a newspaper analysis.

In order to analyse the public reaction of Danish citizens to the reform plans I conducted a newspaper analysis of the main national newspapers that covered the issue: Berlingske Tidende, Jyllands-Posten and Politiken. Jyllands-Posten published two articles

referring to the public reaction to the regional reform plans between 2002 and 2004. The first article refers to the research by Gallup in July 2002, and mentions that 58 percent of the participants supported the regional reform plans. Only 32 percent opposed this proposal by the government (Jyllands-Posten, 2002 July 14). A second article argued that the Danes were positively sceptic towards the reform plans. On the one hand, a poll demonstrated that two-thirds of the participants thought their possibilities to influence politics would increase through the reforms. On the other hand, people thought that the connection with the municipality would diminish and were considered the plans too vague (Jyllands-Posten, 2004 January 25). Nevertheless, none of the national newspapers published on the public reaction in relation to the regional government changes.

The public reaction to the municipality reforms were mixed. A number of articles describe the positive outcomes of referenda on the merging of small municipalities (Politiken, 2001 May 30). For example in Politiken on the referenda in Aero (2003 June 10), and other regions and islands (2003 April 28). To the contrary, other articles demonstrate a negative public reaction to the municipal reforms. In Skaevinge the public is sceptical about the plans and feel threatened in their identity (Jyllands-Posten, 2004 January 30). Other articles refer to the negative results of referenda on the reforms in Langeland and Sydlangeland (Berlingske Tidende, 2003 February 26a; Berlingske Tidende, 2003 February 26b). Finally, the Politiken published an article on the fright of mayors to organise referenda for its citizens, in fear of the negative results this might give due to a negative public opinion on municipal reforms (Politiken, 2004 March 1).

As a result, it is difficult to draw conclusions on the most dominant public reaction to the reform plans, especially in relation to the county reforms. Nevertheless, the articles show less resistance to the reform plans than in the Netherlands, and the public reaction has not supported a controversy around the reform discussions.

4.4.2 Public Interests in Policy Process

Even though the findings from the newspaper analysis do not offer a clear idea of the public reaction of Danes to the regional government reforms, these were framed as more beneficial to citizens by the Danish government. Firstly, the reforms entailed the abolishment of county taxes, which presented a financial gain to people. Secondly, an emphasis was put on the improvement of health care in Denmark, which had been criticised. This was done through decentralisation of health care tasks to municipalities. Finally, the government organised more promotion of the positive effects the reforms would have on the Danish welfare system. Contrary to the Dutch plans, budget constraints were not part of the reform aims. In addition, citizens were granted a voice through referenda in many municipalities. Even though these did not always lead to positive results, this form of involvement is not granted to Dutch citizens. Therefore, the circumstances in Denmark appear more beneficial to its citizens, and could therefore have led to less pronounced resistance.

Chapter 5 – Comparative Analysis

This final chapter will consist of a comparative analysis of the two cases in this research, followed by a concluding section which will answer the research question of this study. Firstly, the outcomes of each guiding question are addressed, and related to the dependent variable that this study scrutinises: the level of resistance of politicians and the public against the reform plans. Subsequently, the conclusion will provide an answer to the research question of this study: Why have similar regional government reforms fuelled little resistance by politicians and the public in Denmark, but strong resistance in the Netherlands?

5.1 Comparative Study of Dutch & Danish Reforms

The empirical chapters of this thesis demonstrate interesting similarities and differences between the Danish and Dutch reform policy processes. This section will provide an overview of these findings by comparing the key themes between Denmark and the Netherlands. The first guiding question focussed on the exact changes both governments planned to make to the governmental structure. The Danish and Dutch government shared the general vision behind the reform plans, however, differed in the precise execution of this vision. Nevertheless, the most important features of these reforms resembled: the drastic rescaling and simultaneously reducing authority of regional governments. The reform plans of Denmark and the Netherlands are, therefore, both examples of a new trend in regional government reforms and are comparable for this study.

