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Citation

Raadt, E. de. (2021). *The late acknowledgement of the victimized parents of the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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The late acknowledgement of the victimized parents of the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands

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Words: 25.627



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Abstract

This thesis will investigate some explanatory factors that illustrate why the victimized parents of the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands were acknowledged this late. By means of the concept of citizen lobbyists, the position of parents in their striving to put their issues on the political agenda and fight for justice will be explained. This thesis will examine the three obstacles that the victimized parents faced in their pursuit of justice, namely; the organizational- and policy capacity of the victimized parents was lacking, the dominant frame of the policy monopoly on the justification of the harsh anti-fraud policies hindered the victimized parents in putting their issue on the political agenda, and NPM reforms have led to decentralization and a focus on efficiency. Employing a qualitative research approach, a series of semi-structured interviews will be held against the backdrop of the content of existing reports on the scandal, such as the reports of the Dutch Ombudsman (2017) and the Committee-Van Dam (2020). This thesis investigates the child benefits scandal from an individual point of view, therefore adding to the existing research into this scandal.

Words of acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. dr. Braun, for her support and helpful suggestions to improve the quality of this research. Above all, I want to thank Prof. Braun for her efforts to introduce me to Wallaart & Kusse Public Affairs (WKPA), and helping me set up an internship at this firm. WKPA has provided me with a lot of insight into public participation and citizen lobbying, and for that I thank them. I would like to especially give thanks to my supervisor at WKPA, Myrthe Kusse, for all of her feedback and guidance during this process. Mrs Kusse has truly provided great support for the development of this thesis with her extensive knowledge on citizen participation and citizen lobbying. Moreover, I would like to thank all of my colleagues at WKPA for their enthusiasm, support and help during my thesis. With the help of my colleagues, I was able to find additional respondents for my research, to whom I otherwise would not have had access to. Lastly, I would like to thank my fellow interns who have provided great help by reviewing this thesis and providing me with feedback, I am very grateful for your insights and support.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The magnitude of the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands is partially due to the longevity of the issue. Ever since the implementation of the law on child benefits in 2004, parents have been at risk of unknowingly committing fraud. The law provides parents with the opportunity to receive benefits for childcare, for instance when a childminding agency provides childcare whilst the parents are working. In 2005, the general provisions of this law were implemented. However, the general provision allowed room for interpretations of the law, which was noted by some malicious entrepreneurs, such as Jan V., who started the childminding agency “*De Appelbloesem*” (Frederik, 2021). V. deceived parents into believing that they did not have to pay their individual contribution for the childminding, leading to the situation in which parents unknowingly broke the law (Frederik, 2021). The Dutch Council of State¹ has ruled that those parents who did not pay their own share of contribution, would not receive child benefits (Frederik, 2021). However, since parents trusted their childminding agency to be reliable, they believed that the childminding agency would take care of their finances and benefits, so when De Appelbloesem told parents they would handle the individual contribution, parents believed they would (Frederik, 2021). This enabled childminding agencies such as De Appelbloesem to collect more financial benefits on behalf of the parents than was legally allowed. Moreover, since parents gave their childminding agencies their personal governmental registration accounts, de Appelbloesem was able to file for additional benefits that parents would not qualify for (Frederik, 2021).

In 2009, the Fiscal Intelligence and Investigation Service (FIOD) raided de Appelbloesem, and Jan V. was prosecuted to serve jail time for one and a half years for committing fraud. Aside from receiving additional benefits due to the lack of payment of the individual contribution, Jan V. had also claimed wrongful child benefits on behalf of the parents. Parents received a notification from the Dutch Tax Authority that they were obligated to pay back the received child benefits over the years that their children were enlisted to de Appelbloesem, plus a fine for violating the law on accounts of not paying their individual contribution, but also due to the wrongful child benefits claims by Jan V. on their behalf (Frederik, 2021). This meant that technically, the parents were breaking the law, and once the Tax Authority received knowledge

¹ The Dutch Council of State serves as the highest administrative court in the Netherlands, and also has an advice-giving role (<https://www.raadvanstate.nl/overrvs/raad-state-kort/>).

of this “fraud”, parents were ordered to repay child benefits from years before, including a large fine and losing the right for benefits during the years that the case was prosecuted. This resulted in parents building large amounts of debts, for instance because they could not afford to send their child to the childminding agency any longer, which resulted in parents losing their jobs and getting into more financial struggles (Frederik, 2021).

In 2013, the Dutch Tax Authority noticed another potential case of fraud with the likes of de Appelbloesem. The childminding agency Dadim appeared on the radar of the Tax Authority in suspicion of fraud. In 2014, the FIOD raided Dadim, but were unable to find any criminal activity, besides some faulty accountancy (Frederik, 2021). Yet, this faulty accountancy was reason enough for the Tax Authority to order parents to pay back their received child benefits from 2012 onwards, in addition to the fine for breaking the law. Again, parents claimed to have been unaware of Dadim’s accountancy mistakes, and therefore should be seen as innocent. Moreover, they felt as though their ethnicity is the reasoning behind their harsh treatment by the Tax Authority, as Dadim mostly hosts children of parents that have a different nationality than Dutch (Hofs, 2019). The “Dadim parents” attempted in many ways to fight their prosecution, but were hindered by the Tax Authority and other government agencies in many ways².

The Dutch Ombudsman at the time, Alex Brenninkmeijer, had been publishing reports since 2012 that the government’s approach to fighting fraud was way out of line and that the government seemed to be ‘addicted to legislation’, which created unnecessary complicated rules for citizens (Welgraven, 2013). Despite Brenninkmeijers early warning signs for the government’s obsession with fraud, the government continued to design and implement additional legislation to fight fraud, creating a swamp of bureaucracy that drowned parents who were victimized by the child benefits scandal (Frederik, 2021). Pieter Omtzigt, a Dutch member of parliament who has been critical of the harsh approach to fraud for a number of years, was notified of the wrongdoings of the Tax Authority and brought up the issue in parliament on July 10th of 2017³. On August 9th of 2017, the Dutch Ombudsman published another report called ‘*No powerplay, but fair play*’, in which it became apparent that the Tax Authority, with

² See “Chapter 2. Case Description” for a further elaboration on this hindrance of the Tax Authority.

³ Second Chamber of Parliament. (10-07-2017). *Vragen van het lid Omtzigt (CDA) aan de Staatssecretaris van Financiën over de opschorting en stopzetting van kinderopvangtoeslag (ingezonden 10 juli 2017)*. Retrieved from: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kv-tk-2017Z10190.html>

the help of the Personal Registration Authority, registered the ethnicity of parents and employed a disproportionately strict enforcement of the fraud legislation (van den Berg, Alhadjri, Mulder, 2017). This report, in combination with the recently asked parliamentary questions by Omtzigt, caught the attention of media outlets such as *RTL Nieuws* and newspapers such as *Trouw*, and the child benefits scandal soared into the political limelight (Soudagar, 2020).

As of time of writing, the child benefit scandal in the Netherlands is one of the largest, still growing scandals that has ever occurred. In a devastating report, called ‘Ongekend Onrecht’ (*Unheard Injustice*), the Parliamentary Committee-Van Dam ruled in 2020 that every branch of the Dutch government institute has failed to fulfil its constitutional duties to protect and serve citizens. *Injustice*, due to the fact that for years, parents were labelled as fraudsters by the Dutch Tax Authority based on preconceived notions stemming from years of implementing harsh anti-fraud policies. *Unheard*, not only because a scandal of this magnitude had not occurred yet, but also because parents had been trying to access policy makers early on in the crisis to warn about the faults in the policy employed by the Dutch Tax Authority (Lammers & Kleinnijenhuis, 2020). However, none of these warnings actually got through to policymakers, even though victims addressed policymakers individually to explain their situation (Lammers & Kleinnijenhuis, 2020). In addition, the child benefits scandal mostly affected parents of immigrant backgrounds (Kleinnijenhuis, 2019), resulting in a group of citizen lobbyists fighting against the systemic discrimination by the Dutch executive government bodies (Hofs, 2020a). All in all, the scandal was left to fester and grow, resulting in one of the most prominent administrative crises in the Netherlands thus far. In this thesis, there will be a further investigation into the factors that could help explain why it took this long for the victimized parents to be recognized by the administration and how come the magnitude of the scandal was unnoticed for this long.

Hence, this thesis will strive to answer the question: “How can the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents in the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands be explained?”. In this thesis, the concept of citizen lobbyists will be used to explain the different efforts taken by the parents to acquire acknowledgement for their cause. To answer the above outlined research question, a qualitative research method will be used to uncover the full extent of the scandal, in which semi-structured interviews will be held in order to support theoretical claims with empirical evidence. The theoretical approach to support this process will be twofold; one pillar

will focus on the behaviour of citizen lobbyists and one pillar will focus on the misfit of the efforts of citizen lobbyists and the Dutch administrative system. These findings will be presented in the chapter “Results” later on in this thesis but first, there will be a more in-depth examination of the child benefits scandal, in which key figures and decisive events will be highlighted. Next, the literature on concepts such as citizen participation will be reviewed, followed by a theoretical framework that provides the hypotheses for this analysis. Subsequently, the research methods applied in this thesis will be described further, including an examination of the data selection process for this thesis. Then, the chapter presenting the results of the analysis will be presented. This thesis will close with a chapter on the discussion and conclusion, in which some suggestions for future research will be provided.

Chapter 2. Case description

For a deeper understanding of the child benefit scandal, this chapter will dive further into its key figures and defining moments. This chapter will present multiple moments in time where the Dutch government had received signals of the devastating consequences of the harsh anti-fraud policies, and identifies moments in time where the interests of parents had been ignored by the administration. Together, this describes the background to which the child benefits scandal was able to develop and how these key figures and defining moments would result into factors that explain why the victimized parents were acknowledged this late.

Context

An important catalysator for the harsh anti-fraud policy that would later fuel the magnitude of the child benefit scandal, is the Bulgarian Fraud scandal of 2013. Between the year 2007 and 2013, Bulgarian gangs were able to receive around four million euros in benefits from the Dutch state by registering on different housing addresses in the Netherlands and using their newly provided government registration accounts to apply for all sorts of benefits (RTL Nieuws, 2015). Since the Tax Authority rewarded benefits first, and checked the legitimacy of the application of those benefits later on, the Bulgarian gangs were able to get away with their fraudulent activity for years. Once the Bulgarian Fraud Scandal came into the political limelight, the second chamber of Parliament called for a harsher execution of anti-fraud policy (RTL Nieuws, 2015). Former State Secretary of Finance, Frans Weekers, announced that the balance of government between providing services to the public and fighting fraud was going to tilt towards the “fight against fraud”⁴. In a management meeting of the division on Combatting Fraud of the Tax Authority, a discussion on the fact that ‘the good will have to suffer because of the bad’ took place, meaning that those with good intentions and honest mistakes will have to suffer the consequences of the harsh policies on behalf of those who are committing fraud willingly⁵. Former director of Benefits of the Tax Authority, Gerard Blankestijn, would later testify in the hearings of the Committee-Van Dam that the pressure from politics and the media to implement and enforce far-reaching policies was ‘huge’, and

⁴ Rode draden uit de interviews over het MT Fraudebestrijding. (2019). Official publication, file 31033/661. Retrieved from: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/blg-937826>

⁵ Ibid.

that civil servants within the department of Benefits received harsh criticism since they were ‘the ones who let this [the Bulgarian Fraud Scandal] happen’ (De Witt Wijnen, 2020). Consequently, the Bulgarian Fraud Scandal led to the implementation of new far-reaching anti-fraud legislation in 2013, and fuelled the public debate for years that the fight against fraud justified all means, resulting in a ‘fighting fraud obsession’ within the legislative and executive branch of government (Committee-Van Dam, 2020). The Ministry of Finance was warned by the Dutch National Audit Office that the hypersensitive legislation on fraud was predominantly responsible for the issues concerning benefits occurring within the Tax Authority (Giskes & van der Werf, 2020). Over the course of 2005 up until 2020, the Dutch National Audit Office continued to warn the Dutch government that the legislation concerning the fight against fraud had disproportional consequences for citizens, yet these warnings remained unacknowledged by the government (Giskes & van der Werf, 2020). Thus, the Bulgarian Fraud scandal resulted in a dominant political focus on the fight against fraud, leading to the establishment of harsh anti fraud policies in the Netherlands. Despite multiple warning signs that the execution of these policies could have quite severe consequences, the government still decided to pursue their route on harsh anti-fraud execution.

The missing hardship clause

In the previous chapter, the law on child benefits has already been briefly discussed. However, this law had another notable feature that would later contribute to the magnitude of the child benefits scandal, as the law lacked a hardship clause, which would allow for some flexibility in the enforcement of the law in unforeseeable circumstances. The Dutch Council of State did advise the parliament to adopt such a hardship clause in the law⁶, yet this advice was rejected by the parliament and it adopted the law without a hardship clause. The parliament dismissed the advice by the Dutch Council of State since they argued that due to the high number of applications for benefits, the Tax Authority should function as ‘a machine’ in order to be able to process all applications (Committee-Van Dam, 2020). Employing a hardship clause would result in the Tax Authority being obligated to consider individual cases, which would slow down the process of rewarding benefits (Committee-Van Dam, 2020). Hence, the law on child benefits was implemented without a hardship clause. Due to the lack of a hardship clause in

⁶ Second Chamber of Parliament, Harmonisatie van inkomensafhankelijke regelingen (Algemene wet inkomensafhankelijke regelingen). File: 29764/5. Retrieved from: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29764-5.html>

the law, the sanctions that the Tax Authority employed to parents were disproportionately high, as one parent wrongfully filed for an additional 190 euros in their application, which resulted in that parent needing to repay 18.000 euros to the Tax Authority⁷. Parents started to write letters to Minister Lodewijk Asscher of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in hopes that the minister would be able to help them. Asscher wrote to one parent that he was ‘unable to act upon individual cases’ as he was merely accountable for legislation, not the executive function of the law (Frederik, 2021). The complexity of the judicial system behind the child benefits law would become another attributing factor to the magnitude of the child benefits scandal. The parliamentary committee tasked to question all governmental players in the scandal, the Committee-Van Dam, declared that parents ‘did not stand a chance’ against the entanglement of executive and legislative bodies and their incoherent policies, which was worsened due to a ‘concerning lack of’ accurate information supply to citizens (Committee-Van Dam, 2020). Parents encountered a multitude of government agencies when trying to connect with officials to ask for help, since the child benefits law was executed by the Tax Authority, but designed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Moreover, the Tax Authority falls under the Ministry of Finance, with whom the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment needs to consult when implementing major decisions regarding tax related issues (Frederik, 2021). All in all, it became extremely difficult for the parents that were victimized by fraudulent childminding agencies to fight their case.

Dadim

However, it was not just the entanglement of complex judicial agreements and policies that hindered the victimized parents in their pursuit of justice. At least 247 parents that were enrolled in the Dadim agency, discussed in the previous chapter, attempted to file a statement of opposition with the court, which was made extra difficult by the Tax Authority since they claimed that the parents failed to provide the necessary documents to support their opposition claim (Frederik, 2021). However, when parents contacted the Tax Authority to ask which documents they needed to support their claim, the Tax Authority refused to answer, hindering parents even more in their legal battle (Frederik, 2021). To make matters worse for the Dadim parents, the Tax Authority claims that at least 35 of the 280 Dadim parents there is the case of

⁷ Dutch Council of State. (2018). File: 201703951/1/A2. Retrieved from: <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RVS:2018:137>.

intent/major fault (*opzet/grove schuld*), meaning that those parents supposedly were aware of the fraud they committed and therefore became non-eligible for any sort of debt settlement plan (Frederik, 2021). These 35 Dadim parents needed to settle their full debts in two years, even if those debts exceed thousands of euros, which the parents could not afford (Frederik, 2021). What makes one qualify for intent/major fault is unclear, due to an ill-defined working definition that holds that even failure to supply all required documents could lead to the labelling of intent/major fault when filing for child benefits. The documents required by the Tax Authority could consist of extreme details, such as detailed lists of attendance at the childminding agency for example, which was a document that parents often did not have access to (Strop, 2020).

