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**Doenvermogen: The development of a neologism in the public debate**  
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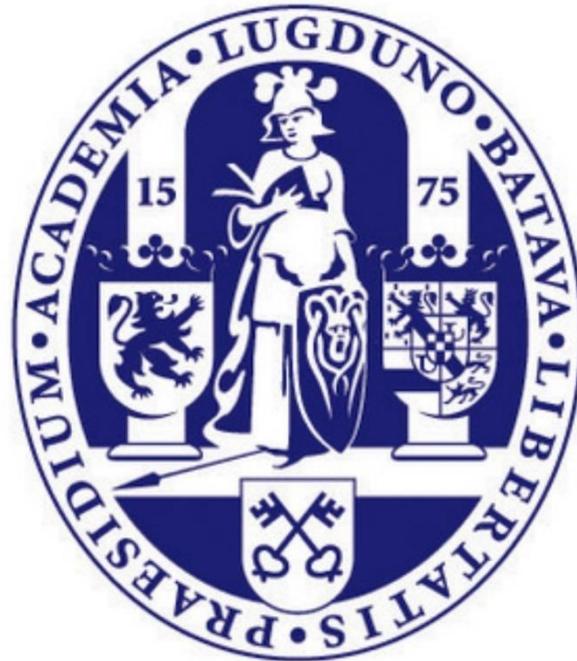
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# Doenvermogen

*The development of a neologism in the public debate*



# Universiteit Leiden

Master thesis

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## Introduction

Every year, thousands of neologisms emerge in the Dutch language (Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal, 2022). Many of these new words and terms are the result of social, cultural and scientific developments that require the language to adapt to these developments (Tabatadze et al., 2022). These developments thus cause people come up with new words or terms so that others understand what they are trying to explain. (Konstantinova et al., 2019). These neologisms are however at first not known to the public of course, so in order to become a generally accepted new word, a neologism needs to be understood and subsequently start being used by other people (Konopelkina, 2017), it needs to survive.

One particular area in which it is paramount that an actor has the ability to express ideas and thoughts in an understandable way is political discourse (Yu, 2020). This is particularly the case for ideas and problems that are new to the public, it is crucial that communication about this is clear and unambiguous, so the receiver understands what the idea/problem is (Konstantinova et al., 2019). One way to achieve this is by creating a neologism that better describes what the actors wants to say than any of the words in the current lexicon. However, for this neologism to be understandable it is crucial that other actors in the public debate<sup>1</sup> understand what is meant by the neologism and adopt it (Konopelkina, 2017).

Although there is research on why neologisms are created in a political context, very little is known about the subsequent development of these neologisms in the public debate. Actors, especially in a political context, often might have very different motivations behind creating a neologism, of which a major one is that they want to make the neologism, and the phenomenon it describes, more known to other actors (Yu, 2020). The more a neologism develops and starts becoming an institutionalized word in the public debate, the more the described goal of making the neologism known is achieved. It would then be important to know what factors determine whether a neologism is adopted and institutionalized in the public debate.

There probably is a wide variety of different factors and actors that might have a negative or positive impact on this development, and to uncover all of these would require a lot more research than can be done in one thesis. I will however make a beginning of this research by analyzing what impact the creator of the neologism, in this case a think tank, can have on the development of this neologism. For this I will make a case study of the word 'doenvermogen'. This neologism was created in a report by the Dutch think tank "The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy" (WRR) in their report 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017). In this thesis I will broadly analyze how 'doenvermogen' developed within the public debate in the Netherlands and how the WRR influenced this development.

I will start off by learning more about the creation of 'doenvermogen', to know what motivated the WRR to create the word. After that I will analyze how 'doenvermogen' developed in the Dutch public debate. Once I have described the process of the creation and development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate, I will be able to analyze in what way the WRR had an impact on this development. these steps are centered around the research question in this thesis: "What role did the WRR play in the development of the neologism 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands?".

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I analyze the development of 'doenvermogen' in the debate about public policy and the policymaking process in the Netherlands. This consists mainly of parliamentary debates and communication by members of parliament, ministers (and secretaries of state), policymakers and other relevant actors. I have chosen to use the term 'public debate' to describe this, as I believe that the meaning of public debate comes closest to describe the debate as mentioned above.

## Scientific and societal relevance

The first and foremost reason why this thesis is scientifically relevant is that it makes a first attempt at discovering what factors have an influence on the development of a neologism in the public debate. Doing so adds to the literature on political discourse about how neologisms can be used to express new ideas and problems. Apart from this, this thesis also contributes to the broader theory of what factors determine whether a neologism survives in a language in general, helping us better understand the constant evolution of a living language.

The results are however not the only aspect of this thesis that is scientifically relevant for the field of neologisms and political discourse. As mentioned earlier, very little is known about the development of neologisms and I was actually not able to find any research on the development of a neologism in the public debate. For this reason I came up with a number of different methods to analyze this development and to show in what way these methods can tell us something about this development. The methods used in this thesis could thus in future research be used to analyze the development in the public debate of other neologisms, and what role certain actors played in this development. Of course these methods are probably flawed or incomplete and might for instance need adapting for the analysis of the public debate in other countries, but they can form a starting point for such research.

The third reason this thesis is scientifically relevant is that it introduces a new form of impact in the research field on impact of think tanks and how that impact can be measured: impact through the creation of a neologism that is subsequently adopted in the public debate. This thesis will provide a first exploration of possibly lasting impact the creation of a neologism can have on the public debate and policymaking. This is not only relevant for the research field but also has a more societal relevance in that we learn more about how think tanks can have an impact through the creation of a neologism that enters the public debate, and the impact that think tank can have on the development of that neologism in the public debate.

This thesis is relevant from a societal point of view in that it gives an overview of the discussion on 'doenvermogen' in the public debate. The main message of 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017) is that more attention in policymaking should be paid to the lack of 'doenvermogen' of people in policy. The analysis in this thesis gives a broad overview of how the discussion in the public debate on 'doenvermogen' has developed over the last years. It thus informs the public and actors in the policymaking process on how the debate has developed, in what policy areas attention to 'doenvermogen' is being paid, and to some extent what measures have been undertaken to ensure that 'doenvermogen' is included in the policymaking process. In doing this it gives the public and policymakers an indication of the degree to which taking 'doenvermogen' into account has become institutionalized in the policymaking process.

Another way in which this thesis is socially relevant is that we learn more about how neologisms can enter the public debate, and have an impact on attracting attention to a problem in the public debate. The results of this thesis are in line with the observation made by WRR member Mark Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023) that with the creation of 'doenvermogen' and the writing of the 'weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017) report, they gave a 'language' to the problem described in the report. The case described in this thesis shows how important the use of the right language is in describing a societal problem and attracting attention to it.

## Theory

The theoretical framework of this thesis is build up as follows: First I will briefly discuss where new words come from and what a neologism is in general. Then I will talk more specifically about how and why neologisms are created in a political context. After that I will discuss that there is little knowledge about how these neologisms develop in the public debate after their creation, what affects this development, and why it would be interesting to learn more about this. Following that I will discuss a factor that can influence this development: the creator of the neologism, a think tank in this case. Lastly I will show how think tanks can have different forms of impact on policy and the public debate, that the creation of a neologism is one of these forms, and that think tanks can increase this impact by influencing the development of this neologism in the public debate. Here the research fields on neologisms and on the different kinds of impact of think tanks are thus combined to arrive at the more broader question that is behind the research question of this thesis: How can a think tank have impact on the development of a neologism in the public debate.

### The creation of new words

Every year, thousands of neologisms emerge in the Dutch language (Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal, 2022). There are a lot of ways in which neologisms can be created, such as existing words which take on a new meaning, words that combine two different words into a new one or words that are adopted from a different language (Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal, 2022). Apart from different ways of creating a new word, there are a lot of reasons for why a new word can come to existence, such as political, technical or scientific developments that lead to new objects, concepts or inventions (Waszink, 2019).

There is a lively debate in the literature about the exact definition of what a neologism is (Konopelkina, 2017), and when a term can, or can no longer be, regarded as a neologism. A criterium for when a word can be regarded as a neologism is for instance time: “A word or phrase is no longer a neologism, when it is no longer new” (Polkovnichenko, 2013, p. 83). Other criteria are “Exclusion from dictionaries, formal or semantic instability, and the perception speakers have of an item’s novelty.” (Guerra, 2016, pp. 529-530). A more simplified definition of a neologism is provided by the Cambridge Dictionary (2023): “A new word or expression, or a new meaning for an existing word”.