The second empirical section traced the development of the pre-decision policy process in Denmark and the Netherlands. One essential difference between both countries was the history of critique on regional governmental structure. In the Netherlands the reform plans were proposed after the need for reforms was emphasised by multiple bodies. In contrast, the Danish government was not pressured by a history of critique, but reform plans entered the

political agenda more coincidentally. On the one hand, in the Netherlands political and public actors could have been in opposition to the plans from the onset, leaving no room to execute these. On the other hand, in Denmark the plans came as an unexpected surprise for both the public and politicians which could have spurred resistance. It is, therefore, difficult to explain the reaction to the plans based on this analysis.

The third guiding question provided more insight into the reasons why more resistance was fuelled by the reform plans in the Netherlands than in Denmark. Based on the theory of joint-decision traps by Blom-Hansen (1999) the analysis shows that in the Netherlands to a larger extent the government is paralysed in its decision over the reforms by provincial governments. The Dutch central government and provinces are in a conflict of interests over the reform plans, however, because the central government does not have an exit option, the provinces can exercise considerable pressure on the government to adjust or withdraw the reform plans. In Denmark, to the contrary, the central government had an exit-option, because of its minority governmental structure. The reform debate was open for parliamentary and corporate actors, however, the central government had the control to include which interests, which creates an incentive for compromise. As a result, the reform debate in Denmark was moving, while in the Netherlands it appears to be stagnating. The resistance could, thus, come from the necessity for institutional actors to compromise with the central government, which is not the case in the Netherlands.

The analysis of the fourth concept, public reaction, gave an extra dimension to these findings. Namely, I found that in both countries the public response was strongly represented in the media, but the focus was on the reactions of politicians. In both countries there was opposition to the plans, despite polls suggesting that the majority of the Danes supported the plans. Nevertheless, the important difference appears to be the utilisation of the public reaction by the political arena. In the Netherlands the strongest argument against the reforms

is the threat to provincial identity, which is facilitated by provincial governments against the reforms. Therefore, in the Netherlands a controversy has arisen, while in Denmark the resistance was less, even though there were many Danes in opposition to the plans. Another important factor that made the reform plans less attractive to Dutch citizens is that these are considered austerity measures, while in Denmark the positive effects of the reforms were emphasized.

5.2 Conclusion

The comparative analysis allows me to formulate an answer to my research question why more resistance was ignited in the Netherlands than in Denmark in response to regional government reform plans. Firstly, the discussion on the reform of provincial governments had reached more tense heights in the Netherlands than in Denmark. The official reform plans could, therefore, have spurred more opposition because these discussions have taken place before. Secondly, even though both counties and provinces in Denmark and the Netherlands did not want their authority to be decentralised, the historical position of Dutch provinces in the governmental system to counter these measures is much stronger. In addition, Dutch provinces have more possibilities to exercise influence on the Dutch central government than Danish counties. Thirdly, the governmental structure in Denmark allowed the central government to have leverage on including the interests of counties in the reform plans. To the contrary, in the Netherlands the provincial governments and IPO are to a greater extent capable of pushing the central government into a joint-decision trap. This does not spur an incentive for provinces to compromise on the reform plans, but instead has led to strong resistance. Finally, the media appears to be utilised in the Netherlands to strengthen the public argument against the reforms. Even though Peters (2007) had convincingly demonstrated that provincial identity is not the same as provincial governance, this argument is put forward as

the public argument against the plans by regional broadcast services. In Denmark there was also opposition against the plans, especially against the municipality reforms, but this did not facilitate a political controversy.

From a theoretical perspective this study of the Danish and Dutch reform plans demonstrates that there is a new trend in regional government reforms. The aims of both governments were similar: strengthen the three-tier government, reduce the authority of regional governments to stimulate local democracy and stimulate the economy. Instead of regionalisation, these reforms might, therefore, be characterised as part of a turn towards neo-liberalism lite (Andersen, 2008). Future research on regional government reforms in the Netherlands and Nordic countries would provide more insight into this trend. This would contribute to literature on governmental reforms and the legitimacy of regional governmental functioning in three-tier systems.

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