Eva González Pérez

A key figure in the Dadim-case is Eva González Pérez, a lawyer and the wife of the owner of the Dadim childminding agency. González Pérez began to act as a lawyer for the Dadim parents in 2014. It quickly became apparent that the accusations of the Tax Authority were based on falsehoods and abuse of power, since the Tax Authority refused to release parent's files and continued to prosecute their cases in higher courts of the law, since they 'had nothing to lose anyway' (Soudagar, 2020). Parents, whose debts increased by the day, did not have the time and resources to continue to fight their case, which González Pérez views as the most prominent case of abuse of power (Soudagar, 2020). In 2016, González Pérez discovered that the Tax Authority is able to register the parents' ethnicity in their files, which is against the law (Soudagar, 2020). Up until 2014, it was legal to build risk-profiles based upon second nationality, yet this was changed by law in 2014 and 2015 (RTL Nieuws, 2020). The Tax Authority claimed to stop using the second nationality as an attribute to one's risk profile, yet parents still claimed that they were considered a "risk-case" due to their second nationality (RTL Nieuws, 2020). González Pérez called for an investigation into these claims, but both the Tax Authority and the Personal Registration Authority refused to cooperate since they consulted with top level bureaucrats in the Tax Authority, who claimed that 'such a thing never occurred' (Soudagar, 2020; Omtzigt, 2020). Furthermore, González Pérez accused the Tax Authority of withholding important documents that would help her clients' cases, such as their personal files (Frederik, 2020). Finally, the Tax Authority continued to pursue extremely harsh punishments for parents who made the slightest inaccuracies in their applications for child benefits, by immediately cancelling all of their benefits at once (Frederik, 2020). The work of

González Pérez thus goes to show that the Tax Authority acted upon discriminatory preconceptions of risk-profiles of fraudsters (Hofs, 2020a) and hindered the victimized parents in their fight for justice.

Ignored warning signs

Since the scandal caught the attention of the media, the scandal soared to the top of the political agenda, and more and more details of the intricate web of wrong doings of the Tax Authority became apparent. For instance, it appeared that many of the lower ranked employees of the Tax Authority had attempted to notify their superiors of the inaccuracies of the policy they had to implement (Klein, 2019; Soudagar, 2020). Additionally, a lawyer within the Tax Authority had warned Tax Authority officials about the inaccuracies in their policy and strictly advised them to compensate all parents, yet this memo was swept under the rug and deemed irrelevant by directors of the Tax Authority (Hofs, 2020b). Importantly, since the memo was halted in the hierarchical line of officials, the memo never reached the responsible State Secretary Eric Wiebes, and his successor Menno Snel, as was claimed by these two government officials (Hofs, 2020). Yet, there are some indications that Wiebes and Snel might have had some knowledge of the memo and its contents, as official documents disclose that the memo had been discussed amongst the directors of the Tax Authority and the state secretaries at the time (Keultjes, 2020).

More investigations into the child benefit scandal showed that more low-level bureaucrats had attempted to warn their superiors and politically responsible officials. For instance, according to an investigation by independent journalist platform Follow the Money, civil servants within the Ministry of Finance had been signalling since 2014 that the implemented policy was too strict and reached beyond its mandate (Strop, 2020). Again, these warning signs were ignored by former State Secretary Wiebes and Minister Asscher, since the current State Secretary of Finance, van Huffelen, acknowledged that the policy had been discussed by government officials at the time, but had been disregarded due to matters that seemed more pressing at the time (NOS, 2020a). In addition, it became apparent that an employee of de Appelbloessem, one of the first childminding agency's in the scandal, had been warning government agencies of the illegal activity of Jan V. since 2007, yet government agencies failed to respond up until 2009 (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2015). Had the government responded to these signals earlier

on, a significant portion of the damage done to parents could have been prevented. Moreover, it becomes apparent that the interests of parents were unacknowledged for many years.

The interests of parents

Considering the above outlined process of how the child benefits scandal unfolded, it becomes clear that throughout the entire unfolding of the scandal, the interests of parents have largely been ignored. For instance, the absence of a hardship clause in the law on child care benefits showed how the Tax Authority from the start did not wish to anticipate individual cases for whom an exception could be made. As earlier explained, this could be partially explained by the context in which the child benefit scandal emerged, since the Netherlands just became victim to the large-scale case of fraud by Bulgarian gangs that falsely received thousands of euros in state benefits. This resulted in a line of policy that focussed on the relentless tracing and identification of potential other cases of fraud, which developed strict legislation such as the law on child care without any hardship clause. In addition, the Bulgarian Fraud Scandal led to the establishments of risk-profiles within the Tax Authority, that were most often based on one's ethnicity (Committee-Van Dam). An algorithm automatically assigned parents with an additional nationality besides Dutch as a risk-category when they applied for child benefits (Committee-Van Dam). This contributed to the discriminatory grounds on which the Tax Authority would later classify parents as fraudsters and would immediately withhold their benefits. This "all-or-nothing" approach to which parents got labelled as "intent/major fault" clashed with the state's judicial obligation to consider each citizen as an individual, and therefore the state had failed to provide judicial protection to all citizens (Committee-Van Dam). The overheated political debate surrounding the national policy on tackling fraud clouded legislators with preconceived notions on how to detect fraudsters, which failed to take into consideration that parents could make honest mistakes with their application for child benefits (Committee-Van Dam). In addition to this, the Ministry of Finance redesigned the Tax Authority's division on benefits in 2014, by adding 25 million euros to the budget for yearly inspections on fraud (Committee-Van Dam). This room for adding 25 million euros to the budget stemmed from the idea that employees would make sure that the Tax Authority would decrease their chances of rewarding citizens with unjust benefits (Committee-Van Dam, 2020). The Committee-Van Dam concluded that the above outlined rationale fuelled the Tax Authority's perceived mandate to act on the furthest extent of the law to classify individuals as fraudsters (Committee-Van Dam, 2020; Klein, 2020).

All those years, parents felt powerless in the fight against major government institutes such as the Tax Authority. In the hearings of the Committee-Van Dam, some government officials admitted that they had received letters and emails from parents asking for help. Minister Asscher for instance, admitted to having received a number of letters between December 2013 and June 2014 from parents to which he did not respond adequately (Committee-Van Dam, 2020, p.54). Additionally, State Secretary of Finance Frans Weekers had received internal and external signals that the consequences of the policy concerning fraud in the child benefits case would have devastating results for parents (Committee-Van Dam, 2020, p.19). Further, the Committee van Dam stated that in the last fifteen years, there had been several occasions on which government officials could have responded to the signalling of the disproportionate consequences for individual citizens due to the extremely harsh policies that had been implemented. From the design of the benefits system, that puts too much responsibility on the citizens, to the ignoring of the Ombudsman's report *no powerplay, but fair play*, to the lack of action in repaying the parents' unjust debts, the Committee-Van Dam concluded that the entire governmental system has failed to take the interests of parents into account.

Present

Despite the enormous public unrest that the scandal brought to life, even in the present day the interests of parents are not fully taken at heart. The State Secretary of Finance, Alexandra van Huffelen, announced on December 22 in 2020 that all parents that were victimized by the scandal would receive 30.000 euros in compensation (NOS, 2020b). However, it was not until March 2021 that the first parents would receive any compensation (Het Parool, 2021). In the meantime, municipalities were tasked with providing parents initial compensation and support, since municipalities are part of the executive branch of governance. Moreover, it was believed that citizens would be more likely to participate in municipal efforts, due to a combination of mistrust in national government agencies and a feeling of shame for their personal situation (Lammers, 2020). The Dutch State granted municipalities 11 million euros to enable parents that were in critical need to apply for compensation quicker (Elich, 2020). Nonetheless, this was based on the number of parents that the Tax Authority had registered as victims, which would soon appear to be way too limited to the number of actual victims (Koops, 2021). It appeared to be difficult for the Tax Authority to accurately assess how many parents were victimized per municipality and on the national level, as they first accounted for a total of 8.300

parents in total, which was later assessed at 26.000 parents (Koops, 2021). More calculation problems within the Tax Authority occurred, such as the initial calculation that only 693 of those parents would be residents of Amsterdam, which would later turn out to be at least 1671 parents (Koops, 2021). An additional issue with the outsourcing of compensation repayment to the municipal level was that the Tax Authority was unable to provide the municipalities with parents' personal information, such as name and address, due to privacy laws (Koops, 2020). Only parents that approached the municipality themselves were able to apply for the municipal compensation measures, since the municipality was unable to proactively approach parents themselves (Koops, 2020). Alderman Marjolein Moorman of Debt Assistance in the municipality of Amsterdam claimed in a council meeting in 2021 that parents have grown a natural distrust towards government agencies, and thus appear to be reluctant to approach the municipality on their own accounts⁸. Consequently, only sixteen parents have reported themselves to the municipality as victims of the scandal, whilst the municipality knew that around 1700 parents within the municipality are victimized. The president of the Union of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) stated that the argument that the Tax Authority was unable to provide municipalities with parents' personal information was contradictory to the previous acting of the Tax Authority, that used to frequently supply municipalities with personal information of citizens when it came to other cases of fraud or debt registration (Lammers, 2020). Once more, the Tax Authority did not seem to acknowledge the interests of parents, even in the aftermath of the benefits scandal.

⁸ Notes from the meeting of the Council Committee on Employment, Income and Education of the Municipality of Amsterdam. (2021). Retrieved from: https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/vergadering/810703#ai_5726227.

Chapter 3. Literature review

To fully grasp the position of the parents in the child benefit scandal, this section will aim to dissect a multitude of aspects. The parents attempted to participate in the political processes, therefore the literature on citizen participation, collaborative governance and coproduction will be reviewed. Parents did not merely act upon citizen participation means, but were also concerned with providing signals of failed policy to the government and striving to put their issues on the political agenda. However, due to a lack of accessibility of the collaborative network, it was difficult for parents to convey those signals to politicians. Hence, this chapter will close with an elaboration on the accessibility of the governmental network. Together, the discussion of the literature of the above outlined concepts will build up to a conceptualization of citizen lobbyists in the next chapter. This form of lobbying should be considered as a hybrid approach to lobbying, which is applicable to the victimized parents in the child benefits scandal.

Citizen participation

According to scholars on democracy, citizen participation is essential for democratic citizenship and democratic decision-making (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). As Barnes (1999) argues, citizen participation is a necessary condition for a cohesive society and a mode for the minimization of social exclusion. Additionally, Barnes (1999) argues, direct involvement with the public will encourage public authorities to seek legitimacy for their actions, therefore establishing more direct accountability mechanisms which benefits democracy as a whole. Besides, with the use of citizen participation, governments are able to access knowledge and expertise that they otherwise would not have access to, resulting in better informed policy (Barnes, 1999). Moreover, citizen participation could improve the quality of the decisions and solutions reached, due to the wider source of information that helped establish these decisions and solutions (Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Participatory citizens could thus be seen as policy advisors, as Craft and Howlett (2013) argue. Participatory citizens act in a policy advisory system where they compete with government agencies, NGO's and private corporations to influence policy making processes (Craft & Howlett, 2013). This idea ties back to the definition of the World Bank Learning Group on Participation, who defined participation as a 'process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them' (World Bank, 1995, p.xi). Subsequently,

participation should be seen as consultation or decision making in all phases of the policy cycle (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999).

Even though the above outlined literature presents the notion that citizen participation affects national policy, since the emergence of decentralization government structures, citizen participation is profoundly present at the local level of governance (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). Decentralisation is often understood as the transfer of resources, power and tasks to lower-level authorities which are to some degree independent of higher levels of government (Manor, as cited in Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). With the outsourcing of administrative tasks to lower levels of governance, citizen participation also shifted towards local governance. The assumed advantage of a more accessible arena for citizen participation on the local governance level does not always apply, as De Vries (2000) argues that regulations to enforce participation are lacking at the local level due to decentralization. According to De Vries (2000), the history of the Netherlands with decentralization shows that national policy areas are often disregarded by local administrators, since they usually lack knowledge of those areas as those are not the areas that local administrators gain votes with. In the early days of the child benefits scandal, parents would attempt to inform their local government of the faulty anti-fraud policy, but were turned away by their municipalities. Once parents disclosed their problems with the Tax Authority to their municipalities, local administrators claimed that they were unable to help the parents due to multiple issues. For example, municipalities claimed that they were unable to take the signals of parents into consideration, since they were merely tasked with the executive function of national policy, and thus were unable to influence legislative policy and hence had to follow orders from what was decided on the national level⁹. As this empirical anecdote shows, the supposed advantages of increasing citizen participation on the local level due to decentralization therefore are inapplicable to the case of the child benefits scandal.

Likewise, not every scholar is as enthusiastic about the possibilities and benefits that citizen participation could provide. Cupps (1977) argues that public participation needs to be ordered and constrained by administrators, or otherwise would the style and tactics of citizen groups and their absence of sophisticated cost-benefit analyses endanger the public interest policies and programs. Furthermore, administrations could become short-sighted in their eagerness to respond to citizen demands in order to increase their popularity among citizens, leading to

⁹ Chapter 6 will further elaborate on the experiences of the victimized parents with their municipalities.

poorly conceived and unrepresentative policy decisions (Cupps, 1977). One could argue that such a short-sighted policy decision occurred after the public unrest following the Bulgarian Fraud scandal, where citizens demanded political action to prevent such a scandal from happening again, leading to rushed legislation on fighting fraud that granted the Tax Authority with powers way beyond its mandate (Verbon, 2021).

Furthermore, citizen engagement is rarely equally accessible to everyone, as Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) argue. Citizen engagement is dependent on three factors, namely resources, engagement and recruitment (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Resources entail time, money and civic skills, engagement refers to the interest in politics and a sense of efficacy, and recruitment is considered as the amount of invitations for participation that friends, relatives and other members of one's social circle provide (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Inequalities in citizen engagement could emerge from the extent to which citizens' acts could convey information, the amount of time, money and skills required for said act and in the "volume" of such acts (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). The volume of an activity is measured in relation to its capacity for clout, in other words, the extent of the pressure the activity exerts (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Thus, it appears that Verba, Schlozman and Brady assume that there is a potential for the emergence of inequality due to the difference in external factors such as time and resources. However, other authors also differentiate between internal factors that posit differences in the degree to which citizens engage with politics. Almond and Verba (1963) developed a typology that characterizes citizen internal orientations towards politics that determines their level of citizen engagement. At the lowest level, there is the Parochial, a political sleepwalker that lacks the knowledge and interest in politics, meaning that he is very unlikely to effectively engage in politics (Almond & Verba, 1963). The Subject is somewhat aware of politics, as he acknowledges that his life is influenced by politics, yet he limits his engagement in politics as he assumes that he is merely to obey rather than provide an actual contribution on his own behalf (Almond & Verba, 1963). Finally, the Participant has fully developed his political efficacy and is determined to act as a serious political actor (Almond & Verba, 1963). In the case of the child benefits scandal, it could be argued that the victimized parents started from the Parochial position but rapidly developed into the Participant, as the parents experienced how politics could impact their lives directly from the moment they were accused of fraud onwards.