It can be rather difficult to define exactly when a neologism has officially made the transition from a neologism to a generally recognized new word. The ‘Dikke Van Dale’, one of the main Dutch dictionaries, identifies multiple criteria for the acceptance of a new word in its dictionary (Van Dale, 2023):

- The word is frequently used during an extended period of time in newspapers, magazines, books and on the internet.
- The word is commonly known in the Netherlands, it needs to be naturalized.
- The word needs to appear in several texts.
- Words that are solely used in specific professions are excluded, so no jargon.

It could be interesting to analyze if ‘doenvermogen’ can still be regarded as a neologism, its very recent creation would for instance indicate so. The fact that it recently has been added to a major dictionary (H. de Groot, Personal communication, April 3, 2023) would however oppose this on the basis of the ‘exclusion from dictionaries’ (Guerra, 2016) criterion. A thorough analysis of whether ‘doenvermogen’ could still be regarded as a neologism is outside the scope of this thesis.

Apart from looking if the word is accepted into the language, it is also interesting to look at its chances of long-term survival in a language. A popular method, used by the Dutch Language Institute, for analyzing the chances of survival of a word is the FUDGE-test (Waszink, 2019):

- **Frequency:** How often does a word appear? The more a word is used, the higher its chance of survival.
- **Unobtrusiveness:** How much does a word differentiate from other words? A word that sounds and looks more like other words has a higher chance of survival.
- **Diversity:** Is the word used in different situations and by a wide variety of people? A word that is used in many situations and by a wide array of people has a higher chance of survival.
- **Generation:** The chances of survival are higher if a word has multiple meanings.
- **Endurance:** A word has a better chance of survival if the phenomenon it refers to is expected to exist and stay relevant for a longer period of time.

Later on in this thesis I will briefly discuss the acceptance of 'doenvermogen' as a general word and its subsequent chances of long-term survival in the Dutch language. For now I will move on to the creation and development of a more specific type of neologisms: those created in a political context.

### New terms entering the political arena

A living language, like Dutch, develops rapidly and is always adapting to new social, cultural and scientific developments, constantly generating new words and terms to cope with these developments (Tabatadze et al., 2022). People, for instance politicians or researchers, thus come up with new words or terms when the existing lexicon does not provide that person with a word or expression that accurately reflects what they want to say (Konopelkina, 2017). The crucial next step for a neologism is then if it is being accepted and subsequently used by other people (Konopelkina, 2017). In the case of a neologism like 'doenvermogen', its survival in the public debate is thus crucially dependent on actors within in public debate adopting and using the word.

In political discourse, ability to express ideas and thoughts is crucial for an actor that wants to bring across a message to the public (Yu, 2020). This is particularly the case for problems and ideas that are relatively new to the public, it is important that these messages are communicated clearly so the receiver understands what the problem/idea is (Konstantinova et al., 2019). One way to achieve this is through creating neologisms, they can be used as a way to allocate priority areas, a tool to influence public awareness and attract attention to a certain problem by creating a new word (Konopelkina, 2017). Lehrer (2003) further elaborates on this, stating people might create neologisms in order to try and make the hearer remember the word, or confuse the hearer with a neologism so that he/she starts thinking about the meaning of the word. This can then subsequently cause the hearer to start thinking about the phenomenon that is described by the neologism.

The fact that a neologism is completely new to a hearer might also pose a risk, as identified by Tabatadze et al. (2022), being that misunderstandings about the exact definition of a neologism might appear. Often when people hear a word for the first time they do not know the definition of the word. They guess what the word means based on for instance parts of the word they do know and the context in which the word is used. People might then make a mistake about the meaning of the word and subsequently start using the word in the wrong way.

This risk described by Tabatadze et al. (2022) might also be precisely what actors try to achieve: Neologisms created in a (semi-)political context are quite often constructed with various subjective political motivations behind them (Yu, 2020). A good example of this is the term 'ownership society', coined by former United States president George Bush, describing a society in which main values as

personal responsibility, economic liberty and ownership of property are central (Wray, 2005). President Bush used this neologism for the political goal of promoting a number of policy proposals which gave Americans more personal control over for instance social security savings (NBC News, 2005). The policies were criticized by opponents of the president, stating that they induced greatly increased risks and costs on the ordinary American for social security, health care and retirement benefits (NBC News, 2005). One of these critics was later US president Barack Obama, who took the neologism created by Bush, and transformed it into a neologism with an opposite meaning to support his critique: “George Bush called this the ownership society, but what he really meant was ‘you’re-on-your-own’ society” (Page, 2008). This case provides us with a clear example of how neologisms can be created and/or used for more or less the sole reason of promoting one’s own political agenda.

Generally speaking, neologisms created in a scientific environment often describe new developments and discoveries in a relatively objective and neutral way (Guerra, 2016). As seen in the paragraph above however, neologisms created in a political context often have more subjective motivations behind their creation and can thus be used in a more subjective way. The fact ‘doenvermogen’ was created by a scientific thinktank like the WRR makes it an interesting case in this regard: On the one hand, the WRR is a politically neutral scientific think tank that advises the government based on scientific data (Subramaniam et al., 2023). The writers of the report were clear that they created ‘doenvermogen’ for the sole purpose of helping the hearer understand the thing they were discussing, and that they did not have specific political motivations for its creation (WRR, 2017; M. Bovens, Personal communication, April 17, 2023)

On the other hand, ‘doenvermogen’ is created in a report of which the main conclusion is that more attention should be paid to ‘doenvermogen’ in the policymaking process. This message is inherently political because the WRR (2017) tries to persuade politicians and policymakers to make certain changes in the policymaking process.

It would thus be very interesting to analyze how a neologism like ‘doenvermogen’ would develop in the public debate, and what impact the fact that it was created by a thinktank like the WRR has on this development.

In some cases, neologisms that are first used in a specific political situation can acquire a more general meaning over time. Anisimova & Tikhonova (2022) name ‘credibility gap’ as a good example of such a development. Initially, the term ‘credibility gap’ was coined in the 1960s during the United States war in Vietnam. Here it was used to describe the discrepancy between what politicians said about the status of the war, and what was actually happening (Anisimova & Tikhonova, 2022). Over the years it was used more often and nowadays it is used to define any contradiction between what the government says and what the real situation is (Anisimova & Tikhonova, 2022).

One final notion about the neologisms is that its development, especially in the public debate, is often strongly influenced by relevant developments in society that can increase or decrease its relevance (Šetka-Čilić & Ilić-Plauc, 2021). A good example of this is the term ‘vaccine nationalism’, that describes a situation in which countries hoard vaccinations in order to increase the supply for their own country, regardless of how much they leave for the rest of the world (Riaz et al., 2021). The recent COVID-19 pandemic increased the relevance and use of the term ‘vaccine nationalism’ dramatically (Riaz et al., 2021).

As shown above, there is literature on how neologisms in a political context can be created, what goal is behind this creation, and that in order to achieve this goal it is often crucial that the word is adopted and starts developing in the public debate. I was however not able to find any literature on

what factors determine the development of a neologism, and to what extent it is adopted and institutionalized in the public debate. This would be quite interesting considering we might have a lot of knowledge on the intentions and goals behind a neologism, if the neologism fails to achieve institutionalization these goals and intentions are not realized. It is thus not only relevant why and how a neologism is created, but also how it can survive, in this case in the public debate.

There is probably a great number of, interdependent, factors of varying significance that have an impact on the development of a neologism in the public debate. To identify and untangle them all would require a lot more research than can be done in the scope of one thesis. I will however make a start with this research by analyzing a specific aspect: The influence the actor that created the neologism can have on its subsequent development in the public debate. I chose to analyze this by looking at the development of 'doenvermogen', a neologism created in a report in 2017 by the WRR, a Dutch think tank. A think tank like the WRR can have an impact on the policymaking process and the public debate in a number of ways (Subramaniam et al., 2023), and could thus potentially impact the development of a neologism it created in a number of ways.

In the next section I will discuss a number of ways in which a think tank like the WRR can have an impact on the public debate and the policymaking process, and that the creation of a neologism might actually be one of those ways. As the rest of this thesis will show however, the WRR can not only impact the public debate through the creation of a neologism, but also through influencing its subsequent development and institutionalization in the public debate.

### Impact of think tanks

In this section I will discuss a number of ways in which a think tank can have impact on policies, and show examples of how the WRR has had impact on the policymaking process in those ways. In the section after that I will discuss the form of impact central to this thesis: The creation of a neologism and its subsequent development within the public debate.

Generally speaking, the goal of a think tank is "To combine knowledge and policy-making to impact future policy processes" (Lewis, 2023), or "To research policy issues and advocate for certain political and social objectives" (MasterClass, 2022). Of course, each think tank has a more or less specific goal of its own (Ritter, 2009). In case of the WRR, the specific goal is to "Provide science-based strategic policy advice to the Dutch government and Parliament on strategic issues that are likely to have significant long-term social and political consequences." (WRR, 2022c).

All three of these definitions have in common that the goal is to have an impact on policy/the policymaking process. There are a number of ways in which this impact can be achieved.

Sometime think tanks might have a quite direct influence on policymaking (Abelson, 2018). A WRR example of this is the impact of "Migratie en classificatie" (WRR, 2016). In this report, the WRR claims that classifying immigrants as either 'western' or 'non-western' is too broad and thus no longer an appropriate way of classification. This recommendation eventually led to the CBS, the Dutch Central Statistical Office, re-examining the use of the classification, naming the WRR report specifically as one of the reasons for the re-examination (CBS, 2021). Eventually, the CBS decided to abandon the western/non-western classification of migrants in 2022 (De Ree, 2022).

In other situations, the publications of a think tank might not lead directly to policies, but it is clearly taken into account by governmental bodies (Abelson, 2018). A good example of this is "Minder pretentie, meer ambitie" (WRR, 2010), in which the WRR advises government to make development aid more professional and to focus the aid on specific countries.

In the coalition agreement of 2010, government parties VVD and CDA wrote explicitly that the WRR report would serve as a guideline for revising the Dutch development aid strategy (VVD & CDA, 2010).

Another, more indirect, way of how a think tank can impact policy is through creating media-attention (Abelson, 2018). An example of this is given by the WRR-report “Allochtonenbeleid” (WRR, 1989). This report did not directly lead to much impact on policy development. It did however trigger a lot of media attention, this media attention eventually spilled over into the political debate about the topic, leading to policy change (Scholten, 2009). Influence through media and public debate is becoming increasingly important for think tanks, often policymakers first take note of the contents and relevance of for instance WRR-reports or other research through (mass)media, after which the topic can end up on the actual political agenda (Ritter, 2009; WRR, 2022a).

This last case is a good example of how a thinktank can have a more indirect way of impacting policy, in this case agenda-setting (Van Nispen & Scholten, 2014). Another indirect way in which a think tank can have impact on policy is through influencing institutions or actors that in their turn influence the policymaking process (McGann et al., 2014). In the case of the WRR, actors such as regulators, policy implementation organizations, other advisory organizations or experts that advice the government on specific topics might be influenced by WRR-reports (WRR, 2022a). An example of this is the Dutch Central Statistical Office (CBS) referencing the ‘Weten is nog geen doen’ (WRR, 2017) report in an article about children from families who live on benefits (Veer et al., 2023).

Sometimes, think tanks try to expand the public debate about a certain topic by introducing new perspectives in that debate or discovering new issues (Ritter, 2009). An example of this is the aforementioned ‘Allochtonenbeleid’ (WRR, 1989) report. The report, at the time, played a major role in gradually making the public debate about immigration more empirical and neutral instead of the more normative and subjective way of debating that was more common until then (Scholten, 2009).

Apart from the kind of impact a think tank can have, I want to include an important notion about the relevance of timing for the impact of think tanks like the WRR. Both Den Hoed & Keizer (2007) and Scholten (2009) talk about how the publishing of a report coinciding with other relevant developments at the same time can play a major role in the impact the report has. Scholten (2009) names ‘Nederlands als immigratiesamenleving’ (WRR, 2001), a report on cultural diversity and the Netherlands being an immigration society, as a good example of this. The report was published exactly 13 days after the 9/11 disaster, which had major impact on the discussion about immigration and multiculturalism (Scholten, 2009). 9/11 thus had a big effect on the public reception of the report: “Thus the WRR became part of the popular dissent of government integration policies and the alleged bias towards multiculturalism. Whereas the third report might have been considered very critical on several policy topics at the time it was initiated, by the time it was published it was more generally regarded as ‘too soft.’” (Scholten, 2009, p. 570).

Think tanks can thus influence public policy in a number of ways, in terms of method as well as in terms of actual impact. In this thesis I will however discuss a method of indirect impact that has not yet been discussed in the literature on the impact of think tanks: The creation of a neologism that subsequently starts playing a role in the public debate.

### **Influencing the public debate through a neologism**

So far two I have given a brief overview of the literature in two separate research fields that on first sight appear to have very little in common:

1. The creation and development of neologisms, more specifically in a political context.
2. The different ways in which a think tank can have an impact on the policymaking process.

These two fields can be combined however: A think tank can impact policy through the creation of a neologism that subsequently is adopted in the public debate and policymaking. In addition, the think tank might not simply create the neologism, but might also have an impact on its development in the public debate. Through its impact on the creation and the development of the neologism, the think tank then in an indirect way has an impact on the public debate and policymaking. It would be interesting to see how the fact that the neologism was created by a think tank impacts the development of the neologism, and how the think tank can influence this development.

In this thesis, I will analyze this by taking a close look at the development of a neologism that was recently created by a think tank: The neologism 'doenvermogen' that was created by the WRR (2017). Creating a neologism that subsequently enters public debate is a quite rare way of impacting policy by a thinktank like the WRR. Although it is rare, 'doenvermogen' is not the first neologism created by a thinktank or alike institution. Another example of is the neologism 'pre-distribution', meaning policies that encourage more economic equality before the government collects taxes or pays out benefits (Policy Network, 2014). The term was first coined by Jacob Hacker in a publication of the British think tank Policy Network and was subsequently adopted in the British public debate (O'Neill, 2017).

The analysis in this thesis can be seen as a first investigation of how a think tank can influence the development of a neologism it created, and how through this influence it can have an impact on the public debate and policymaking. Because this is rather uncharted territory, I will take a broad look at the development of 'doenvermogen' within the public debate in the Netherlands, to see what role the WRR has had on this development. This analysis is centered around the main research question in this thesis: "What role did the WRR play in the development of the neologism 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands?". The fact that this research question initially assumes that the WRR did play a role in the development of 'doenvermogen' is justified by the fact that the WRR created 'doenvermogen', so it inherently has a role in its development.

## Methodology

### Explanation of choices

Because of the lack of theory on the development neologisms created by think tanks, and thus the lack of how to analyze this development, I will use a number of analytical methods which I will explain in more detail below. With each of these methods I hope to uncover a part of the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate, and what role the WRR could have played in that development. In doing this I hope to discover ways in which a think tank can impact the development of a neologism it created. If these methods prove to a degree successful in tracing the development of 'doenvermogen' and the role the WRR played in it, they can be used in the future to analyze the development of other neologisms.

I will first look at the creation of 'doenvermogen' and the motivation behind its creation so that its subsequent development can be put into context. After that I will briefly analyze the development of 'doenvermogen' as a neologism in general, as this might be a first indicator of how the neologism developed in the Dutch language in general, and through that in the public debate.

The main body of research in this thesis consists of the analysis of parliamentary documents from both parliaments in the Netherlands (The House of Representatives and the Senate). These documents do not only consist of debates and written discussions between members of parliament, ministers and state secretaries.

They also include letters from government to parliament discussing new policy and the process of existing policies, and ‘explanatory memorandums’, which explain in detail why new bills are proposed and what they entail. This broad base of documents includes the vast majority of official communication between members of parliament, ministers and state secretaries about new and existing policies. They can thus serve as a good indicator for how ‘doenvermogen’ has developed in the public debate and the policymaking process, and what role the WRR played in this development. In addition, as I will indeed show later on in this thesis, analyzing these documents in detail might also show the use and institutionalization of ‘doenvermogen’ in other parts of the public debate and the policymaking process.

## Methods

Before analyzing the development of ‘doenvermogen’, I will first look at the creation of ‘doenvermogen’ to get a better understanding about its backstory and the motivation behind its creation. I will do this by interviewing professor of Public Administration Mark Bovens, who is a member of the WRR, writer of ‘Weten is nog geen doen’ (WRR, 2017) and thus one of the creators of ‘doenvermogen’. The other writers were WRR-staff members Anne-Greet Keijzer and Will Tiemeijer. In this interview I will ask questions like why they opted to create a neologism, why they chose ‘doenvermogen’, and also what their expectations were of the development of ‘doenvermogen’ in the public debate. Apart from the creation of ‘doenvermogen’, I will also briefly discuss what the writers of the report did after the publication to spread and sustain the main message of the report. This provides me with more information about how the WRR could have impacted the development of the main message of the report, and through that the development of ‘doenvermogen’ within the public debate.

After this I will briefly discuss how ‘doenvermogen’ developed as a neologism in general. To do this I will contact an editor the ‘Dikke van Dale’, one of the main Dutch dictionaries, and a linguist from the Dutch Language Institute to learn more about this development. If ‘doenvermogen’ has indeed shown signs of developing within the Dutch language, the chances of ‘doenvermogen’ being adopted in the public debate and surviving there might also be higher.