Be this as it may, Arnstein (1969) argues that inequalities in the degree of citizen participation do not stem from the behalf of citizens, but the way the “haves” respond to the “have-nots”. According to Arnstein (1969) citizen participation concerns the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens to employ strategies to make sure they are included in political and economic processes in the future. However, the degree of power that citizens can exert on the final product varies, as illustrated by Arnstein (1969) on an eight-rung ladder (Figure 1).

The bottom two rungs are Manipulation and Therapy, and are implemented by power-holders to “educate” or “cure” participants, as participants do not actually have any power to participate in the project, yet are included by the power holders to illuminate to the general public that they included the voice of citizens in their final project (Arnstein, 1969). Informing and Consultations allow citizens to voice their concerns and opinions in a project, though citizens lack the actual power to make sure that their concerns and opinions are taken to heart by the powerholders (Arnstein, 1969).

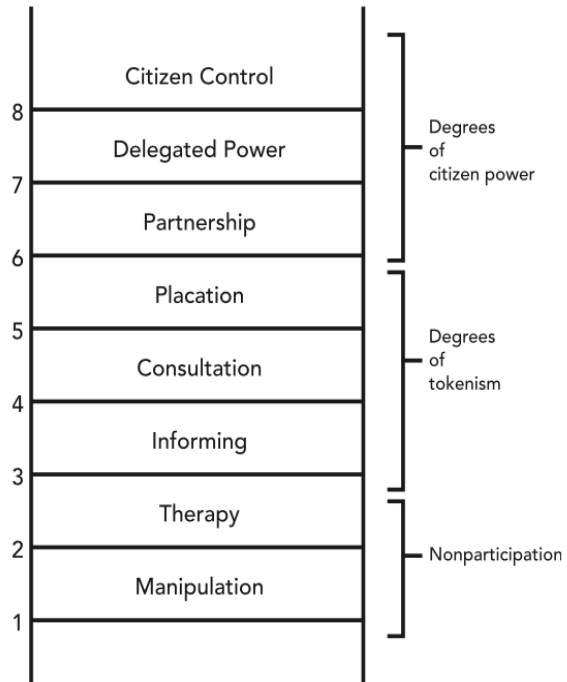


Figure 1: The ladder of citizen power (Arnstein, 1969).

Placation slowly progresses into citizens being able to obtain an advice-giving role, where the power holders retain the right to make the final decision (Arnstein, 1969). From Partnership onwards, citizens steadily gain more power and control over the decision-making process, ending in Citizen Control where the have-not citizens have gained full managerial power (Arnstein, 1969). In the child benefits scandal, it becomes apparent that the influence of the victimized parents slowly increases as the scandal unfolds. In the beginning, parents were not really taken seriously and were stuck on the bottom two rungs. Slowly, parents gained more and more power to influence the power holders and voice their opinions. It could be argued that parents now place on the fifth rung, Placation, as they obtain an advice-giving role in panels such as the Parent Panel, and the power holders still hold the right to make final decisions (Belastingdienst, n.d.).

Although citizen participation has some promising features, such as the possibility for increased legitimacy of political actions and the ability of governments to consult with the

public to retrieve knowledge and expertise they would otherwise not have access to (Barnes, 1999; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). However, there are also some disadvantages to citizen participation, such as the inability of local governments to provide an accessible arena for citizen participation on the local level (De Vries, 2000). Moreover, citizen participation incentives could lead to short-sighted decisions made by governments, in eagerness to respond to citizen participation (Cupps, 1977). Furthermore, citizen participation does not automatically provide an equal level playing field, as strength of those citizen acts depend on the amount of time, resources and skills that influence the volume of the act (Almond & Verba, 1963). Besides, citizens' internal attitudes towards politics vastly differ, leading to not every citizen participating as actively in citizen participation efforts (Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995). Finally, the way power holders respond to citizens attempting to engage in citizen participatory means varies across a number of rungs, thus not every citizen participatory act carries the same leverage (Arnstein, 1969). The above outlined factors that could contribute to the inequality in citizen participation will function as the groundwork that will help illuminate how victimized parents faced similar inequalities in their pursuit of justice in the child benefits scandal. The next chapter will provide further theoretical explanation of the hybrid citizen lobbyist function that these parents employed, and will show how these inequality factors contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents. First, however, this chapter will turn to an elaboration of coproduction, after which the level of accessibility to politicians is discussed to illustrate the ability of citizens to actually employ coproduction and citizen participation means.

Coproduction

With the emergence of New Public Management, (NPM) bureaucratic institutions faced major institutional changes. NPM principles centre around the idea that public institutions are able to, and should, function according to market and management principles, where efficiency is key in achieving the desired goals (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). NPM reforms result in the consideration of the effectiveness of decisions over the legitimacy of decisions based on processes, representativeness and legality (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). This paradigm shift occurred to deal with the desire to streamline and increase effectiveness of providing public services and goods to the public, as the environment in which these institutions operated changed into more of a network style of governance, requiring public institutions to adapt to these changes (Eggers & Goldsmith, 2004). The dawn of this new collaborative, network era in public administration introduced new concepts such as coproduction and collaborative

governance. Coproduction indicates ‘a process through which inputs from individuals who are not “in” the same organization are transformed into goods and services’ (Ostrom, 1996, p.1073). Coproduction thus entails a model where service delivery could encourage citizens to actively participate in the policy making process, as their input is used to design and implement policy (Booth, 2019). Though coproduction sounds like an effective means to increase citizen participation, for it to be effective a change in power relations between service users and service providers is necessary (Booth, 2019). Similar to what Arnstein (1969) argued, just because citizens are able to provide input, does not automatically mean that the ones in power will take that input into consideration. As Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere (2018) argue, it’s simply a fact that there will always be a certain lack of incentive on behalf of policy makers and professionals to follow up on the input of citizens. Simultaneously, citizens could have unrealistic expectations of what powers governments hold and how far their mandate stretches (Brandsen, Steen & Verschuere, 2018).

Coproduction could be necessary to address so-called “wicked problems”; problems that do not have clear solutions, and cannot be addressed effectively through traditional bureaucracies (Harmon & Meyer, 1986; McGuire, 2006). McGuire (2006) prefers the conceptualization of ‘collaborative public management’ to refer to the process of dealing with wicked problems via multiorganizational arrangements. Collaborative public management further entails that government agencies manage external actors in a networked setting, whilst maintaining primary influence on policy making processes (McGuire, 2006). This collaborative public management thus allows for government agencies to employ a top-down hierarchical strategy, where they remain the primary player (Eggers & Goldsmith, 2004). Therefore, some argue that governments are not naturally fit for effective partnerships with others, since they do not naturally look for mutual solutions and exchange information in an effective way that benefits all players (Teisman & Klijn, 2002). This leads to a general acknowledgement among scholars that certain groups benefit more from this collaborative network structure than others, due a discrepancy in accessibility to the network (O’Toole & Meier, 2004). Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere (2018) argue that recent technological advancements have created a more favourable climate for coproduction, as they argue that communication amongst actors has become way less time consuming than before. According to Brandsen, Steen and Verschuere (2018), since it takes little to no effort any more to look up a person’s personal contact details, it has become much easier for the public to contact public officials and vice-versa. However, these perceived benefits of technological advancement could be deceiving as the policy arena

is not as accessible to every citizen. The efforts of parents in the child benefits scandal to contact political representatives and policy makers shows that, although the email addresses of politicians might have been easy to find, they still could not get through to the politicians to convey their signals. This could be explained by the lack of accessibility in the collaborative network that employs citizen participation and coproduction means. This next section will further highlight the inability of citizens to reach politicians, due to a lack of accessibility in the network.

Accessibility

As discussed earlier on in this chapter, recent emergence of wicked problems has intensified the interface between the citizen and the state. Citizens are frequently asked to consult policy makers on all sorts of policy decisions, which is one way to bridge the gap between citizens and state institutions (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). Another approach to bring government closer to its people, is by strengthening the accountability and responsiveness of those government agencies through institutional design changes that would allow for easier access to policy makers (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). These two approaches complement each other, since the increased participation and collaboration with the public has increased the public's demand for transparency and accountability on behalf of government institutions (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). According to research by Wallaart & Kusse, Public Affairs (WKPA) and Open State Foundation (OSF), the accessibility of members of parliament plays a crucial part in closing the gap between the citizens and their representatives (WKPA & OSF, n.d.). Their research shows that every member of the Dutch parliament in their study agrees that members of parliament should be easily accessible by the public (WKPA & OSF, n.d.). However, the members of parliament lack the resources to adequately deal with the immense amount of emails they receive from the public every day (WKPA & OSF, n.d.). Almost half of the respondents in the questionnaire sent by WKPA and OSF claim to receive over a hundred emails per day, and admit that they do not respond to 50 percent of the received emails. A respondent explained that they receive way too little administrative support to carry out citizen representation in a serious, professional manner (WKPA & OSF, n.d.). Another respondent stated that answering emails is 'a matter of making decisions and setting your priorities straight', and adds that you are a member of parliament '24/7' (WKPA & OSF, n.d.).

Despite the fact that around sixty percent of the members of parliament in the questionnaire of WKPA and OSF claim to answer their emails themselves ‘regularly’, a more problematic feature of the results shows that the identity of the sender matters for the speed in which members of parliament answer to the email. More than half of the respondents admit that they respond faster to an email when they know the person who sent the email (WKPA & OSF, n.d.). This is problematic, as this underlines the idea that to get access to citizen representatives, you have to be part of the “in-crowd” that is already favoured by representatives, which hampers the democratic notion that every citizen has the equal right to the ability to influence policy (Alemanno, 2017).

Since the child benefits scandal mostly affected parents that fall under a lower social-economic group in society, it could be assumed that they were not part of that in-crowd that could easily get access to citizen representatives. Hence, this thesis makes the argument that these parents had no other choice but to act as citizen lobbyists, since in their ordinary capacity as regular citizens, their voices were not being heard. Subsequently, Alemanno (2017) appoints this discrepancy in accessibility to the governmental network structures as one of the main drivers for citizen lobbyists. This next chapter will dive further into what the act of lobbying entails, and what differentiates conventional lobbyists to citizen lobbyists.

Chapter 4. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework for this thesis will be outlined. To examine the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal, there first will be an elaboration on the concept of citizen lobbyists. Next, three obstacles that the victimized parents, acting as citizen lobbyists, faced in their pursuit of justice will be examined, namely; the policy- and organizational capacity of the victimized parents was lacking, the dominant perception on the fight against fraud disadvantaged the attempts of the victimized parents to put their interests on the political agenda, and finally, NPM reforms have led to decentralization and focus on efficiency. In this chapter, theoretical support will be provided for these claims. However, it is first important to conceptualize citizen lobbyists in order to elaborate on this hybrid form of citizen participation that the victimized parents engaged in.

Citizen lobbying

To answer the question of how one could define citizen lobbyists, it is important to assess what lobbying in itself means. Some define lobbying as ‘the act of attempting to influence the decisions made by policymakers, at any level of government (Alemanno, 2017). According to Transparency International UK, lobbying could be defined as ‘any direct or indirect communication with public officials, political decision-makers or representatives for the purposes of influencing public decision-making, and carried out by or on behalf of any organised group’ (Transparency International UK, n.d.). Similarly, Berg (2009) draws attention to the communication function that lobbying holds in the political atmosphere. According to Berg (2009), lobbying grants corporations, labour groups or citizen groups a voice in the political arena. Lobbying has been analysed as a communication process since 1960, as Lester Milbrath (1960) claimed that government perceptions and policies could only be influenced via communication, therefore lobbying should be seen as a communication process. According to Milbrath (1960), important political figures never decide on their own accounts, but merely parrot the established policies made by corporate lobby groups that exert a heavy influence on policy making. Mills (1956) already acclaimed this negative connotation to lobbying as he claimed that lobbying was filled with back-room deals among the powerful elite that consisted of men in powerful positions in the economic, political and military arenas. Therefore, it is unsurprising that lobbying has been deemed by some as an immoral activity, where lobbyists

have been reduced to unquestioning individuals whose actions solely depend on corporate money-driven priorities (Anastasiadis, 2014).

In contrast to the supposed preconceived notion of money-driven individual lobbyist, the concept of citizen lobbyists refers to quite the opposite individual. A prominent scholar that has aimed to conceptualize citizen lobbyists is Alberto Alemanno (2017). Alemanno has founded The Good Lobby, a non-profit organization which strives to equalize access to power in order to establish a more plural, inclusive and democratic society. In his book “The Good Lobby”, Alemanno (2017) characterizes citizen lobbyists as those who engage in the policy process by monitoring those issues that are important to them, and developing a strategy to actively fight for a better implementation of that particular issue. Citizen lobbyists, according to Alemanno (2017), engage in a form of activism that could be distinguished from other forms of activism because of the target, method and goal they pursue. By means of the lobbying toolkit, designed by Alemanno (2017), citizen lobbyists target public authorities in the hopes of establishing systemic change. Thus, citizen lobbyists are motivated to bring about change in those policy areas that are typically neglected by the masses, which sets them apart from conventional lobbyists (Alemanno, 2017). Citizen lobbyists often act on behalf of the “powerless”; a group in our society that feels neglected due to the unequal distribution of power, the distance between voters and decision-makers, the disconnect between what is taught in schools on representation and reality, and a system design that systematically overlooks this group (Alemanno, 2017).

The origin of citizen lobbying is difficult to identify, yet it has been argued by some that it predominantly stems from the ‘not in my back-yard’- principle, which entails citizens protesting against civil services that would lead to direct hinder on their behalf (Dröge & van Drimmelen, 2018). Some refer to citizen lobbying as ‘grassroots lobbying’, where citizens are able to challenge conventional stakeholders with relatively unprofessional lobby efforts (Huisman, 2016). Adams (2007) characterizes citizen lobbyists as citizens that identify a set of issues that are important to them, develop a number of political goals related to those issues and then lobby with government agencies to accomplish these goals. Ever since the emergence of social media, these types of citizen lobbying have been thriving, due to the connectivity and accessibility that social media provide (Huisman, 2016; Dröge & van Drimmelen, 2018).

An important distinction with community problem solvers, according to Adams (2007), is that citizen lobbyists do not necessarily act in collaborative or deliberative ways. In other words, citizen lobbyists have their own goals and determinations on how to achieve those goals, and do not wish to be simply asked for mere participation on governance issues, but demand actual influence in the early processes of policy making. An example on a local scale would be that a participatory citizen would be granted the option to choose between whether they want an empty field to be either reconstructed into new houses or into a new park. A citizen lobbyist would pre-emptively engage with local government to lobby for, for instance, the building of houses on that particular field, since that citizen has the goal of creating more affordable housing in their neighbourhood. This proactive influence on the policy making processes is what sets citizen lobbyists apart from participatory citizens, as citizen lobbyists mostly strive towards influence in an earlier stage of the political agenda setting (Adams, 2007).