For the analysis of parliamentary documents I will use “[officielebekendmakingen.nl](https://www.officielebekendmakingen.nl)”, the official website of the Dutch government for the publication of parliamentary documents. I will use the keywords ‘doenvermogen’ and ‘doevermogen’, which as I will later show is a variant of ‘doenvermogen’ (in the rest of this thesis when I talk about ‘doenvermogen’ the results of ‘doevermogen’ are thus incorporated). In principle I will include all parliamentary documents, both from the House of Representatives and the Senate, in my analysis, except for appendices to parliamentary documents. These appendices are often research reports or other documents that serve as substantiation of parliamentary documents, and are thus not part of the core communication between actors in the public debate. The main types of documents that are included are:

- Transcripts of plenary debates
- Transcripts of parliamentary committee debates
- Letters from ministers and state secretaries to parliament
- Explanatory memorandums
- Written dialogue between members of parliament / parliamentary committees, ministers and state secretaries.

I will exclude documents that overlap with other documents in order to prevent counting one use of ‘doenvermogen’ twice. This is for instance the case when parliamentary questions are asked.

These questions are first published in a single document. Then when the questions are answered by a minister or state secretary, the questions are repeated again for the structure of the answer-document. If 'doenvermogen' is being used in one of the questions, it would thus be counted twice (in the first document and after that again in the document with the answers), while it is in fact the same question. I would then leave out the first document considering that all content from that document is also incorporated in the second document containing the answers by government. Another example of a double document is a letter from government that is being sent to the House or Representatives as well as to the Senate.

I will analyze the documents as described above from the period of 2017, the year that 'doenvermogen' was created, until April 2023.

I will then go on to analyze the use of 'doenvermogen' in these documents in a number of ways. The first rather straightforward thing I will do is count the amount of times 'doenvermogen' has been used since its creation. The answer to this question first of all tells us something about if the word was adopted at all in the public debate, and if its use in the public debate has grown over the last years. Secondly, a first prediction about its survival in the public debate can be made by analyzing if the usage of 'doenvermogen' has increased over the past years. This method does not specifically tell us something about the impact of the WRR on the development of 'doenvermogen', but it provides a basis for the rest of the methods.

I will count the total amount of times 'doenvermogen' is mentioned and in how many different documents it is used, and divide those numbers by year to spot potential growth or decline of the use of 'doenvermogen'.

Apart from simply looking at how much 'doenvermogen' is used, I will also look in a more qualitative manner at how 'doenvermogen' is being used in debates. Here I will first of all look if 'doenvermogen' is being used to describe the phenomenon for which it was created. This will give a good indication of the risk of misunderstanding the word as describe by Tabatadze et al. (2022). It is rather difficult to establish clear objective boundaries as to when the word is used as intended by the WRR, and when it is not. I will thus not make quantitative conclusions about how often 'doenvermogen' is used in a 'wrong' or 'right' way. Rather, I will try to search for clear examples of when 'doenvermogen' was used in a way that differs from how it is defined by the WRR (2017). I will do this by qualitatively analyzing the context in which 'doenvermogen' is used to see what the user means by 'doenvermogen' and if this corresponds with what the WRR (2017) meant by the word. To dive even deeper into how 'doenvermogen' is used in the public debate, I will also analyze in what context 'doenvermogen' is used. The WRR (2017) initially mentioned examples like pensions or healthcare, but the word can potentially be used in debates about a wide variety of subjects. This analysis originates from the observation made by Anisimova & Tikhonova (2022) that words created in a specific situation can obtain a more general meaning over time. If 'doenvermogen' is used in a lot of different contexts, its chance of survival and institutionalization in the public debate might also increase. A second reason why this in depth analysis could be interesting is to check if there have been societal developments that might have increased the usage of 'doenvermogen'. This is in line with the observations made by Den Hoed & Keizer (2007) and Scholten (2009) about the big influence relevant societal developments can have for the impact of WRR-reports. It is secondly also in line with the theory by Šetka-Čilić & Ilić-Plauc (2021) that certain events and developments can have a major impact on how a neologism develops. As I do not know all the different contexts in which 'doenvermogen' is used prior to my research, I will categorize contexts in an inductive way as I conduct my analysis.

Apart from looking at how often and in what way 'doenvermogen' is being used in the public debate in general, I will also see if there are differences as to who uses 'doenvermogen'.

As seen in literature before, words created and used in a (semi-) political context are often being used in a way that suits the political preferences of the person using it (Yu, 2020). The WRR (2017) created 'doenvermogen' in a report of which the main message was that more attention should be paid to the 'doenvermogen' of people in the policymaking process. It would be interesting to analyze if there are certain politicians or political parties that talk about 'doenvermogen' more often than others. I will do this by tracking who used 'doenvermogen' each time it is used. I will first of all broadly categorize these uses by either ministers and state secretaries, members of parliament, or other actors (I will discuss in more detail who these other actors can be in the results section). After this first broad categorization I will also categorize the uses by ministers and state secretaries by department (so the uses of all ministers and state secretaries of one department combined). I will also categorize the members of parliament by political party (so the uses of all members of parliament, both House of Representatives and Senate, of each political party combined).

Doing so provides a number of interesting insights. First of all, analyzing which ministers use 'doenvermogen' the most frequently and what department they are from adds to the question stated earlier about the contexts in which 'doenvermogen' is being used. Secondly, by analyzing how spread out the use of 'doenvermogen' is between the different ministers, and especially the different political parties, tells a lot about if the relevance of 'doenvermogen' is only advocated in certain political communities, or that it can count on a broader support. This, in combination with the analysis of the amount of contexts in which 'doenvermogen' is used, provides us with an improved view on how 'doenvermogen' would score on the diversity indicator of a FUDGE-test (Waszink, 2019). It at the very least tells us a lot about its diversity of use within the public debate. Furthermore, I will also look at what is being said about 'doenvermogen' to see if there are for instance political parties that are opposing the idea of creating more attention for 'doenvermogen' in the policymaking process. In doing this, I will also discuss the possibility that certain political parties oppose the idea because they oppose the WRR or the report in one way or another. It might be the case that an actor has negative associations with the WRR, and that it therefore has negative preconceptions about the messages, such as more attention for 'doenvermogen', that the WRR produces. This might in turn cause the actor to avoid using the word 'doenvermogen'. In this way, it is thus possible that the fact that the WRR created 'doenvermogen' has a negative effect on its development within the public debate.

The last thing I will analyze is how often the report is referenced when 'doenvermogen' is being used. I will analyze this by counting the amount of documents in which the report is referred to when talking about 'doenvermogen' in order to explain what 'doenvermogen' means.

I will then analyze if the relative amount of times the report is referenced is increasing or declining over the years. If in an extreme case 'doenvermogen' always has to be explained by referencing the report, the chances of its long term survival in the public debate are relatively low. This is because the word is apparently not being institutionalized in the public debate. If on the other hand 'doenvermogen' is being used on its own more, the chances of its survival might be higher, even if the role the original report plays in public debate starts to decline. In addition, if 'doenvermogen' is used without explanation more often, it might indicate that the word has become increasingly accepted as an established word in the public debate.

On the other hand, the answer to this question might also give a first impression of how much the fact that 'doenvermogen' was created in a report by an influential thinktank like the WRR influences its use and development in the public debate, I will elaborate on this later in the thesis.

A final methodological notion that needs to be made is that the interview and the documents that are analyzed in this thesis are all in Dutch. This poses the problem that words and sentences need to be translated from Dutch to English in this thesis. I have tried my best to translate said words as accurately as possible but there is of course the possibility that the meaning of certain translations differ slightly from their original meaning. Where this might possibly be the case I have provided extra context to cover up potential minor translation mistakes.

## Results

### Meaning of ‘doenvermogen’

Before discussing the results of my research, I will first discuss the meaning of ‘doenvermogen’ in more detail.

In 2017 the report ‘Weten is nog geen doen’ (WRR, 2017) was published. In this report, the WRR created the term ‘doenvermogen’ (In the English version of the report it is translated with ‘capacity to act’ (WRR, 2019<sup>2</sup>)). Capacity to act, as opposed to capacity to think, refers to capacities like “Taking stock of a situation; identifying goals and making a plan; taking action and carrying out that plan; persevering; and coping with emotions and setbacks” (WRR, 2019, p. 5). According to the WRR, the government expects too much of the self-reliance of people when constructing policy, especially when faced with difficult moments in life such as the loss of a job or a divorce. In these situations, the government expects quite a lot from its citizens in terms of for instance financial administration, while in fact their ‘capacity to act’ (also called ‘non-cognitive capacities’, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section) is restricted by that exact situation. The WRR (2017) thus advises that the government should take the limited ‘doenvermogen’ of people into account when constructing policy, making sure that the citizens can not only understand the policy, but can also ‘do’ the policy. One way of doing this is by constructing policies in such a way that the chance of people making mistakes is limited, and that small mistakes result in small consequences.

### The creation of ‘doenvermogen’

Before talking about the development of ‘doenvermogen’, I first want to discuss its creation, and what the motivation behind its creation was. As discussed before I will do this on the basis of an interview with WRR-member, and creator of the word ‘doenvermogen’, Mark Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023).

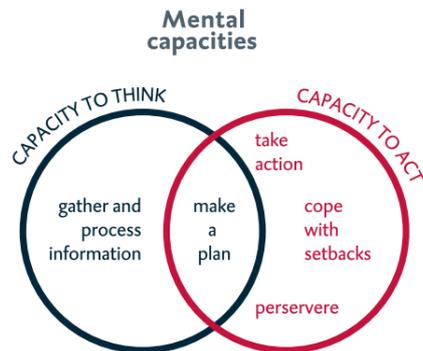
Originally, the writers where not planning on creating a neologism. They used the rather technical term from the field of behavioral science: ‘non-cognitive capacities’ (niet-cognitieve vermogens<sup>3</sup>). Towards the end of the writing process, the writers presented their results and findings so far to advisors from the prime ministers cabinet. Throughout the conversation, the writers noticed that the term ‘non-cognitive capacities’ did not cause the right reaction. Either the advisors did not understand the term at all, or they responded that there were already provisions in place for functional illiterate or digital illiterate people. Characteristics like illiteracy are however cognitive capacities and are thus the exact opposite of what was meant by the writers: non-cognitive capacities. The writers thus discovered that if they continued using the word non-cognitive capacities, people would often misunderstand the message of their report.

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, when referencing the report, I will in principle reference the original Dutch report from 2017. I will however sometimes quote the official English translation of the report which was published in 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of these ‘niet-cognitieve vermogens’ are problem-solving, motivation, planning and perseverance (Sabater, 2022), which corresponds with the definition of ‘doenvermogen’ as described in the section before.

The writers started thinking, and talking to other people, about how to solve this problem. Eventually, the writers discovered that a more common understandable term that was used in behavioral science for cognitive capacities was ‘denkvermogen’ (capacity to think). So one day, Mark Bovens realized that if ‘cognitive capacities’ was the opposite of ‘non-cognitive capacities’, the opposite of ‘denkvermogen’ (capacity to think) would be ‘doenvermogen’ (capacity to act). And thus, the term ‘doenvermogen’ came into existence and after deliberation within the WRR, it was decided that it would be used in the report to make the main message of the report better understandable. The writers made a diagram (*Figure 1*) to clearly show the distinction between ‘doenvermogen’ on one side, and ‘denkvermogen’ on the other side. The figure was incorporated in the report and was also often used in presentations after the publication of the report.



*Figure 1 (WRR, 2019, p. 44)*

The creation of ‘doenvermogen’ thus fits in quite well with the theory of provided by Yu (2020): A neologism was created so that a certain message could be communicated in a clearer way. It can however sometimes also go further than this in that neologisms can be created for the purpose of creating more public awareness (Konopelkina, 2017). Although the aim of the report is to influence policy and thus at least to some extent public awareness for the problem at hand, ‘doenvermogen’ was not intentionally created to enhance the public awareness. The purpose for its creation was simply to make the difference between cognitive and non-cognitive capacities clearer, and the writers did not expect ‘doenvermogen’ to start being regularly used in the public debate.

In the experience of Bovens, it was the right choice to create ‘doenvermogen’ and start using it in the report. People often get the right association when they hear ‘doenvermogen’ and the term has become increasingly known in the policymaking community. This has gone so far that the writers nowadays often refer to the report as the ‘doenvermogen’-report, instead of using its actual name ‘Weten is nog geen doen’.

### Success of the report

According to Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023), the report was a success and there are multiple reasons for this, of which the adoption of ‘doenvermogen’ in the public debate is one. A second reason is that the writers, especially Keijzer and Bovens, continued putting effort into bringing the message across to the policymaking community for years after the report was published, so that the message would really be institutionalized. This was done through giving lectures and presentations, but for instance also through the creation of the ‘doenvermogenoets’ publication, on which I will elaborate later on in this thesis. A third reason Bovens mentions for the success of the report is the ‘toeslagenaffaire’, on which I will also elaborate later on in this thesis.

Whether the report was a success is inherently subjective, and since the development of ‘doenvermogen’ is only part of the impact of the report, I will give a judgement of my own on whether I believe the report was a success.

## Survival of ‘doenvermogen’

At the end of the interview, I asked Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023) what his expectation for the long-term survival of ‘doenvermogen’ would be. His response was that, partly because of all the effort that was put in after the publication of the report, he hoped that the term ‘doenvermogen’ is institutionalized enough in the policymaking community to survive in the long-term. He mentioned as an example that the ministry of Justice and Security even appointed a ‘projectmanager doenvermogen’ in this regard. In addition, the Council of State (Raad van State), one of the top legislation advisors of the Dutch government, now analyzes how much the ‘doenvermogen’ of people has been taken into account when assessing new policies. These and other examples show that ‘doenvermogen’ has to an extent been institutionalized in the policy process in the Netherlands and that it can thus be expected to survive over some time. Bovens does however discuss a risk for the survival of ‘doenvermogen’: A time might come where the willingness of the public to take into account the ‘doenvermogen’ of people might decrease, and thus the relevance of ‘doenvermogen’ in the public debate might decrease with it.

## ‘Doenvermogen’ in the Dutch language

Before analyzing how ‘doenvermogen’ developed as a neologism in the public debate, I will first briefly discuss ‘doenvermogen’ as a neologism in general. Doing so provides an indication of the chances of long-term survival of ‘doenvermogen’ in general, and through this of its chances of survival more specifically in the public debate.

First of all, I asked Van Dale, the company behind one of the major dictionaries in the Netherlands if ‘doenvermogen’ passed their criteria which were mentioned earlier. When asked by email, Van Dale editor Hans de Groot (Personal communication, April 3, 2023) responded that ‘doenvermogen’ was added to the Dikke Van Dale dictionary in may 2022, together with its variant ‘doevermogen’ and synonym ‘handelingsvermogen’. Both terms are defined as “Capacity to act, the degree to which someone is capable to transform ideas and plans into actions” (*own translation*) (H. de Groot, Personal communication, April 3, 2023). To come up with a valid difference in translation for ‘doenvermogen’ and ‘handelingsvermogen’ is outside the scope of this thesis, I will however address the implications for the fact that ‘doenvermogen’ has a synonym for this thesis.

The fact that ‘handelingsvermogen’ is regarded by Van Dale as a synonym for ‘doenvermogen’ might pose a problem for this thesis considering the fact that the two words might be used interchangeably. The WRR-impact of creating a new word would then be more vague because we do not know what influence ‘doenvermogen’ had on the creation of ‘handelingsvermogen’. This problem would only arise however if the words were used with the same meaning in the public debate in the Netherlands, considering that is the focus of this thesis. I entered ‘handelingsvermogen’ into the 1848 monitor<sup>4</sup>, with which parliamentary documents can easily be sought through, to see if, and how, the term was used in the Dutch public debate. For this I looked at its use in the past year (April 2022 – march 2023)

The term ‘handelingsvermogen’ appeared in 32 parliamentary documents (excluding attachments to parliamentary documents) (1848, n.d.-a). In all 32 cases, the term was used to refer to the capacity/ability to act of a certain governmental body, mainly the ‘legal’ capacity of the Europe Union to act in certain situations (1848, n.d.-a).

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<sup>4</sup> The reason I use the 1848 monitor here is because it is easier to scan through multiple documents. officielebekendmakingen.nl is however more complete and trustworthy since it is the official government website for publications, so that is why I use that for the in-depth analysis of this thesis.

The fact that 'handelingsvermogen' is thus used solely for legal capacity to act of governmental bodies, and not for the capacity to act of an individual based on characteristics, for which 'doenvermogen' is used, removes the potential problem. The words are, at least in the Dutch public debate, not used in the same way and 'handelingsvermogen' will thus be left out of the rest of this thesis.

The Dikke Van Dale regards 'doevermogen' as a variant of 'doenvermogen'. Although it only appears in four parliamentary documents in the last five years (1848, n.d.-b), it was used in the same way as 'doenvermogen'. My hypothesis is that the few times 'doevermogen' was used were mistakes, and that 'doenvermogen' was actually meant. This hypothesis is more or less confirmed by the fact that in two of the four cases, 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017) was specifically referenced when using 'doevermogen' (Koolmees, 2018; Hoekstra, 2018). In this thesis, I will thus assume that 'doenvermogen' is meant when 'doevermogen' is used.