The above outlined conceptualizations of citizen lobbyists focus on the individual citizen, yet it could be argued that in the case of the child benefits scandal, the parents acted as a form of hybrid citizen lobbying. The victimized parents merged notions of more institutionalized interest movements and citizen lobbying, since they attempted to unionize via social media platforms, but also acted upon citizen lobbyist means such as writing letters to (local) politicians and contacting (local) political parties to make their voices heard. Furthermore, the victimized parents acted as citizen lobbyists in their pursuit of appointing this issue as important on the political agenda, and in their striving towards the goal of receiving financial compensation. A successful example of such a hybrid citizen lobby group is the group called Windalarm. In IJburg, Amsterdam, a citizen lobby group called "Windalarm" protested heavily against the building of windmills in their area, leading to the municipality terminating their plans for the windmill construction (van Zoelen, 2021). For a long time, Windalarm's signals concerning noise pollution and potential damaging effects on public health were disregarded by the municipality (Van Zoelen, 2021). Yet, after a long process of extensive protesting and lobbying, Windalarm did reach their goal of stopping the building of windmills along the coast of IJburg, and could therefore be seen as a successful citizen lobby group. A notable feature of the Windalarm group is that they organized themselves along very distinct bureaucratic structures, such as the establishment of a secretariat and distinctive divisions concerning, amongst other things, political lobby, external communication and judicial matters¹⁰. This

¹⁰ About Windalarm. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://windalarm.amsterdam/nl/windalarm>.

application of bureaucratic structures within the organization could contribute to the level of success that citizen lobbying groups could reach (Walker, 2005). This next section will further dissect theory on the ability of interest groups to mobilise their members towards one unified goal, providing the first obstacle that parents faced in their role as citizen lobbyists.

Obstacle 1: Lack of policy and organizational capacity

The organizational design of citizen lobbying groups is key in the realization of its goals and the effective implementation of its strategies. Albareda (2018) states that groups are required to have some form of formal structure in order to be successful in their strategies. In other words, groups should host a certain degree of organizational capacity. Organizational capacity refers to the formation of formalized hierarchical structures within organizational arrangements, in order to become more autonomous and formalized than mere loose network-type organizations (Albareda, 2018). This organizational capacity allows for citizen lobbying groups to function as transmission belts, where lobbying groups are able to generate, process and transfer information from their members to relevant policymakers (Albareda, 2018). According to Albareda and Braun (2019), there are two types of information that citizen lobbying groups could provide to policy makers; namely expertise (e.g. technical specifications and state-of-the-art scientific knowledge) or political support (such as citizen support or the support of policy-powerful economic actors). The capacity to which groups are able to offer different types of information to public officials is key for their effect on policy making (Albareda & Braun, 2019). The degree to which groups are able to transfer policy information to various public officials attests to their 'policy capacity' (Albareda & Braun, 2019). Policy capacity entails the ability to choose policy instruments that are effective and most fitting to the particular and economic context (Daugbjerg & Halpin, 2010). In the case of the child benefits scandal, it could be argued that the parents struggled to fulfil their policy capacity, as they lacked knowledge and skills on what policy instruments to use in their situation.

Besides, the victimized parents were unable to constitute effective organizational capacity within their group, as it was difficult for the victimized parents to unify under one umbrella organization, since multiple parents already took to social media to set up their own platforms to connect with other victims. This led to multiple groups being present online, with each their

own visions and ideas on how to handle the situation (Ramesar, 2021; Links, 2021)¹¹. This inability to constitute membership to one specific organization is claimed to be a determining factor in the lack of success of civil society groups, as membership involvement is essential to establish legitimacy for a group's advocacy and lobbying activities (Albareda, 2018). For membership involvement to be done in an effective manner, groups should provide a forum where members can interact among themselves and with representatives of the group (Albareda, 2018). Despite there being multiple fora where parents could interact with each other, internal conflict led to not one of the fora being acknowledged as the main representative for all the parents (Ramesar, 2021; Links, 2021), leading to an inability to constitute effective member involvement.

Finally, Albareda and Braun (2019) argue that the organizational design of lobbying groups also affects their access to public institutions. In the case of the child benefit scandal, the lack of access to public officials could be accounted for as one of the reasons why the citizen lobbyists in the scandal were acknowledged this late. Braun (2013) illustrates how bureaucrats select interest groups to interact with based upon what suits their own, their agency's, or their political superior's interests. This rationale could explain why early signals on the wrongful fraud-policy were disregarded by bureaucrats on multiple levels, as these signals did not match the current political agenda on strict enforcement of anti-fraud policy. Minutes of the Ministerial Council show that critical members of parliament were 'sensitized' by their party leaders in the discussion of the child benefits scandal, and that coalition parties were deemed to be loyal to the cabinet's execution of policy (du Pré & Hofs, 2021). The following section will provide a further theoretical explanation on agenda-setting theory, and why it was so difficult for the victimized parents of the child benefits scandal to break through the issue-attention cycle.

The above outlined theoretical elaboration on the lack of organizational- and policy capacity brings this thesis to its first hypothesis:

H1: The lack of policy- and organizational capacity among the victimized parents attributed to their late acknowledgement.

¹¹ Full transcripts of the interviews with Ramesar and Links are available per request.

Obstacle 2: The fight against the dominant agenda-setting

Every political entity has its own agenda; a collection of issues, symbols and solutions that are considered for discussion and disposition by government officials (Birkland, 2007, p.63). Birkland (2007) denotes agenda setting as the process by which issues gain or lose public and elite attention. Due to the society's lack of capacity to address all issues simultaneously, there is fierce competition amongst actors to put their issue on the political agenda (Birkland, 2007). Despite Jones and Baumgartner's (2004) argument that there is a strong congruence between the priorities in the agenda of the public and the priorities of government officials, this does not mean that the public and the government process information in a similar vein. Jones and Baumgartner (2004) state that the public often focuses on a few particular issues on the agenda, whereas government agencies are able to consider multiple issues at the same time. However, since governments contain the ability to actively engage in multiple issues at the same time, information processing is a key factor in agenda setting in the governmental arena. According to Jones and Baumgartner (2005), information processing concerns the "collecting, assembling, interpreting and prioritizing signals from the environment" (p.7). Subsequently, policy makers must act upon an information-rich world, where they ought to assign relevance to issues themselves (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). However, policy makers are not all knowingly creatures and are limited in their information processing by a degree of bounded rationality, therefore opting to focus on certain pieces of information and disregard most of the information provided to them (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). Hence, how policy makers select certain issues to prioritize over others is quite important to assess. Jones and Baumgartner (2012) argue that due to the overkill in information that policy makers receive, they are more likely to underact to signals on new issues than overact. A change in what issues are considered relevant enough to obtain more information on, only occurs once the informational signals from external actors are extraordinarily strong or when signals accumulate over time until policy makers have no other choice but to become involved (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). In the case of the child benefits scandal, it is expected that a change in agenda setting had occurred due to the accumulation of signals concerning the pressing nature of the scandal over time. It is expected that the persistence of parents to continue to signal the negative impacts of the harsh anti-fraud policies eventually led to more policy makers considering those signals as a priority amongst the large quantity of information they receive.

The above outlined theories elucidate the idea that prioritization is quite difficult to accurately employ in such a complex and multidimensional world, as similarly argued by Workman, Jones and Jochim (2009). The struggle for interpretation amongst multidimensional issues allows those in charge of directing the attention, such as politicians or organized interest groups, to steer the agenda concerning a particular issue in their desired direction (Workman, Jones & Jochim, 2009). Accordingly, certain groups also fight to keep certain issues off the political agenda, exerting their blocking power (Cobb & Ross, 1997). According to Bachrach and Baratz (1962), actors can act on coercive power and blocking power, where the dominant actor forces an issue either on or off the agenda. Additionally, there is a third face of power to be recognized; namely that over time, social relationships and political ideology have been structured in such a way that A will always remain more powerful than B, no matter what B tries (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). For example, when B attempts to fight against this unfair system of power imbalance, the main interest will be to ignore B's attempts for change, as A is the majority player. In the long run, this will result in B giving up their fight as B becomes alienated from politics due to a lack of acknowledgement for their cause by A. In the case of the child benefits scandal, this third face of power over the political agenda occurs, as parents attempted to signal that the policy put in place to fight fraud was negatively affecting them, but were unable to compete with the government's and the public's main interest of fighting fraud and preventing another Bulgarian Fraud scandal from happening¹².

Traditionally disadvantaged groups, such as actor B in the above outlined example, obtain two modes of dealing with the expansion of the scope of conflict (Birkland, 2007). First off, disadvantaged groups could make use of more dramatic symbols and images to induce greater media and public sympathy for their cause (Birkland, 2007). Second, groups could appeal to higher decision-making levels such as state institutions or higher courts to increase their chances of being heard by the right audiences and attract more like-minded supporters along the way (Birkland, 2007). In the case of the child benefits scandal, parents strived to use both routes to fight for their interests. For instance, parents started to approach the media to tell their emotional and heart-breaking stories in hopes of pushing their interests higher on the political agenda (Frederik, 2021). Secondly, parents started to appeal their cases to the Netherland's highest administrative court, the Dutch Council of State, in hopes of overturning previous court

¹² See chapter 'Case Description' for a further elaboration on the Bulgarian Fraud scandal and its effects on the public debate surrounding fraud.

rulings that found them guilty of fraud whilst simultaneously increasing awareness of an administrative system that continued to neglect its citizens (Frederik, 2021).

A more overarching issue the imbalance in power over the political agenda is that dominant actors in policy making act in what Baumgartner and Jones (1993) call “policy monopolies”. These policy monopolies strive to keep problems and underlying policy issues off the political agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Once policy monopolies lose control over the agenda, other less powerful groups are able to produce agenda changes that could break up these policy monopolies (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). This is what Baumgartner and Jones (1993) call a ‘punctuated equilibrium’, where dominance of government on supporting policy images and enforcing the status quo is overthrown by other political forces that destroy this policy monopoly. Moreover, this punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) could also apply to the information processing of policy monopolies, as discussed by Eissler, Russell and Jones (2016). PET is applicable to information processing as punctuated equilibria could drastically alter what information is suddenly seen as relevant by policy makers, and what information is not (Eissler, Russell & Jones, 2016). Thus, PET shows how changes in information processing on a particular issue could shift the dominant frame on that issue (Eissler, Russel & Jones, 2016). Punctuated equilibria could result from triggering events, which are conceptualized as ‘dramatic symbols of problems that are already rising to national attention’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p.130). In the case of the child benefit scandal, the report of the Dutch Ombudsman or the parliamentary questions submitted by Pieter Omtzigt could be seen as such a triggering event. Such triggering events could prompt explosive processes that will prevent the status quo from returning to its equilibrium for a long time (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). This idea is underlined by Baumgartner and Mahoney (2008), who argue that changes in the collective policy debate are due to endogenous efforts of individual lobbyists and due to exogenous shocks in the system, such as crises and triggering events. However, constituting an actual change in the collective policy debate by reframing an issue appears to be rare, as policy monopolies favour the maintenance of the status quo (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008). According to Baumgartner and Mahoney (2008), actors base their actions upon what they expect those around them to act upon, resulting in the establishment of a collective action process that relies on the preferences of the network as a whole. As discussed earlier, the preference of the political network at the time of the unfolding of the child benefit scandal was to justify harsh anti-fraud policy, despite signals of its devastating consequences. Therefore, a second obstacle that citizen lobbyists faced was the

inability to constitute a reframing of the view on anti-fraud policies in the collective policy debate, due to a dominant position of the policy monopoly on the political agenda. This brings this thesis to its second hypothesis:

H2: The dominant stance on the political agenda by the policy monopoly on the justification of harsh anti-fraud policy contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

H2a: Triggering events allowed for a shift in the political agenda in ways that benefited the acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

Obstacle 3: NPM reforms have led to decentralization and focus on efficiency

The third obstacle parents faced in the child benefits scandal was the implementation of NPM reforms in the Netherlands that had led to decentralization and an overall focus on efficiency. The elaboration of this third obstacle is therefore two-fold; the first part of this explanation focuses on the decentralization measures implemented in the Netherlands that tasked municipalities with executive functions too complicated for them to handle. Moreover, the argument will be made that the civil servants on the municipal level lacked the knowledge and skills to deal with such an intricate problem as the child benefits scandal would develop to be. The second component of this obstacle is the increased focus on efficiency within government agencies as a result of NPM reforms. It will be theorized that the focus on efficiency amongst all layers of the administrative organization leads to an overarching culture that devalues citizen letters as a burden and a waste of time. It is expected that this attitude will have played a role in the late acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyist in the child benefits scandal.

Decentralization

As briefly discussed in the literature review, NPM reforms are inspired by private sector management norms and values, where efficiency and cost-reduction are main attributes (Minas, Wright & van Berkel, 2012). In the Netherlands, the implementation of NPM reforms intensified rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s, where focus was put on the outsourcing and decentralization measures (Minas, Wright & van Berkel, 2012). Decentralization plays a central role in the NPM ideology, as it contains the ability to execute a variety of different

agendas simultaneously, thus leading to a more effective delivery of public goods and services (Alonso, Clifton & Díaz-Fuentes, 2015). Moreover, some scholars argue that decentralization would also lead to increased staff motivation among local civil servants, as it would be easier to motivate employees within a local organization instead of a “distant” central government (Pollitt, 2005). According to Pollitt (2005), employees identify more with local issues, thus becoming more motivated to act towards betterment of these issues. It is further argued that citizens will feel more connected with their local government, thus becoming more likely to reach out to their local representatives and trust that these local representatives will have their best interests at heart (Pollitt, 2005). On the contrary, there have also been scholars who disagree with these supposed benefits of decentralization, such as Prud’homme (1995). Prud’homme (1995) argues that central governments are more likely to attract more qualified people due to the greater diversity of tasks, more possibilities of promotion and less political intervention. Besides, central governments have better resources and the availability of investment in technology, research and innovation (Prud’homme, 1995). In addition, Prud’homme (1995) argues, the electoral mandate among local politicians is vague and inconsistent, meaning that local politicians often lack the resources to fulfil their promised expenditures. Consequently, local politicians lack the incentive to keep their promises, as most don’t expect to be re-elected or know that re-election is not fully dependent on their local performance but more on their local connections (Prud’homme, 1995).

In the case of the child benefits scandal, the above outlined disadvantages to decentralization become apparent. As the results section will examine more extensively, almost all respondents illustrated in their interviews that they got stuck between being told that the municipality was tasked with service delivery concerning debt settlement issues, yet being turned away by the municipality time and time again when asking the municipality for help with their debt settlement issues, due to a lack of resources and knowledge on the municipality’s behalf. The case of the child benefit scandal shows how municipalities were tasked with service delivery in areas where they lacked resources and skills to accurately provide those services, which is expected to have contributed to the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal. This is due to the fact that victimized parents were constantly turned away by their municipalities in their efforts to seek help and signal faults in the anti-fraud policy. Hence, the following hypothesis will be examined in this thesis:

H3: The lack of skills, resources and mandate of municipalities to provide accurate

public services to the victimized parents contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

Focus on efficiency

As previously mentioned, another leg of NPM reforms is the increased focus on efficiency due to the market-style orientations adopted from the private sector (Minas, Wright & van Berkel). Cairney (2011) argues that the sheer size of government results in government ministers or presidents being unable to fully grasp all aspects of ongoing policies. Hecló (1978) has argued that the executive administration has grown to such proportions that it is unfeasible for members of parliament to have knowledge and expertise on every issue within their portfolio. This helps to explain the reasoning of decision-makers to not respond to every email or every individual case, which is exactly what happened when parents attempted to notify public officials of their troubles with the Tax Authority (Frederik, 2021). Moreover, the stretching of governmental responsibilities beyond the scope of the executive administration leads to what Baumgartner and Jones (1993) call “parallel processing”. In modern day decentralized governments, public policy is conducted mostly through specialist policy communities with minimal involvement of senior decision makers (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). These senior decision makers rely on the information and advice that their subordinates provide to them. This system of parallel processing allows for many issues to be considered simultaneously by component parts of a larger organization (Jann & Weigrich, 2007). However, there’s also an important downside to parallel processing, as senior decision makers are not aware of all issues concerning their department, and are therefore at risk of missing out on important pieces of information. Parallel processing thus could provide an explanation for why top officials in both the Tax Authority, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment claimed to have been unaware of the issues with their policies for so long.