The fact that 'doenvermogen' has been taken up in the 'Dikke Van Dale' dictionary shows that it has come a long way in becoming a generally accepted word so far, but what can be said about its long-term survival in the Dutch language? The chance of survival of 'doenvermogen' in the Dutch language is a major factor for its development within the public debate in the Netherlands. Although a thorough analysis of the chances of the survival of 'doenvermogen' is outside the scope of this thesis, I asked Vivien Waszink, linguist at the Dutch Language Institute, what her expectation would be. She responded by conducting a brief FUDGE-test (V. Waszink, personal communication, April 5, 2023):

- **Frequency:** The fact that 'doenvermogen' has been added to the Dikke Van Dale is a major indicator that the word is probably being used frequently.
- **Unobtrusiveness:** Considering that 'doenvermogen' is made up of two already existing words, and that it is quite easy to come up with an idea about what it means, 'doenvermogen' scores quite well on unobtrusiveness.
- **Diversity:** 'Doenvermogen' likely scores a lower on diversity of users. The word is probably mainly being used in a political/policy context, or sometimes in education or care provision. As off now it can thus probably not be regarded as an ordinary Dutch word.
- **Generation:** Here to 'doenvermogen' scores low considering 'doenvermogen' has not yet been incorporated in other words or gained additional meanings.
  - o An exception to this would be the 'doenvermogenoets' which is addressed later in this thesis.
- **Endurance:** If the word is used in a lot of official governmental documents the phenomenon is generally speaking expected to have high endurance.

Taken together, Waszink (Personal communication, April 5, 2023) concludes that at first glance 'doenvermogen' has a reasonable chance to become an established word in the Dutch language.

## The analysis

### Total

In total, after filtering out the double documents and mentions, 'doenvermogen' was used 2.022 times in 530 documents since its creation in 2017 until April 2023. Figure 2 below shows the total amount of times 'doenvermogen' was mentioned from 2017 until 2022.

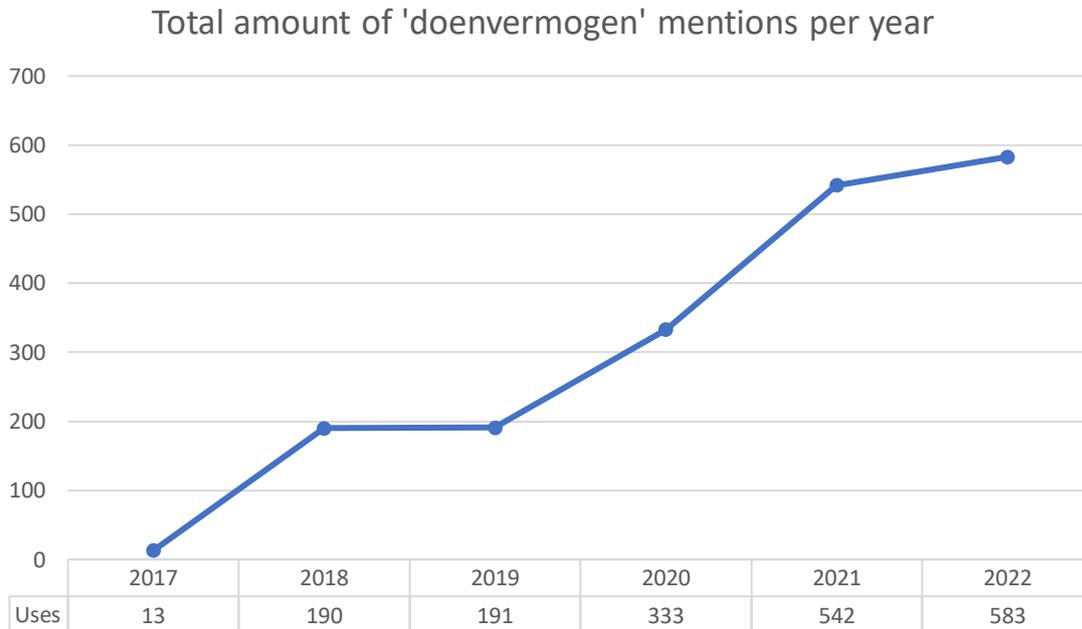


Figure 2. Total amount of 'doenvermogen' mentions per year<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2 clearly shows that the use of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate has steadily, and quite substantially, been increasing since 2017. The only surprise here is that there is a very slight growth between 2018 and 2019. This can at least partly be explained by the 'Cabinet reaction' to the report. The government is obliged to write a formal response to every report that the WRR produces (Den Hoed & Keizer, 2007). The formal response to 'Weten is nog geen doen' by the government was sent to parliament on January 22, 2018 (Kamerstukken II, 34775 VI, nr. 88, 2018), and a follow up on that response was sent to parliament on June 29, 2018 (Kamerstukken II, 34775 VI, nr. 113, 2018). In these two letters combined, 'doenvermogen' was used 64 times, which is more than one-third of the total amount of 'doenvermogen' uses in 2018. These 64 uses are however somewhat of an outlier because naturally 'doenvermogen' is used quite a lot in the government response. Although 2019 had (almost) the same total amount of 'doenvermogen' uses as 2018, 64/190 uses from 2018 can be seen as somewhat of an outlier which explains at least in part why the growth from 2018 to 2019 diverts so much from other years.

This government reaction is however also an example of how the WRR has an impact on the development of 'doenvermogen': Because the government is obliged to write a response to the WRR-report, the ministers and civil servants responsible for writing the response are automatically confronted with 'doenvermogen', and are somewhat forced to think about the place of 'doenvermogen' in the policymaking process. They might then carry this information with them in the future when discussing policies.

<sup>5</sup> 2023 is left out because I only had data on 4 months.

## Who uses 'doenvermogen'

From the total of 2.022, 605 uses where by members of parliament (House of Representatives and Senate combined), 1.264 where by ministers and state secretaries, and 153 where by other actors that played a role in the public debate. Examples of other actors are for instance the Council of State or external experts that are invited to discuss certain specific topics with parliamentary commissions.

### Members of parliament

From the 605 uses of members of parliament, 479 where by specific members and 126 where by parliamentary commissions. Relevant to mention here is that 84 out of those 126 uses where by the temporary commission on executive organizations (Tijdelijke commissies uitvoeringsorganisaties) in their report on the causes of problems with these executive organizations (Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 2, 2021), which I will discuss later on. Figure 3 below shows the amount of times 'doenvermogen' is used by members of parliament of each political party. Table 1 shows the English names for each party (House of Representatives, 2023), as well as amount of seats that party received in the elections for the House of Representatives in 2017 (Kiesraad, 2017) and 2021 (Kiesraad, 2021), and for the Senate in 2019 (Kiesraad, 2020). The amount of seats are relevant because, all other things equal, parties with more seats will play a bigger role in the public debate. They will get more speech time in some debates (Bruj, 2023) and will also generally participate in more debates than parties with a lower amount of seats. If every party would pay the same amount of attention to 'doenvermogen' and all other things are equal, parties with more seats would be expected to have more 'doenvermogen' uses than parties with a relatively lower amount of seats, because they have more speech time and participate in more debates.

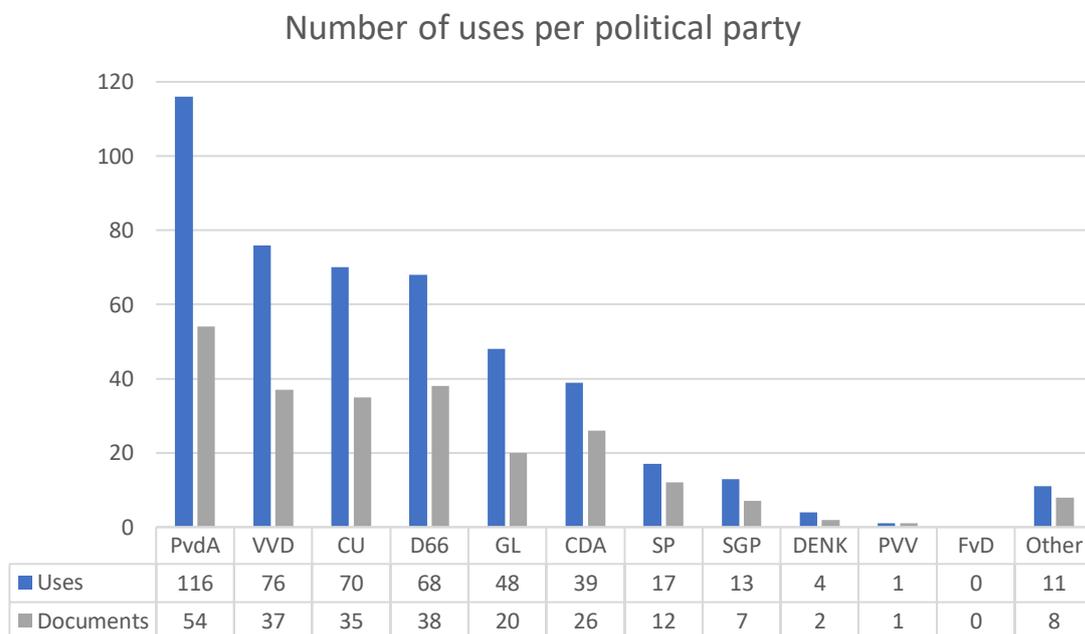


Figure 3. Number of uses per political party

Abbreviation	English name	2017 (HoR)	2021 (HoR)	2019 (Sen)
PvdA	Labour Party	9	9	6
VVD	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	33	34	12
CU	ChristianUnion	5	5	4
D66	Democrats 66	19	24	7
GL	GreenLeft	14	8	8
CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal	19	15	9
SP	Socialist Party	14	9	4
SGP	Reformed Political Party	3	3	2
DENK	THINK	3	3	0
PVV	Party for Freedom	20	17	5
FvD	Forum for Democracy	2	8	12