In line with the idea of parallel processing, another feature attributes to the argument that the focus on efficiency due to the NPM reforms delayed the acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal, this being the view on citizen letters of civil servants. This next section will outline the rationale that due to a focus on efficiency, politicians often outsource the response and analysis of citizen letters to their civil servants beneath them. Since citizen letters often regard a single individual case, it is deemed inefficient to spend a lot of time on reviewing and processing the signals that such a citizen letter could provide. Therefore,

civil servants disregard citizen letters as irrelevant, and thus miss out on the overall pattern of signals that multiple citizen letters could provide. It is expected that this stance on citizen letters has contributed to the late acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyist in the child benefits scandal, as civil servants did not pick up on the pattern in individual cases that cried out for help due to the far-reaching consequences of the anti-fraud policies.

Focus on efficiency; the disregarding of citizen letters

From a theoretical point of view, a letter by a citizen is the most powerful form of political participation, as the citizen has the full capacity to convey all the information they deem relevant to the government (Bimber, 1999). However, it is interesting to assess whether the administrative system considers letters of citizens of the same importance. For this assessment, it is important to consider individual civil servants within bodies of government that are responsible for dealing with letters of citizens. Michels and de Graaf (2010) argue that in the Netherlands, the most important actors in the policy making process are the civil servants, since they take the main decisions. Civil servants are the ones who determine which plans are implemented and are in charge of coordinating streams of information within their department (Michels & de Graaf, 2010). By this logic, one could argue that the individual civil servants responsible for supplying information from letters of citizens to higher officials also hold a significant degree of power. It is expected that the process of selecting and evaluating the importance and significance of letters from citizens by individual responsible civil servants will have had an effect on the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal. As the chapter on case description already revealed, most top-level officials claimed to have been unaware of any signalling from citizens that the anti-fraud policies had such far-reaching consequences, and blamed that lack of information on the fact that those signals never made it through hierarchical lines of information within their institution. This illuminates the fact that apparently, certain individuals are responsible for sending signals upwards into that hierarchical line, and apparently those individuals weigh in on what is important enough to reach the top of the line. It is expected that the NPM reforms on effectiveness have trickled down into the cultural processes of public institutions (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). This argument is supported by Meier (2010), who states that organizational structure affects how ideas and preferences are conveyed throughout the organization via formal units and decision-making structures in the organizational hierarchy. These organizational structures further affect the interpretation of signals provided from multiple sources to the organization (Røvik, 2016).

Moreover, according to Selznick (1957) the internal and external pressures institutionalize within public organizations, forming distinct cultural features that are represented by their informal norms and values. Since NPM reforms centre around the ideas of efficiency, it is expected that civil servants view citizen letters as a burden on the overall effectiveness of the policies of organizations, hence preferring to disregard letters of citizens and deem them as irrelevant. Therefore, it will be hypothesized that the cultural norms and standards that individual civil servants uphold towards the importance and significance of citizen letters has influenced the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal.

Taking the above into consideration, the final hypothesis can be derived. The NPM reforms' focus on efficiency has resulted in politicians simply not having the time to acknowledge individual cases. Connecting to this, is the way civil servants supply information on individual cases to their superiors. Since civil servants are aware of the busy schedules of their superiors, they become highly critical of what information they send up into the hierarchical line of information. This creates a culture of being highly selective of what letters of citizens are relevant enough for politicians to see. Moreover, it is expected that the letters of citizens are often disregarded by civil servants, and the signals in those letters are often not put into perspective, resulting in civil servants being unable to identify a common ground amongst the signals. Due to this, individual cases are not seen as within an overall trend, and thus seen as irrelevant information to supply to higher officials. This rationale leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: The notion that the critical analysis of citizen letters hampers efficiency has contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents in the child benefits scandal.

Chapter 5. Methodology

Research method

This thesis will employ a single-case study design, where multiple pieces of evidence will be examined regarding a single unit (Toshkov, 2017). In this thesis, various governmental reports and news articles are examined, in combination with the results yielded from a series of semi-structured interviews. Essentially, the interviews will be used to validate the statements put forward in, amongst other things, the reports by the Dutch Ombudsman (2017) and the Committee-Van Dam (2020), who aimed to assess the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents in a similar vein as this thesis. However, these documents employ quite a broad level of analysis, as they mostly discuss the scandal from a governmental point of view and make statements on how the system as a whole failed to respond to the signals of victimized parents. By means of a series of semi-structured interviews, these investigations are given a more individual point of view, as both individual citizen lobbyists and governmental representatives are given the opportunity to reflect on the development of the scandal. Moreover, a semi-structured interview will help elaborate on the strategies employed and the obstacles faced by the victimized parents who attempted to act as citizen lobbyists.

The respondents were selected by means of a convenience sample, which means that the respondents just happened to be available for research (Toshkov, 2017). This also means that the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized (Toshkov, 2017), yet this should not be seen as a limitation to this research, as the aim of this thesis is to investigate mechanisms within this case specifically. The respondents of the semi-structured interviews fall under two categories. Firstly, interviews will be held with citizen lobbyists who lobbied in the child benefits scandal. These citizen lobbyists were found via extensive social media searches. Unfortunately, most victimized parents who acted as citizen lobbyists disabled the function on social media platforms to message them directly. However, this social media search did lead to three of the respondents; Janet Ramesar, Lynn Woodrow and Angelique Links, who runs the Lotgenoten KOTA Twitter page¹³. Via Mrs Ramesar I was able to post a call for other citizen lobbyists to

¹³ The results section will further elaborate on the Lotgenoten KOTA group.

respond to an interview invitation on her social media platform. Unfortunately, no one responded to this call.

Via my personal network I was able to contact a fourth citizen lobbyist, Hendrik-Jan Derksen of the Frisse Start lobby group. Mr Derksen has been involved in citizen lobbying from a very early age, and despite not being victimized by the child benefit scandal himself, he set up a lobbying group called Frisse Start (*'Fresh Start'*) to lobby for the improvement of assistance by the municipality. Mr Derksen was kind enough to consult his own network of municipal council members and members of the Second Chamber of Parliament to call for more respondents for this thesis. Unfortunately, none of the political representatives in Mr Derksen's network were available for an interview.

With the help of the network of my current internship at WKPA, I was able to find four respondents for the second category in this research, namely the political representatives. I was able to interview Tino Wallaart, who has filled several positions where he acted as spokesperson and personal assistant to different ministers. This made Mr Wallaart an interesting candidate to interview, since he was able to reflect on the stances on citizen letters of different ministers, thus illuminating the image that the notion that citizen letters were a burden on efficiency was carried out through multiple ministries, at multiple points in time. This strengthens the argument that there is a general view that disregards citizen letters, and that this disregard is not limited to the subject of the child benefits scandal, but is carried out throughout the period since the implementation of NPM reforms on multiple topics. The other two respondents have fulfilled prominent political positions. One of the respondents, who wishes to remain anonymous, has been an Alderman, a member of the Provincial Council and a member of the Second Chamber of Parliament. The other respondent, Laura Bromet, has also been an Alderman, a municipal Councilwoman, is currently in the Second Chamber of Parliament and ranks high on her political party list. Most notably, Mrs Bromet has been the spokesperson for matters concerning the child benefits scandal for her party. The last respondent in this category is Inge Verdaasdonk, the chair of the Socialist Party in the municipal council of the Dutch city Breda. Since the respondents in this category all fulfilled positions at different administrative levels, these respondents are considered to be able to paint an accurate picture of different levels of political representation.

Overall, it appeared to be difficult to find respondents in both of the categories, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. As explained by Mrs Ramesar and Mrs Links in their interviews, citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal are overworked and tired with their continuous efforts to pursue justice on behalf of the victimized parents. This resulted in a low incentive among other citizen lobbyists to agree to giving another interview. On behalf of the political representatives, a similar resistance was felt. I have reached out to multiple key political figures in the child benefit scandal, such as Pieter Omtzigt and Renske Leijten. Due to personal circumstances, Omtzigt was unable to participate in an interview, despite complimenting the efforts to further investigate the child benefits scandal by academic means. Other key political figures did not respond to my invitations to participate in an interview, or were simply too busy to participate. Nonetheless, I was able to find eight respondents for this thesis, all of whom with the most relevant expertise. Therefore, I would consider this number of respondents sufficient to draw some careful conclusions on the explanatory factors for the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents in the child benefits scandal.

To examine these explanatory factors, questions will be asked to the victimized parents concerning the difficulties of accessing government officials and what challenges presented themselves along the way. In addition, the respondents will be asked to formulate ideas on how the government could improve the process for citizen lobbyists to carry out influence on policy in the early stages of policy development. Subsequently, the interviews held with political representatives will aim to uncover the circumstances in which politicians have to work. Respondents will for instance be asked to shed light on the current workload and the possibility for politicians to step back and consider individual cases in a more systemic manner. These interviews will help illuminate what factors motivate politicians to disregard individual cases, and therefore will help contribute to an explanation of why the victimized parents were acknowledged this late in the child benefits scandal. The semi-structured approach to conducting interviews is the most frequently used interview technique in qualitative research, since it provides flexibility on both the interviewer and interviewee's behalf (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016). The interviewer and the interviewee both have room for improvisation and adaptation towards each other's questions and responses (Kallio et al., 2016). This method seems most appropriate for interviewing the citizen lobbyists in the child benefit scandal and political representatives since it would provide the interviewees with more room to elaborate further on their experiences, without being limited to respond to an ordinary Likert scale for example.

In this thesis, the causal relations between the independent variables lack of organizational- and policy capacity, the dominant stance on the political agenda by the policy monopoly, the lack of skills, resources and mandate of municipalities and the notion that critical analysis of citizen letters hampers efficiency are expected to have a negative causal relation to the dependent variable late acknowledgement. The independent variable ‘triggering events’ is expected to have a positive relation to late acknowledgement. A notable disadvantage of examining causality is that it is not possible to observe causality, as one can merely make inferences about causality (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). This problem with causal inference results in having to stick to a counterfactual perception of reality, since we can never be entirely certain that the causal relationship exists, yet we can be confident that a causal relationship exists based upon our findings (Toshkov, 2017).

Due to the very nature of qualitative research methods, it is difficult to accurately apply and assess validity and reliability in this research (Brink, 1993). With qualitative research there are multiple sources of error that could invalidate the validity and reliability measurements, such as the method of data collection and analysis, the situation or social context, the bias of the researcher or the subjects participating in the project (Brink, 1993). However, there are some measures to be taken to increase the validity and reliability of the qualitative research, for instance by making sure that the respondents of the interview are clear on the nature of the research and understand the full scope of the project (Brink, 1993). To ensure this, respondents were informed on the research question and the theoretical expectations beforehand. In addition, respondents were provided with an interview guide¹⁴ before the interview took place. Moreover, to strengthen reliability and internal validity, respondents were, aside from personally relevant questions, each given the same questions regarding the three identified obstacles. Furthermore, by means of a semi-structured interview, the interviewer is able to use probes to enhance the reliability of the data, as probing enables the interviewer to clarify inconsistencies within a respondent’s answers or help them recall information for clarity (Barriball & While, 1994). In the series of interviews, I often summarized the previous information stated by the respondents and asked them to confirm whether that summary was correct. This enhanced reliability as the respondents were able to review and reflect on their stated answers to confirm the accuracy of those statements. Another feature of semi-structured

¹⁴ The interview guides are available per request.

interviews that could endanger reliability and validity is the social desirability bias of respondents (Barriball & While, 1994). Social desirability bias occurs when respondents feel the need to answer in a way that matches the preferred social response to a certain question (Barriball & While, 1994). This bias could be avoided by making sure that the respondent is comfortable enough with the interviewer and the interview setting to disclose their true opinions (Barriball & While, 1994). By giving the respondents the opportunity to remain anonymous and employing an open-minded and trusting attitude on my behalf, I was able to reduce the chances of such social desirability bias from occurring. Finally, by means of triangulation, personal biases were circumvented as the hypotheses will either be accepted or rejected based upon both results from the interviews and theoretical or empirical confirmation. Triangulation in qualitative research is applied by employing multiple data sources to form a comprehensive understanding of certain phenomena (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Dicenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014). Since multiple sources illustrate similar data, triangulation is said to enhance validity in qualitative research (Carter et al., 2014). For this thesis, the various governmental reports published about the scandal are reviewed and considered in the result section to examine the results yielded from the interview.

Operationalization

The concepts outlined in the previous chapter will now be operationalized and used for further analysis. Starting with the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists, operationalization will turn out to be quite difficult to accurately achieve. The latter part of this concept, ‘acknowledgement’, is defined by Mueller, Moergeli and Maercker’s (2008) definition of social acknowledgement, namely the victim’s perception that individuals or society react positively and appreciate their traumatic experiences and current difficult situations’ (p.161). Social acknowledgement of a certain trauma is free from societal disapproval, criticism or rejection, and victims feel supported and understood by society. More difficult to define is ‘late acknowledgement’. What constitutes something as being acknowledged “late”? In the case of the child benefits scandal, this thesis operationalized late acknowledgement as being late considering the circumstances. As mentioned before, parents did not have the time and resources to wait for recognition of governmental agencies for their problems. Every day that the parents’ benefits were held back, or every day that parents fell under debt release assistance was one too many for the parents to bear, resulting in major financial and mental damage. The damage done, especially to many of the parents’ mental health, is disproportionately large.

Parents reported to have severe mental complaints due to the scandal, for instance due to the heavy stress experienced by suddenly facing an enormous amount of debt (Ramesar, 2021). Parents disclosed that the fact that they were constantly turned away by the Tax Authority and their municipalities left them feeling completely broken and helpless (Ramesar, 2021; Links, 2021). The stress and anxiety stemming from the child benefits scandal had for some parents' fatal consequences, as some parents saw no other way out and committed suicide (Links, 2021; Woodrow, 2021; Klein, 2019a).

Subsequently, the concept of policy- and organizational capacity among the victimized parents who acted as citizen lobbyists needs to be operationalized. To recall, the degree to which groups are able to transfer policy information to various public officials attests to their 'policy capacity' (Albareda & Braun, 2019). Policy capacity thus entails the ability to choose policy instruments that are effective and most fitting to the particular and economic context (Daugbjerg & Halpin, 2010). Policy capacity is difficult to measure, as Wu, Ramesh and Howlett (2015) argue, as many different conceptualisations of policy capacity exist. Yet, with the conceptualisation as described above in mind, this thesis will operationalize the concept of policy capacity by means of the degree to which groups are able to transfer information with the relevant policy instruments. For example, this means that the policy capacity of the victimized parents who acted as citizen lobbyists is measured by the extent to which they were able to convey information on their situation to policy makers and public officials. In the interviews with the citizen lobbyists, questions will be asked to investigate which channels the citizen lobbyists employed to convey their problems to relevant public officials. Furthermore, questions will be asked to what extent public officials responded to those signals, how fast the citizen lobbyists received a response and whether the citizen lobbyists felt satisfied with those responses. By means of such questions, the policy capacity among the citizen lobbyists will be assessed. Subsequently, organizational capacity is measured in terms of the ability to constitute a membership to one specific organization and the ability to access public officials as an organization. To examine the organizational capacity amongst the citizen lobbyists, questions will be asked regarding the preferred forums of representation. For instance, the respondents will be asked whether they were a member of the established representative group for parents in childminding agencies, BOiNK, and whether they felt represented by this group. Additionally, respondents will be asked to what extent they aimed to organize themselves with other victimized parents, and whether they are, or have been, active on social media platforms in order for such an organization to be established.