Table 1. Legend political parties

The main finding here is that the PvdA, despite being a relatively small party, has by far the most mentions of 'doenvermogen' with 116 uses in 54 documents. The VVD, the largest party in all three elections, is second which is somewhat in line with the expectation of the biggest parties having the most mentions. Third however, is the ChristianUnion, a very small party with only 5/150 seats in the House of Representatives. The last thing that stands out immediately is that the PVV, the second largest party in the 2017 election, only uses 'doenvermogen' once. The one time they do use 'doenvermogen', is when quoting a letter from government, and thus they do not use it in an argument of their own (Kamerstukken I, 19637, nr. K, 2022).

One possible explanation for that relatively small parties like the PvdA and the ChristianUnion use 'doenvermogen' so often is the nature of these parties. The PvdA and the ChristianUnion are both considered left parties that prioritize that people in need of help should be helped and that "everyone can participate in society" (ChristianUnion, 2021, p. 56). From this point of view it would thus be to some extent logical that parties like these pay more attention to the needs of people with little 'doenvermogen' that have a difficulty keeping up with everything the government/society asks from them.

Although it might thus be the case that left parties appear to pay the most attention to 'doenvermogen', parties with other classifications such as the VVD (Centre-right), CDA (Centre) and D66 (Progressive) also regularly talk about 'doenvermogen', and they all do so in a rather positive way: They often state that more attention should be paid to 'doenvermogen' in certain policy areas and they also regularly ask questions about how 'doenvermogen' has been taken into account in new policies. It can thus be said that the notion that more attention should be paid to 'doenvermogen' in policy can count on a rather broad support in parliament.

There is one classification however that is very clearly missing: populist parties. Although it is always to some extent controversial to classify parties as populist, there are two parties in that are most often regarded as populist in the Netherlands: The PVV and the FvD (Rooduijn, 2021; Ornstein, 2023; Louwerse & Otjes, 2019). As said before, the PVV, the second largest party in the 2017 election, only mentions 'doenvermogen' once and that is when quoting someone else. The FvD<sup>6</sup>, the largest party in the 2019 senate selection together with the VVD, mentions 'doenvermogen' 0 times.

<sup>6</sup> A number of senators left the FvD-fraction and started their own fraction(s) after disputes within the FvD (Parlementair Documentatie Centrum, 2023). These departed members also did not mention 'doenvermogen' a single time however.

It is quite remarkable that the two parties most often regarded as populist are also the two parties, when combining number of 'doenvermogen' mentions and party size, that stand out the most for the lack of using 'doenvermogen'.

A first rather straightforward explanation for this could be that these parties have not taken notice of 'doenvermogen'. The fact that almost all other parties in parliament, including a number of parties that are a lot smaller than then the FvD and the PVV, have taken notice of 'doenvermogen' and regularly use it in debates in which the FvD and PVV participate, makes this explanation very unlikely however. A second, more likely explanation might be that the FvD and PVV are against, or at least not for, the idea of paying more attention to 'doenvermogen, and that they simply choose to neglect it instead of actively debating against it.

A third possible explanation that builds forth in the second, is that the FvD and PVV have negative views about the WRR as an institute and therefore are skeptical about the reports it publishes. The FvD and PVV might then oppose the idea of more attention for 'doenvermogen' partly because it was advocated by the WRR (2017) in one of its reports.

A first indication that the FvD does actually oppose the WRR is that its political leader, Thierry Baudet, made his negative views about the WRR very clear in a tweet back in 2018: "The umpteenth rag of that increasingly superfluous organization of left-wing quasi-academic propaganda: the WRR. This time a "report" on "European variations"." (*Original tweet: "Het zoveelste vod van die steeds overbodiger wordende organisatie van linkse quasi-academische propaganda: de WRR. Ditmaal een "rapport" over "europese variaties"."* (Baudet, 2018)). The PVV has also expressed negative views about the WRR in the past, member of parliament Machiel de Graaf tweeted in 2014: "The WRR presents itself as the ideological Council for Left Government with that silly Spekman report. Mallovs." (*Original tweet: "De WRR stelt zich op als de Ideologische Raad voor Links Regeringsbeleid met dat malle Spekmanrapport. Malloten."* (De Graaf, 2014)). Another member of the PVV, Martin Bosma, even stated that he wanted the WRR to be completely abolished back in 2012 (De Telegraaf, 2012).

It could thus be hypothesized that the PVV and FvD have negative views about the WRR and therefore on their reports, such as 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017), and the messages in those reports. This could then in turn lead to them avoiding the use of the word 'doenvermogen'. To test this hypothesis I emailed the PVV and FvD, asking them about their views on 'doenvermogen' and the 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017) report. Unfortunately, the FvD did not respond at all, and the PVV responded that it did not have the time to answer my questions (PVV, Personal communication, June 6, 2023). I was thus not able to test my presumption and it must therefore remain a hypothesis.

### Ministers and state secretaries

All ministers and state secretaries combined mentioned ‘doenvermogen’ 1.264 times in the past years. Figure 4 below shows how often cabinet members from each ministry used ‘doenvermogen’. Most of these were in government letters or other policy documents sent to parliament.

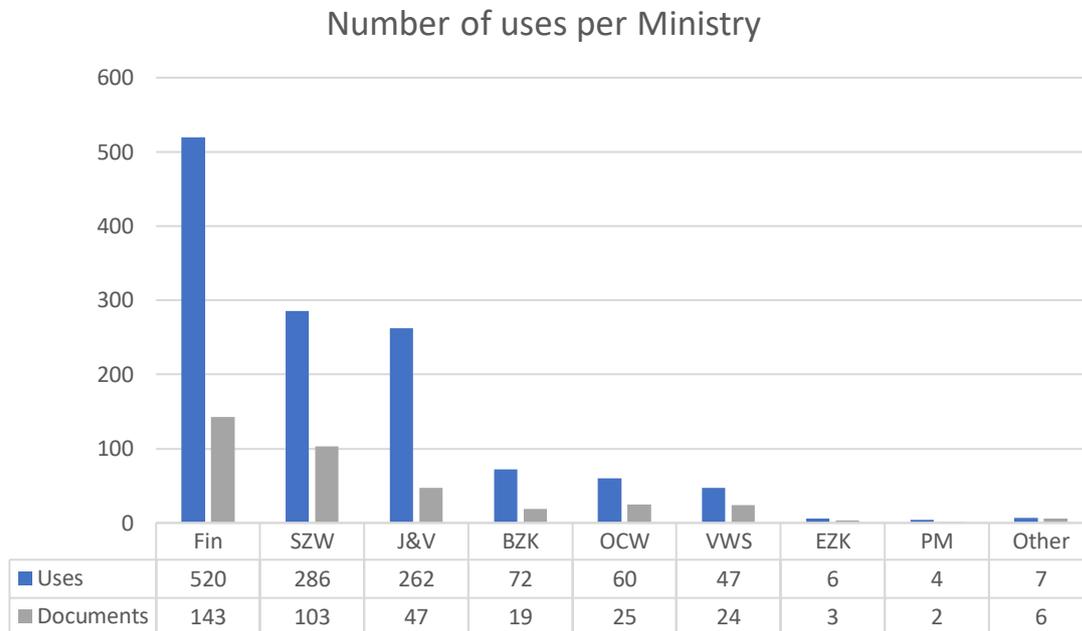


Figure 4. Number of uses per Ministry | Fin = Finance | SZW = Social Affairs and Employment | J&V = Justice and Security | BZK = Interior and Kingdom Relations | OCW = Education, Culture and Science | VWS = Health, Welfare and Sport | EZK = Economic Affairs and Climate Policy | PM = Prime Minister (Rijksoverheid, 2019).