The third concept that is measured in the analysis is the competition with the policy monopoly on fraud investigation in their fight for a spot on the political agenda. This concept will be operationalized by the shift in the public debate on fraud investigation that will become apparent through content analysis of government and media responses to the scandal. From 2017 onwards, it is expected to see a shift in the public debate towards a more composed attitude towards fraud investigation, due to the increasing media attention to the drastic consequences that the current fraud policy could have in people's lives. The political agenda is therefore seen as an independent variable that helps explain why the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal were acknowledged this late. Following hypothesis 2a, the independent variable triggering events needs to be operationalized. Triggering events, as explained earlier on, are events that disrupt the status quo in such a manner that returning to the equilibrium is impossible for quite a while (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). In this thesis, triggering events are measured by the way they are able to shift the dominant agenda setting and alter the public debate surrounding an issue. In the interviews with the respondents, questions will be asked concerning the extent to which citizen lobbyists have experienced a potential dominant frame on fraud investigation, and whether they see a shift in such a frame occurring.

Next, the lack of skills, resources and mandate of municipalities to provide accurate public services should be operationalized. This variable could be operationalized in the terms of lacking to meet the expectations set by the tasks at hand. For instance, municipalities are tasked with debt relief assistance, and have multiple channels to help out citizens who got in trouble with debts (Rijksoverheid, 2019). A notable aspect of the debt relief assistance mandate of municipalities is that they have the mandate to force creditors to allow for a six-month period of "breath release", meaning that citizens do not have to repay their debts for six months, in which they are given the opportunity to find other ways to settle their debts (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Further, municipalities receive funding from the national government to help citizens with the settlement of their debts (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Despite all of these promising tools to help citizens with debt release, it is expected that the municipalities still lacked the skills, resources and mandate to actually fulfil these tasks. Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2005) argue that this lack of skills, resources and mandate is due to decentralization reforms that result in municipalities prioritizing efficiency and marketization over public service delivery. Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2005) show how municipalities in social service deliveries in the Netherlands prefer quantity over quality, as this will ensure an effective and cost-reducing

delivery of social services. Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2005) use the reintegration of unemployed citizens in the Netherlands as an example to show how municipalities employ a collective approach, rather than providing an individual custom-made solution, in their provision of public services. In this thesis, lack of skills, resources and mandate to provide accurate public services amongst municipalities is therefore operationalized as the degree to which municipalities were able to provide individual solutions to victimized parents. If municipalities were able to do so, then apparently they obtained the skills, resources and mandate to provide victimized parents with the exact help that they needed, hence providing accurate public services. Should the results show how municipalities employed a collective approach to dealing with questions and calls for help by victimized parents, then it could be established that municipalities lacked the skills, resources and mandate to provide accurate public services. In interviews with the citizen lobbyists, questions will be asked to examine their experiences with their respective municipalities, and whether they felt that the municipalities were able to provide them with accurate public services. Subsequently, those governmental representatives that obtained municipal functions will be asked to reflect on whether they were able to see to the needs of individuals' in their daily tasks.

Finally, the notion that critical analysis of citizen letters hampers efficiency is operationalized by the visions on NPM reforms leading to a stretching of governmental tasks and the increasing workload for parliamentarians. This leads to the understanding that it is impossible for politicians to respond to individual cases, simply because they are too busy. It can therefore be argued that the critical analysis of citizen letters is seen as a burden, hampering the efficient provision of civil service. Moreover, politicians in government agencies could be seen as self-interested actors that compete in a similar vein for votes or political status (Downs, 1957; Buchanan, 1986). Politicians are likely to attempt to attain control over more interesting and important tasks, which will increase their prestige, salaries or overall power (Lewin, 1991). Every minute spent on individual cases set forth in citizen letters is one that politicians could spend on their other political tasks, which often enhances the personal position of the individual politician, thus being the more attractive option. In the interviews with governmental representatives, questions will be asked to examine their views on citizen letters, and whether they felt as if they were able to analyse the content of those letters.

Chapter 6. Results

This chapter will analyse the content provided by the respondents in the semi-structured interviews¹⁵. To prevent certain biases from occurring, the method of triangulation will be applied by simultaneously reviewing the content provided by official reports on the child benefits scandal by the Committee-Van Dam (2020) and the Dutch Ombudsman (2017). The content of these reports has provided the base upon which the questions for the respondents have been formulated. As stated earlier, the reports have provided a broader overview of the explanatory factors for the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents. The interviews with the respondents have attempted to apply a more micro-level of analysis, and focus more on individual experiences. Hence, the responses given in the interviews, with the reports of the Committee-Van Dam (2020) and the Dutch Ombudsman (2017) in mind, will result in the hypotheses, as outlined in chapter four, either being rejected or accepted.

H1: The lack of organizational- and policy capacity among the victimized parents attributed to their late acknowledgement.

All of the victimized parents who acted as citizen lobbyists acknowledged that it was, and remains, difficult to organize the victimized parents within one umbrella union, thus showing a lack of organizational capacity. As citizen lobbyists Mrs Links stated:

‘There is a two-fold in the victimized parents; there is one group [of parents] that is still very angry, but most of them have been compensated financially. There is another group of parents that still don’t know anything, so those parents are predominantly just angry.’

Links goes on to clarify what she means with parents who are predominantly just angry:

‘There is an enormously large group that has been victimized, who have remained under the radar for such a long time... They are just very angry at what kinds of

¹⁵ Some of the answers are shortened for clarity purposes. Full transcripts of the interviews are available per request.

recovery programs are offered through the Executive Recovery Program Benefits (*UHT*). [...] We do try to listen to those people, yet they exceed the ability to become a viable discussion partner.’

Citizen lobbyist Ramesar agrees that there is a twofold in the victimized parents, yet she divides those two groups slightly differently. Ramesar disclosed that after the announcement that the Socialist Party (SP) was establishing a ‘Black Book’ in the summer of 2019, which they were going to hand over to the State Secretary of Finance, Menno Snel, she became involved in a WhatsApp group with other victimized parents and SP member of Parliament Renske Leijten. When Ramesar first got the invitation to handover the Black Book, she initially refused, after she had already lost faith in politics as a whole, she did not feel as if her participation in the project would have any effect. However, in December of 2019 the Second Chamber of Parliament debated on the child benefits scandal, and on the public’s stand one parent, Roger, could not keep his frustration in and emotionally yelled through the debate that he had lost everything due to this scandal. This motivated Ramesar to visit the debate on the child benefit scandal, where she got in contact with Leijten and the group of parents that would form the WhatsApp group together. Ramesar thus differentiates between the group of parents that are in the WhatsApp group, the “old” group and a “new” group, that emerged after the announcement that victimized parents would receive 30.000 euros in compensation.

Ramesar also acknowledged that this “new” group is still very high in their emotions, as she claimed to have received negative messages on social media after her performance in an advertorial video of the SP. Those negative messages were mostly concerned with the fact that Ramesar had used nuanced words to describe her ‘unpleasant treatment’ of the Tax Authority, and that those words did not cover the extent of the turmoil that the Tax Authority had brought about in the lives of victimized parents. Ramesar stated:

‘We [the victimized parents] are all the same, we all went through the same issues. [...] We are not done fighting yet, but those new impatient people who bring us down, while we have done so much... That’s just not nice.’

Further, Ramesar disclosed that the WhatsApp group with Leijten was not very eager to admit new members, as previous experiences with adding new members resulted in more internal conflict. Since the parents in the WhatsApp group were one of the first to share their story with

the media and public campaign for the interest of the victimized parents, they felt very closely connected to one another. Ramesar describes the group as being a ‘close family’, which did not increase the incentive to add more members to the group in order to form one coherent citizen lobbyist group to lobby for the interest of the victimized parents.

Despite there being an “old” and a “new” group amongst the victimized parents, another factor that contributed to the lack of organizational capacity was the fact that it was difficult to organise all victimized parents under one organization, since multiple fora already existed. For instance, there was the official Parent Panel under supervision of State Secretary Alexandra van Huffelen and the Ombudsman of Amsterdam, Arre Zuurmond. An independent advisory board selected twelve parents to participate in the panel, aside from experts of the interest group for parents in childminding agencies (BOiNK) (Belastingdienst, n.d.). Other parents are able to contact the Ombudsman Arre Zuurmond via his email address, or are able to fill in a contact form to ask the Parent Panel a question. Other parents are currently not able to apply for the Parent Panel, as the seats on the panel are already filled out. Interested parents could register to a waiting list to be considered as a future member (Belastingdienst, n.d.). Considering the fact that this panel remains quite exclusive and only provides access to a very select group of parents, this Parent panel is not recognized by many of the victimized parents as a legitimate lobby group.

Another more official channel that could have been used by the citizen lobbyists is the more institutionalized interest group BOiNK. According to the website of BOiNK, they provide information to parent committees of childminding agencies on multiple topics, such as the child benefits system (BOiNK, n.d.). Moreover, BOiNK claims to represent and advocate for the interest of parents in the childminding sector. However, interviews with the citizen lobbyists show that not every childminding agency was a member of BOiNK, thus many parents were unaware of the services that BOiNK could provide. Additionally, those parents who were aware of the services of BOiNK were unsatisfied with the help that BOiNK provided. Citizen lobbyists Links stated that ‘it was very sad to see that many parents ended up there [at BOiNK], while they were unable to help’. Besides, since BOiNK receives most of its funding from the government, BOiNK could not afford to be extremely critical of the government’s actions (Omtzigt, 2021). All of this considered, led to the belief that BOiNK was also not an effective medium for the victimized parents to strengthen their organizational capacity and unionize under this organization.

Consequently, the above outlined official organizations were not able to enhance the organizational capacity amongst the victimized parents. Citizen lobbyists also attempted to establish groups that could unionize the victimized parents in order to form one coherent organization. One of those citizen lobbyist groups is the Lotgenoten Kinder Opvang Toeslagen Affaire (*Fellow Victims Child Benefits Scandal: KOTA*) group. The KOTA group was established to voice the interest of victimized parents, and has grown to quite large proportions since its establishment in December 2020. The KOTA group has been getting invited to the stakeholder meetings of the Tax Authority and is seen as a serious partner in the discussion around the relief assistance programs provided by the Tax Authority. In addition, the KOTA group works closely together with the UHT and BOiNK. All of this would appear to be reason enough for KOTA to become the most dominant citizen lobbyist group in the scandal, yet interviews with other citizen lobbyists show that KOTA is not acknowledged by all victimized parents. Rather, some citizen lobbyists took to their own social media platforms in aims to establish a coherent citizen lobbyist group, which led to the establishment of many, relatively small, groups on Twitter and Facebook. Those groups were unable to coherently organize themselves in such a manner that they could fulfil aspects that would contribute to the betterment of their organizational capacity.

Another example of a citizen lobby group in the child benefits scandal is *Frisse Start* (Fresh Start). Frisse Start calls upon the national government to take responsibility for the child benefits scandal and act upon that responsibility (Frisse Start & DeGoedeZaak, n.d.). Further, Frisse Start demands that the financial compensation covers all debts by the victimized parents, including those they had to make with private collection agencies as a result of their debts to the state (Frisse Start & DeGoedeZaak, n.d.). In addition, Frisse Start solicit the national government to allow municipalities to offer financial and mental support for victims in their area, specifically by installing a special Ombudsman that represents the parents on local level and helps them rebuild their lives after the scandal (Frisse Start & DeGoedeZaak, n.d.). Finally, Frisse Start demands that the government takes appropriate measures to restore the faith in government by tackling the structural foundations of the scandal, such as the harsh anti-fraud policy (Frisse Start & DeGoedeZaak, n.d.). Frisse Start has a Facebook page with almost 855 followers, where they share templates of proposals that citizens can submit to their municipal council meetings. Moreover, the admins of the Frisse Start group, amongst who is Mr Derksen, have close connections to municipal council members via WhatsApp groups. In these

WhatsApp groups, the citizen lobbyists are able to signal urgent cases where parents are in need of immediate assistance in a particular municipality. Unfortunately, these promising features of the Frisse Start group have not led to the group being acknowledged by the masses as the representatives of all parents in the child benefit scandal, therefore showing once again how the citizen lobbyist in the child benefit scandal lacked organizational capacity to establish one powerful and dominant group.

This lack of organizational capacity appears to yield the conclusion that hypothesis 1 is accepted. However, when discussing the policy capacity of these groups, this statement needs some re-evaluation. To recall, policy capacity entails the ability to choose policy instruments that are effective and most fitting to the particular and economic context (Daugbjerg & Halpin, 2010). Policy capacity is measured in this thesis by the extent to which the victimized parents were able to convey information on their situation to policy makers and public officials. A common thread within the above outlined citizen lobbyists is that they have the ability to directly communicate policy issues with public officials, on both the local or national level. By means of WhatsApp, all citizen lobbyists discussed in this thesis have direct access to political figures such as members of Parliament or municipal council members. It could be argued that the way citizen lobbyists transfer information to these public officials fits best with the context at hand, as the WhatsApp Groups only contain those political figures relevant to the child benefit scandal, hence ensuring that the information is sent to the right person. Furthermore, groups such as KOTA, who are invited to participate in stakeholder meetings with important actors such as the Tax Authority and the VNG, are able to directly assert influence over policy in those meetings. Therefore, some could argue that the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal do possess a certain degree of policy capacity.

However, it is important to note that this establishment of policy capacity only emerged once the citizen lobbyists were acknowledged and the child benefit scandal was put on the political agenda. Before this happened, the citizen lobbyists were unable to choose any policy instrument, since they lacked access to political figures and also lacked the knowledge on what instruments to choose from. Initially, the available options were limited to calling the Tax Authority's service number, whose answer was almost exclusively that they were unable to help the parents and that it must have been their own fault that they were accused of fraud. Citizen lobbyist Mrs Woodrow describes her experience with the Tax Authority's service number as follows;

‘When I called, a very unfriendly person picked up and told me ‘Well, you just have to repay your benefits, because you were not eligible for receiving those’. Then you try to tell them that you were in fact eligible for those benefits, but they simply tell you that you’re not, and that’s the end of that conversation.’

Additionally, Woodrow describes how she was supposed to file statements of opposition, yet she had no idea how to actually file those statements. Respondents from the category of political representatives described in their interviews in a similar vein that they feel that citizens often do not possess all the knowledge and information to accurately provide signals of failing policy to political representatives. Government representative Mrs Bromet argues that the public education of citizens is key in the functioning of a healthy democracy, yet this public education is currently lacking amongst citizens. Government representative Mrs Verdaasdonk stated that as a citizen, it has become quite difficult to file any sorts of complaints with government agencies, as citizens are often only given general channels to voice their opinions. She mentioned that she felt that for citizens, it was quite complicated to find the right instruments to signal policy failures.

Accordingly, citizen lobbyist Woodrow stated that she did not receive any information on how to proceed with her statements of opposition, so she was unsure whether she was using the right approach and whether her statements of opposition even reached the Tax Authority. Likewise, Links describes the self-doubt and shock that arose when she was accused of committing fraud, and states that she felt paralysed and overwhelmed to the extent that she was unable to further fight her case. Ramesar describes a similar feeling, that after her first unfruitful attempts to fight her case with the Tax Authority, she almost gave up on fighting her case all together. It was not until the scandal soured into the political limelight that both respondents felt as if there were new hopes to fight for justice, and started to convey more information about their personal situation to public officials. Woodrow states that it was not until she got the personal confirmation from the Tax Authority that she was acknowledged as part of the victimized parents group that she felt comfortable seeking help and voicing her concerns. Hence, the above described anecdotes lead to the conclusion that in the early days of the unfolding of the scandal, the citizen lobbyists lacked policy capacity to choose accurate policy instruments to convey information on their personal situation. Taking all of the above into consideration, it could be

argued that the lack of organizational- and policy capacity among citizen lobbyists contributed to their late acknowledgement. Hypothesis 1 is thus accepted.

H2: the dominant stance on the political agenda by the policy monopoly on the justification of harsh anti-fraud policy contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

Moving on to the second hypothesis, it is important to recall the nature of the policy monopoly's view on those who committed fraud. Ever since the Bulgarian Fraud scandal, the policy monopoly actors employed a strong focus on the investigation of potential fraudsters, in order to prevent such a shameful scandal from happening again. Tax Authority employees were motivated to investigate benefits claims to the fullest extent, purposefully acting on the edges of their mandate (Strop & de Keizer, 2021). Moreover, intensifying the fight against fraud was one of the main electoral promises that Prime Minister Mark Rutte made in his party's election programme (Kok, 2020). Hence, it is clear that the policy monopoly's stance on the justification of harsh anti-fraud policies was deeply rooted in the political agenda at the time. Even alarming signals from within these policy monopoly actors were dismissed, as the case of Pierre Niessen shows. Niessen worked as an employee on the debt collection division within the Tax Authority, and claimed that the reaching of targets was more important than providing civil services to the public (Jansen & Wilmink, 2021). Niessen warned his supervisors on the misconduct of his division, yet those warnings were dismissed time and time again (Jansen & Wilmink, 2021). The Dutch Ombudsman ruled that the Tax Authority's approach to dealing with the statements of opposition by the parents had been unfair, as they failed to point out to parents that they had the right to file a statement of opposition (van den Berg, Alhadjri & Mulder, 2017). Besides, once the Tax Authority received statements of opposition, the Dutch Ombudsman ruled that in at least 41% of those statements, the Tax Authority failed to process those adequately since they had exceeded legal decision period in which parents should have received a ruling on their statements (van den Berg, Alhadjri & Mulder, 2017). Many of the parents posted complaints on social media that their statements of opposition were ignored by the Tax Authority. Accordingly, all interviewed victimized parents claimed to have filed multiple statements of opposition that were dismissed by the Tax Authority. In Ramesar's case, her file showed none of the statements of opposition she had filed over the years. When she asked her personal case supervisor at the Tax Authority what happened to all of the statements she had filed over the years, and why those were not visible in her file, the case supervisor was

unable to provide an answer to those questions. In Links' case, she filed four different statements of opposition, yet the Tax Authority claimed that they only received one. Links stated that a large number of parents experienced similar issues, whether it concerned statements of oppositions, pieces of evidence or other documents that could help the parent's cases, the Tax Authority claimed to have never received any of the documents, or simply lost them.

These above described circumstances match with the outlined notions on blocking power of monopoly actors in the political agenda by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), as described in the theoretical framework. As outlined earlier, policy monopolies have multiple faces of power on which they can act in their attempts to keep certain issues of the political agenda. To recall, policy monopolies have the ability to ignore pressures for change as policy monopolies are the majority players in the game of power, meaning that those wishing to change political agenda will become discouraged and alienated from politics due to a lack of acknowledgement for their cause by the policy monopoly actors (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). This dominant stance on the political agenda is what the Dutch Ombudsman (2017) referred to as unfair, since citizens lacked the capacity to fight against such a powerful institution as the government or the Tax Authority. Moreover, policy monopolies have employed information processing strategies that solidify the dominant stance on the harsh anti-fraud policies, as the hearings by the Committee-Van Dam (2020) show. In the parliamentary hearings of the Committee-Van Dam (2020), it became apparent that all responsible policy makers had knowledge of the far-reaching consequences of the "all-or-nothing" approach that was applied in the fight against fraud. Despite the fact that some public officials, such as State Secretary Weekers and his successor Wiebes, had some doubts about this approach, they assumed that the harsh consequences of the anti-fraud policies were justified since the fight against fraud was such a dominant issue on the political agenda (Committee-Van Dam, 2020).

An additional factor that solidified the dominant stance of policy monopoly actors on the political agenda is the negative frame that victimized parents were assigned to. This negative frame of being dumb and unaware of the rules contributed to the idea that the signals of victimized parents were simply not accurate as the dominant viewpoint on the fight on fraud was still that fraudsters deserved the severe prosecution they faced. Ramesar stated that when she attempted to notify the Tax Authority that mistakes were made on their behalf, the Tax Authority disregarded those claims all together;

‘It’s as if the big institutions don’t know the rules and regulations, and when you explain those to them, [...] they don’t act on them! Too bad, you’re a person with debt, you are dumb, we are not going to listen to you. That’s how that works.’

The media contributed to the persistence of this negative frame for a long time, as the media considered victimized parents to be ‘uneducated and unable to speak the language sufficiently’. Ramesar explained that the Tax Authority first excused the wrongful child benefits claims on the fact that parents supposedly were unable to understand the letters that the Tax Authority had sent.

‘The Tax Authority started saying things like “parents don’t understand our letters” ... Oh yes we do! [...] In the beginning there was really this frame that we were stupid, so it must have been our fault.’

Citizen lobbyist Derksen agreed that this negative frame withheld parents for a long time to voice their experienced injustices for a long time. In general, Derksen explained, there is a negative connotation to having debts.

‘Do you have any debts? That’s your own fault, don’t bother anyone else with that, and especially do not report that to any agency.’

Citizen lobbyist Woodrow describes a similar feeling of being powerless due to the dominant frame that categorized the victimized parents as fraudsters who willingly committed fraud;

‘They tell you that it is your own fault and that you were unable to meet the requirements. Even when you try to tell them that you did, they still tell you that you did not. Well, what are you supposed to do then?’

Woodrow then continues to elaborate on how the feeling of shame and embarrassment due to the negative frame on having debts withheld her for a very long time to ask anybody for help. The stress and anxiety she experienced due to her sudden overwhelming debts led to severe mental and physical damage. Even in the therapy sessions that followed, she felt too ashamed to talk about her debts, and it was not until she received a letter from the Tax Authority that

stated she was a victim of the scandal too, that she felt released of the shame and embarrassment.

This social construct that faults those with debts and denotes them as being responsible for those debts contributes to the hesitation of citizen lobbyists to come forward in the child benefits scandal. This hesitation to come forward then attributes to the solidification of the dominant stance on the justification of the harsh anti-fraud policies by the policy monopoly, as it confirms the viewpoints of the policy monopoly that people who committed fraud are to be held accountable to that crime and deserve to be prosecuted harshly. The above outlined rationale leads to the conclusion that hypothesis two should be accepted.

H2a: Triggering events allowed for a shift in the political agenda in ways that benefited the acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

Even though the dominant stance of the policy monopoly on the political agenda was preserved for a long time, certain triggering events allowed for a shift in the political agenda that benefited the acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal. In the theoretical framework, it was expected that events such as the parliamentary questions asked by Pieter Omtzigt or the publishing of the report of the Ombudsman (2017) could be seen as these sorts of triggering events. To a certain degree, these expectations were met, since they could be seen as one of the triggering events that snowballed into other political actors engaging in events that enhanced the acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyists. For instance, the report of the Ombudsman motivated journalists of news outlets *RTL Nieuws* and *Trouw* to investigate the accusations of fraud against hundreds of parents in the early days of the child benefits scandal (Klein, 2019a). These reports then motivated Renske Leijten to ensemble the black book against the Tax Authority (RTL Nieuws, 2019). The aftermath of this black book then motivated Ramesar to start engaging as a citizen lobbyist in the child benefits scandal.

For each respondent there was a different event that personally motivated them to engage in citizen lobbyist efforts. Nevertheless, in the interviews with the citizen lobbyists, the announcement of Alexandra van Huffelen on December 22 in 2020 that all victimized parents would receive 30.000 euros in financial compensation (NOS, 2020b) was awarded as most impactful in the acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyists. Although earlier events may have motivated them to start acting as citizen lobbyists, the respondent agreed that ever since the

“30.000-euro announcement”, the number of parents that have reported themselves as victimized parents has grown exponentially. This increased number equipped the citizen lobbyists with the numbers to tilt the dominant perception on the child benefit scandal towards a perception that viewed them as victims of the situation, rather than fraudulent criminals. This tilt in the dominant perception on the scandal shifted the debate from one that focussed on the fight against fraud, to one that focussed on ethical and moral stances on the powers of government.

Thus, even though it is difficult to appoint one particular triggering event, it becomes clear that by means of multiple events that quickly followed one another, the political agenda shifted in ways that benefited the citizen lobbyists. Hence, hypothesis 2a could be accepted.

H3: The lack of skills, resources and mandate of municipalities to provide accurate public services to the victimized parents contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents.

As a citizen lobbyist, but also in his ‘regular’ day jobs, Derksen has worked in close connection to multiple municipalities. Derksen describes an overall trend where the risk of failure for public officials on the municipal level is much more direct and impactful than on the national level. On the national administrative level, Derksen argues, an entire ministry or political party is able to provide cover for any politician in trouble. On the local level, such protection does not exist. Further, Derksen argues, has decentralization led to this trend where aldermen are not selected on their skills or expertise, but are rewarded the position of aldermen as a token of gratitude for serving in the municipal council for a long period of time. Subsequently, the expertise on certain topics is not located at the level of the aldermen, but stems from the civil servants. Civil servants often fear that aldermen take their provided expertise and run with it, leading to potential policy mistakes on behalf of the aldermen. This line of thought matches well with what Prud’homme (1995), who argued that decentralization would not necessarily lead to the attraction of more qualified employees on the local level. As Prud’homme claimed, local politicians obtained a weak electoral mandate, meaning that local politicians would often lack the resources to fulfil their promises. This lack of resources is problematic, since the decentralization processes in the Netherlands have awarded municipalities with many more caregiving tasks such as the provision of mental health services and debt relief assistance. Citizen lobbyist Woodrow described in her interview that even though the civil servants at her

municipality were very kind to her, she felt as if they lacked structure and overview to provide appropriate help.

‘I have to say that within my area [...], they are truly very kind people, but it’s just that at policy level... Every municipality is able to formulate their own policy. Yeah, well that just does not work!’

Since every municipality is able to formulate their own policy regarding debt assistance, there is quite a discrepancy in the quality of the services provided by each municipality (Van Zutphen & Polman, 2021). The VNG notes in a report on the impact of the change in laws that assigned debt assistance policy to the municipal level that this discrepancy affects the accessibility for citizens to make use of the debt assistance services that the municipality could provide (Van Zutphen & Polman, 2021). The VNG concludes that currently, municipalities do not possess enough capacity and (financial) means to successfully provide debt assistance services (Van Zutphen & Polman, 2021). In a position paper from 2018, some municipalities have called for additional funding and the expansion of their mandate in debt assistance, since the municipalities argued that those were currently lacking and hindering them in providing the necessary services to their citizens (VNG & Divosa, 2018). Unfortunately, the financial situation of the municipalities only worsened over the years, to the point where the VNG labelled the financial situation amongst municipalities as “untenable” in 2020 (VNG, 2020). The continuous gap in the municipal budgets will have long term effects on the provision of local public goods and services, the VNG warns, as municipalities simply cannot afford to maintain the social infrastructure in their area (VNG, 2020).

The distressing financial situation in Dutch municipalities leads to an inability to provide the promised services, as municipalities lack the financial means to invest in proper training of their civil servants (VNG, 2020). Citizen lobbyist Links describes how she reached out to her municipality, who turned down her calls for help as they claimed that she should resort to the Tax Authority with these kinds of issues. The only help that was offered to Links was to consult a budget coach to help her manage her finances better;

‘That did not make me feel taken seriously at all, [...] I thought to myself, a budget coach? I can stretch one euro into five euros due to my twelve years of experience [with debts]!’

Citizen lobbyist Ramesar also has personal experience with the lack of skills, resources and mandate to provide accurate help and services. A motion was accepted by the municipality of The Hague last year to implement further measures to provide better services to the victimized parents¹⁶. Nonetheless, Ramesar states that the municipality has done nothing to further implement the content of the motion, since thus far the municipality has only performed an explorative scan into the nature of the issue at hand. The conclusion of the investigation of the municipality was that the child benefits scandal was a multidimensional problem. This conclusion left Ramesar feeling frustrated, as she exclaimed ‘Yeah, well, I also told them that last year!’. Furthermore, the responsible alderman in the municipality of The Hague continued to shift responsibility towards the Tax Authority, and claimed that he first needed to receive additional funds from the Tax Authority before he was able to set up any kind of service provision network. However, once those funds finally arrived, Ramesar claims that the municipality spent it all on the establishment of a team of experts, and left nothing to actually help the parents.

These circumstances motivated Derksen’s citizen lobbying group, Frisse Start, to focus their lobby efforts primarily at the municipal level. It quickly became apparent that the municipal employees had no idea what the child benefits scandal entailed and how they could help. Frisse Start thus aimed their initial lobby efforts on the implementation of motions being implemented that would install experts with the required knowledge and skills that could streamline the help offered to victimized parents. According to Derksen, the drafting of additional experts was necessary in the case of the child benefits scandal, as the municipality initially attempted to fit the offered services to victimized parents in already existing moulds, while victimized parents required other sorts of assistance, for instance with their mental health, the threat of eviction and employee reintegration.

Naturally, the municipality needed to recruit experts to make up for their own lack of expertise, yet according to the interviewed victimized parents, the municipality could easily make use of the attained expertise that victimized parents have gained over the years. The KOTA group lobbies particularly for the instalment of what they call ‘experience workers’; parents who fell

¹⁶ The Hague. (2020). *Een frisse en eerlijke start voor de slachtoffers toeslagenaffaire Belastingdienst*. Retrieved from: https://denhaag.raadsinformatie.nl/document/9018629/2/A_C_1%20HvDH_GdM

victim to the child benefits scandal and are able to transfer their experiences into expertise of what kind of services should be implemented to help other victimized parents. The KOTA group is currently helping the VNG to formulate a policy to start employing experience workers in municipalities with a large number of victims. Woodrow mentioned in her interview that she has been selected by her municipality to follow training to become an experience worker in poverty and social exclusion. Another method to compensate for the lack of skills, resources and mandate of the municipalities, is to implement an Ombudsman on the municipal level. All respondents agree that the implementation of a local Ombudsman would bridge the gap in the distance between citizens and municipal officials, as many victimized parents have been disappointed by the services provided by the municipality, leading to a distrusting attitude towards the municipality. Derksen notes that this distrust towards public officials, even on the local municipal level, has been deeply rooted in societal culture and is not that easily fixed. Nonetheless, Derksen views the Ombudsman as such an independent figure, that they could pose as a confidential counsellor for the victimized parents. Despite these positive attitudes, political representative Verdaasdonk argues in her interview that an Ombudsman on municipal level will only benefit citizens if that Ombudsman is rewarded with a sufficient mandate. The mandate of the municipal Ombudsman is currently lacking to actually enforce policy changes within the municipality, as Verdaasdonk argues.

Considering the fact that parents have felt dismissed and not taken seriously by their municipality, to the degree that they rather implement other sources of representation such as an Ombudsman leads this discussion to the conclusion that the municipalities have lacked the skills, resources and mandate to provide accurate public services to the victimized parents. The personal anecdotes of the interviewed citizen lobbyists show how, should the municipality have taken the complaints seriously, the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal could have been acknowledged much earlier on. However, due to the lack of skills, resources and mandate of the municipality, it was not possible to provide accurate public services to the victimized parents, therefore contributing to the late acknowledgement of the citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal. Hypothesis 3 is thus accepted.

H4: The notion that the critical analysis of citizen letters hampers efficiency has contributed to the late acknowledgement of victimized parents in the child benefits scandal.

As theorized in the theoretical framework, the sheer size of government has stretched the required knowledge and expertise of public officials beyond reasonable expectations. As one of the respondents amongst the political representatives argued, the reason for not always responding to citizen letters is that as a member of parliament, ‘you just have extensive portfolios’. Hence, it is not feasible to respond to each individual case, since your other responsibilities call for your attention too. Accordingly, political representative Mrs Bromet stated;

‘I truly have massive portfolios [...], you just have so much on your plate, it’s just not possible to fully examine each topic. Hence, you chose your own focus [...], and you look for cases of misconduct within that focus.

Besides, as already mentioned, citizen lobbyist Derksen argued in his interview that the executive administration has grown to such proportions that it is unfeasible for members of parliament to have knowledge and expertise on every issue within their portfolio. This is where Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) idea of parallel processing comes into play. To recall, parallel processing holds that senior decision makers rely on the information and advice provided by their subordinates to make decisions. One of these political subordinates was Tino Wallaart, who stated in his interview that he saw citizen letters as ‘equally unimportant’ in both of his positions as spokesperson for the Minister of Housing, Spatial Adaptation and Environmental Management (VROM) and political assistant to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) at the time. Wallaart describes that in meetings with other spokespersons for the VROM Ministry, the discussion of citizen letters was often seen as a mandatory aspect of their meeting; a chore that needed to be taken care of by other people. Often, citizen letters were sent to relevant policy departments that were charged with the task of formulating an appropriate answer, and Wallaart stated that in his career, it had never occurred that the content of a citizen letter resulted in a staff meeting with the minister to thoroughly analyse the signals provided in the letter. Wallaart concludes that the process of making sure that the citizen would receive an appropriate answer in time was more important than strategically using the citizen letter as an instrument for the development of other policies.

Nonetheless, Wallaart recalled that when he was acting as a political assistant to the Minister of OCW, he often made sure that citizen letters were labelled as reading material for the minister to read over the weekend. Although this meant that the minister would read a bulk of

the received citizen letters, this did not mean that the minister would act upon those letters. Wallaart describes the citizen letters to the ministers as:

‘It’s more like a vitamin pill you take to remain healthy, rather than it being an actual consideration [of signals], and they were not actually being used [for policy]’.

Wallaart further elaborated in his interview that the above outlined view on citizen letters as a mandatory chore and the dismissal of potential signals in the citizen letters was carried out throughout the majority of ministries. During his career, there was one Minister, Ella Vogelaar of the ministry for Housing, Residential Areas and Integration, who insisted on reading every citizen letter herself. This already led to some perplexity among other political subordinates, but Wallaart described that he and fellow colleagues were especially astonished by the fact that Vogelaar would occasionally order her political subordinates to act on a specific citizen letter. Additionally, Minister Vogelaar would have her political assistant draw up a monthly overview of the citizen letters addressed to her or her ministry, in order to identify potential signals in those letters. However, Minister Vogelaar was, according to Wallaart, an exception to the rule, as most ministers did not spend that much time on the analysis of citizen letters. It could be argued that this was mostly due to the parallel processing that prevented content of citizen letters to reach the top of the hierarchical information line. Furthermore, Wallaart claims that civil servants lacked the incentive to extensively process the citizen letters, as they were simply not rewarded for the way they handled citizen letters. If they were able to provide a sufficient answer to the letter on time, then their supervisors were satisfied enough. The NPM focus on efficiency comes into play here, as the primary goal of the civil servants was to answer citizen letters as fast as possible, and refrained from analysing the content of the letter for a longer period of time. Wallaart states that these NPM ideologies were visible throughout the entire government structure, as those who spent a lot of time building and expanding their expertise on certain topics were not the ones who got promotions within their ministry. It were those with high managerial skills, those who were flexible and those who were able to act on overarching policy ideas that were rewarded with promotions within the government structure. Wallaart argues that this NPM-market driven culture contributed to the position of answering citizen letters on the bottom of the internal food chain, as it simply required the highest input and resulted in the least efficient output.

Besides, Wallaart recalls that he felt that the processing of citizen letters withheld him from what he considered to be his daily tasks, as the citizen letters often contained very specific micro situations from which he drew the conclusion that a minister in The Hague would not be able to offer the appropriate measures to fix the problem. Another respondent who served as a member of the second chamber of Parliament reasoned in a similar vein that he simply lacked the mandate to act upon individual cases. In the case of the child benefit scandal, parents started to write letters to Minister Lodewijk Asscher of the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in hopes that the minister would be able to help them. Asscher wrote to one parent that he was ‘unable to act upon individual cases’ as he was merely accountable for legislation, not the executive function of the law (Frederik, 2021). This line of thought is supported by one of the respondents, who states that as either a legislative or administrative public official, you simply lack the mandate to act upon individual cases. Only when there’s a pattern in signals, members of parliaments are able to ask parliamentary questions on the matter, and hold relevant ministers accountable. Further, the respondent claims, as representative, citizen letters are not necessarily yours to act upon, only when the citizen letter is addressed to either the party fraction or committee, then the citizen letter could be beneficial to call upon during a debate.

However, as an alderman, the respondent stated that he took the citizen letters he received much more into consideration. In addition, he claimed that he saw the analysis and response to citizen letters was ‘most definitely’ part of his daily job. This does not mean that at the municipal level, citizen letters are appreciated, as political representative Mrs Verdaasdonk illustrates;

‘I think that at the city hall [...], civil servants are a little scared of citizens, they think those are difficult to deal with. [...] Especially if they’re not afraid to speak out’.

Political representative Mrs Bromet recalls that her civil servants would often discourage her to meet with citizens as they argued that meeting with one citizen would lead into countless meetings with other citizens, and that that would be too time consuming. According to Mrs Bromet, civil servants are concerned that their provision of public goods would turn into clientelism if they would consider each individual case in the policy making process. Subsequently, citizen lobbyist Derksen claims that especially on the local level, civil servants strive to block the influence of citizen lobbyists on certain topics, since they fear that they will suffer the consequences when aldermen make mistakes in policy making. Due to the NPM reforms, Derksen argues, the personal risks for civil servants have increased drastically, since

civil servants hold a more dominant position in the municipal system due to their level of expertise. This leads to an extreme cautiousness among civil servants to let nonconventional policy advisors, such as citizens, influence the decisions of aldermen.

All of the above considered, the expectations set out in the theoretical framework are partly met. To recall, NPM reforms were expected to lead to a focus on efficiency that results in politicians not having the time to consider individual cases, as they already have too many tasks at hand and all of those need to be dealt with in the most efficient way possible. In addition, the way civil servants supply information to their superiors via parallel processing centres around the idea that public officials should be informed on issues in an efficient manner. However, this gives civil servants the incentive to be quite selective on which issues to supply to their superiors, knowing that those already have such busy schedules. Thus, it was expected that civil servants would disregard individual cases in citizen letters as unimportant, since individual cases are not really feasible cases to build policy on, and thus are seen as inefficient policy means. The above outlined anecdotes show how these expectations were met, as the respondents illustrated how individual cases were often disregarded at the national level, and how civil servants at the local level were very cautious to consider individual cases, as they would be too time consuming.

However, since the majority of respondents on the local level of government claimed to have ignored the advice of their civil servants to dismiss individual cases and thus take the signals provided in citizen letters seriously and act upon those, the hypothesis that critical analysis of citizen letters hampers efficiency has contributed to the late acknowledgement of citizen lobbyists in the child benefits scandal should be rejected. Further research should investigate the different stance on citizen letters per administrative level in order for a better assessment of the actual influence of NPM ideology on the processing of citizen letters.

Chapter 7. Discussion and conclusion

In the following chapter, some suggestions for further research will be provided. Subsequently, some suggestions to strengthen the reliability and validity of this research will be provided. Moreover, the application of the concept of citizen lobbyists to help explain the position of the victimized parents will be reviewed. Finally, this thesis will close with some concluding remarks.

Suggestions for further research

This thesis has attempted to provide an in-depth analysis of the child benefits scandal. However, considering the magnitude of the scandal, further research should consider some of the following aspects. For instance, this thesis has left out the strictly judicial aspects of the scandal for clarity purposes. Nonetheless, an investigation into the role of the Dutch Council of State in this scandal warrants certain merit. The Committee-Van Dam (2020) ruled that the entire judicial branch of government had failed to fulfil its obligations to serve and protect citizens, due to contradictory rulings and misinterpretations of the law. According to political representative Mrs Bromet, the lack of clear judgement on behalf of the Dutch judicial courts influenced the development of the child benefits scandal, since for a long time, they ruled that the legislation on the child benefits was legit and justified. Therefore, an investigation into the role of the Dutch Council of State could contribute to a full understanding of the child benefits scandal. Another aspect that should be considered for further research is the influence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the anti-racism discourse that thrived during the development of the child benefits scandal. As discussed earlier on in this thesis, a majority of the victimized parents have a second nationality besides the Dutch nationality. Furthermore, according to the president of the Personal Registration Authority, the whole benefits application system was designed and used in a discriminatory manner (Hofs, 2020a). Future research should investigate whether spill-over effects could be measured in the debates surrounding the child benefits scandal, once news of the discriminatory approaches of the Tax Authority reached the Parliament. It could be speculated that the emergence of the socio-political debates following BLM-protests shifted the (public) debate concerning the child benefits scandal from one merely on fraud investigation to one on ethical standards and systemic racism.

As time goes by, future research should investigate newly published reports on the child benefits scandal. Since the beginning of this thesis, the scandal only grew in its magnitude due to the accidental exposure of the notes on the formulation of the new cabinet since the elections of March 2021. In these notes, it became apparent that critical members of Parliament, such as Pieter Omtzigt, had been attempted to be located “elsewhere”, potentially due to his critical role in the child benefits scandal. Future research should consider these developments in the balance of administrative power in the Netherlands and an investigation into the nature of the status of this balance using the child benefits scandal as an explanatory case study would be worthwhile.

In addition, this thesis had the limited availability of official reports into the scandal, as the scandal was still developing at the time of writing this thesis. Should more reports be published in the future, then those should definitely be considered in a further investigation of the child benefits scandal. Moreover, the available reports at the time of writing focussed primarily on the government as the main point of analysis. This thesis has attempted to contribute to existing research by focussing on the individual level of analysis. Future research should definitely examine both of the levels of analysis to get a full picture of the scandal. Notably, the Committee-Van Dam (2020) has appointed some explanatory factors that could explain the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents. The Committee-Van Dam (2020) argues that the inability to consider individual cases, the disproportionately harsh nature of the anti-fraud policies and the poor quality of the information management on behalf of the government and the Tax Authority are the explanatory factors for the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents. This thesis has partially similar conceptions on the explanatory factors, such as the argument that the policy monopoly dominated the political agenda with the justification on the harsh anti-fraud policies and the fact that efficiency measures taken by NPM reforms prevented public servants from considering individual cases. Obviously, these explanations diverge on certain stances, but boil down to similar ideas. However, The Committee-Van Dam (2020) has not taken the organizational- and policy capacity of the victimized parents into consideration, which this thesis has taken into consideration to explain the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents. Therefore, future research could combine both levels of analysis, to fully examine the organizational- and policy- capacity of the victimized parents and whether their efforts taken as citizen lobbyists had any effect on the government level of analysis.

Reflections on methodology

This thesis had access to a limited number of respondents, as explained earlier on in this thesis, due to the fact that it was difficult to contact victimized parents via social media, as most parents disabled the feature to send them a message on social media platforms. Considering that, as discussed in this thesis, there was not one umbrella organization under which the victimized parents unionized themselves, it was not possible to address the entire group of victimized parents and send them an open invite to participate in this research. Hence, the selection of the respondents had to be limited to whoever was available to approach via social media accounts. Additionally, it was difficult to find available political representatives for this thesis as many of them had too busy schedules to participate in this research. These limitations have consequences for the reliability and validity of this research, as a lower number of respondents leads to more probability of inaccuracies occurring when reproducing this research. Subsequently, this convenience sample presents the risk that respondents who voluntarily participated in this research provide different insights than respondents who did not want to participate (Toshkov, 2017). Hence, future research should therefore strive to include more respondents to strengthen the reliability and validity of the results. However, this research could be seen as an incentive for further research to assess whether the explanatory factors that these respondents showed are shared amongst a larger group of respondents.

The concept of citizen lobbyists

This thesis has used the concept of citizen lobbyists to account for the attempts of the victimized parents to fight for justice and put their issues on the political agenda. In the interviews with the victimized parents, respondents were asked whether they classified themselves as citizen lobbyists. All of the respondents agreed that they should be seen as lobbyists, even though some respondents stated that adding a title to their name felt a little odd, as they were ‘just trying to do the right thing’. When asked what changes the respondents felt were needed to improve the ability of citizens to signal failing policy to public officials, most respondents pointed towards the fact that citizens themselves should more actively engage in politics. As citizen lobbyist Derksen stated ‘the mindset of citizens needs to change [...], people need to realize how much power they have’. Accordingly, political representative Bromet stated ‘our democracy only works if the people know how to use it’. Therefore, it could be concluded from the interviews that respondents feel like citizen lobbyists could be part of the solution to prevent another scandal such as the child benefits scandal from occurring. To recall, citizen lobbyists

were conceptualized as individuals who engage in the policy process by monitoring those issues that are important to them, and developing a strategy to actively fight for a better implementation of that particular issue (Alemanno, 2017). Accordingly, Adams (2007) characterized citizen lobbyists as citizens that identify a set of issues that are important to them, develop a number of political goals related to those issues and then lobby with government agencies to accomplish these goals. With these conceptualizations in mind, it has been argued that the victimized parents acted upon a form of hybrid citizen lobbying, as they used citizen lobbyists' means such as citizen letters to address their issues in the political atmosphere. However, the victimized parents only became active as citizen lobbyists once they were labelled as fraudsters by the Tax Authority, hence they did not pre-emptively look for an issue that interested them and started to become engaged on that topic, which Alemanno (2017) and Adams (2007) argue is a characteristic of citizen lobbyists. Nonetheless, the victimized parents could still be seen as citizen lobbyists as they actively became politically involved to fight for the social injustice done to citizens and attempted to unionize via social media platforms to put their issues on the political agenda.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illustrate some explanatory factors that show why the victimized parents of the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands were acknowledged this late. The concept of citizen lobbyists was introduced to elaborate on the efforts taken by the victimized parents to fight for their cause and put their issues on the political agenda. Their fight was hindered due to a threefold of obstacles, namely; the organizational- and policy capacity of the victimized parents was lacking, the dominant frame of the policy monopoly on the justification of the harsh anti-fraud policies hindered the victimized parents in putting their issue on the political agenda, and NPM reforms have led to decentralization and a focus on efficiency. These obstacles have contributed to the late acknowledgement of the victimized parents in the child benefits scandal, yet future research should further investigate whether a focus on efficiency also hindered the victimized parents on the local level. This thesis has contributed to the existing research on the scandal by employing an individual point of analysis, providing the opportunity for individual victimized parents and political representatives to reflect on the development of the scandal. This thesis has further illustrated the political-administrative circumstances that contributed to the longevity of the scandal, therefore adding perspective to the existing reports of the Dutch Ombudsman (2017) and of the Committee-Van Dam (2020).

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