The topics that ministers and state secretaries are discussing when they refer to ‘doenvermogen’ are, as can be expected, quite aligned with their ministry: Finance mainly talks about tax policy and benefits, Social Affairs and Employment mainly about social affairs such as the labor market and pensions, and Justice and Security mainly about the justice system (although cabinet members from Justice and Security also call for more attention for ‘doenvermogen’ in policymaking in general quite often). What exactly is meant by these topics and what relation ‘doenvermogen’ has to that topic is further explained in the ‘contexts’ chapter later on in this thesis.

### Negative towards ‘doenvermogen’

Somewhat surprisingly, no clear cases could be found in which people actively spoke against more attention for ‘doenvermogen’. What might be a good reason for this is that the notion that some people lack ‘doenvermogen’ is based on scientific research, and that no one is completely against paying more attention to this notion in policymaking. It might however be the case that those who oppose the idea of more attention to ‘doenvermogen’ simply choose to neglect it. As mentioned before I asked the PVV and FvD, two parties who practically never used ‘doenvermogen’ about their opinion on ‘doenvermogen’ and ‘Weten is nog geen doen’ (WRR, 2017), unfortunately they did not/would not respond.

### Doenvermogenoets

Before discussing the specific contexts in which ‘doenvermogen’ is used I will discuss one important aspect from the WRR-report that plays an important role in the development of ‘doenvermogen’ in the public debate.

In the original report from the WRR (2017), the WRR already spoke of a ‘doenvermogenstoets’ (Capacity to act test). The main idea of the test was: “In preparing legislation, legislators should examine more closely whether it is ‘doable’ for the public. Implementation tests should assess legislation not only from the perspective of the implementing organizations but also from the perspective of ordinary people. The key question is whether the legislation is based on realistic assumptions about people’s mental resilience.” (WRR, 2019, p. 114).

When discussing the report with actors in the policymaking process and giving presentations on it, the writers discovered that legislators found it difficult to transform the ambition of a ‘doenvermogenstoets’ into reality (WRR, 2020). When discussing the report in the Senate, the WRR was asked if they could provide more practical advice about how a ‘doenvermogenstoets’ could be implemented, and what should be part of the test (M. Bovens, Personal communication, April 17, 2023). In response to this request, the WRR (2020) wrote a separate publication about the test: ‘Doenvermogen: van stoets naar tools’ (Capacity to act: from test to tools) (WRR, 2020). This publication “gives policymakers and legislative lawyers suggestions for ways to focus more attention on the ‘doability’ of policy and regulations” (WRR, 2022b). In this publication, the WRR (2020) identifies five basis questions/steps that should be taken into account when making new policy:

1. How many actions are citizens expected to take with the new policy?
2. Could the moment that actions are expected coincide with other life events or situations that are accompanied by high stress levels?
3. Is there an accumulation of burdens inflicted by other policies?
4. Is the mental burden put on citizens by the policy reduced as much as possible, by for instance introducing default options and opt-outs?
5. Are the consequences of inattention by citizens proportional to the mistake?

The WRR (2020) then gives several concrete tools for how these questions can be answered and thus for how more attention to ‘doenvermogen’ can be paid in the policymaking process.

In the official response to the original report, the government was very positive about the ‘doenvermogenstoets’, immediately stating that it would take several measures for its implementation in the policymaking process (Kamerstukken II, 34775 VI, nr. 88, 2018). One of these measures, as also confirmed by the minister of Finance (Kamerstukken II, 35000, nr. 44, 2018), was that aspects of the ‘doenvermogenstoets’ were incorporated in the ‘Integraal afwegingskader voor beleid en regelgeving (IAK)’. The IAK is a document which provides legislators with tools and questions on how to make good policy and legislation, every legislator is obliged to include the IAK when making policy (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2020). The IAK was replaced at the beginning of 2023 by the ‘Beleidskompas’ (policy compass), which would be an essential part of the policymaking process (Kamerstukken II, 36200 VI, nr. 10, 2022). The ‘beleidskompas’ devotes an entire page on what ‘doenvermogen’ is, why ‘doenvermogen’ should be taken into account and how a ‘doenvermogenstoets’ can be executed, including an e-learning for policymakers (KCBR, 2023). On this page both the report (WRR, 2017) and the follow-up publication (WRR, 2020) are explicitly referenced and cited several times.

Members of parliament have often, and in different contexts, asked ministers and state secretaries about if the ‘doenvermogenstoets’ was performed when constructing policy (For instance: Kamerstukken II, 35000, nr. 44, 2018; Kamerstukken I, 34775, nr. AQ, 2019; Handelingen I, nr. 11, item 3, 2019; Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. U, 2020; Handelingen I, nr. 10, item 3, 2021; Handelingen II, nr. 64, item 9, 2022).

In addition to asking how the 'doenvermogenstoets' was implemented, several motions were also filed by members of parliament for the implementation of a 'doenvermogenstoets' in general as well as in specific areas (Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. I, 2018; Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 169, 2019; Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 8, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 10, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 14, 2022).

As I will discuss in detail in the contexts section of this thesis, there are clear examples of a minister or state secretary explaining in detail how a 'doenvermogenstoets' has been performed, and thus how attention was paid to 'doenvermogen' in the policymaking process. These examples in combination with its inclusion in the 'Beleidskompas' show that the 'doenvermogenstoets' has become increasingly institutionalized in the policymaking process.

## Contexts

In almost all cases where 'doenvermogen' was mentioned in the public debate, actors spoke about the relative lack of 'doenvermogen' of citizens and that more attention to this should be paid in the policymaking process. In some cases, actors spoke about policies in general. An example of this is given by Hülya Kat from D66. In her maiden speech in the House of Representatives she talks about how the government asks too much of citizens with too little 'doenvermogen' in situations where this 'doenvermogen' is reduced by for instance poverty, debts and life events (Handelingen II, nr. 28, item 29, 2022). In most of the cases however, actors discuss specific areas of policy where 'doenvermogen' is taken into account too little. Below I will briefly discuss the main policy areas in which the 'doenvermogen' of citizens is discussed.

### *Tax policy*

Politicians, members of parliament but especially ministers and state secretaries from the Ministry of Finance, often discuss the degree to which tax policy can ask a lot from the 'doenvermogen' of citizens. Members of parliament often talk about how complex tax policies can ask a lot from the 'doenvermogen' of citizens, and that it is often the case that people whose 'doenvermogen' is reduced by certain life events are required to deal with complex tax policies that ask a lot of their 'doenvermogen'. The VVD and CDA (Kamerstukken II, 35928, nr. 6, 2019) for instance discuss the tax policies when buying a new house (specifically the 'eigenwoningregeling' (*owner-occupied home scheme*)). The 'doenvermogen' of people who buy a new house is already restrained by everything that has to be arranged with the purchase and the moving. It is thus important that the tax policies take this already existing pressure on 'doenvermogen' into account and do not add to this pressure. The cabinet members of the Ministry of Finance also often discuss how 'doenvermogen' is included in the policymaking process. A good example of this is given by the state secretary of Finance in a letter to parliament in 2021 (Kamerstukken II, 31066, nr. 866, 2021). He talks about how citizens can be confronted with complex processes and that often the lack of 'doenvermogen' of citizens is taken into account too little when constructing tax policy. He also says that the tax department has become aware of this in the past years and that it has been training its employees to recognize and appropriately aid people with little 'doenvermogen'.

Throughout the years it has become more and more common for cabinet members of the Ministry of Finance to discuss what new tax policy asks of the 'doenvermogen' of people, and the 'doenvermogenstoets' has become rather institutionalized. Already in 2019, the state secretary of Finance called the 'doenvermogenstoets' "Super important" in a debate in the Senate (Handelingen I, nr. 12, item 12, 2020). In the years after, the government regularly discusses how the 'doenvermogenstoets' is being implemented in the tax-policymaking process (Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. S, 2020; Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. U, 2020; Handelingen I, nr. 11, item 8, 2021).

The state secretaries of Finance also explicitly state that the methods provide by the WRR (2020) will play a structural role in the creation of new policy (Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. U, 2020). An example of how the 'doenvermogenstoets' is put into practice in tax policy is given in an explanatory memorandum on a number of tax policy changes (Kamerstukken II, 36202, nr. 3, 2022). In this memorandum, a chapter of almost seven pages is devoted entirely to how what consequences every single policy change has for the 'doenvermogen' of the citizens that have to deal with the tax.

#### *Social policy*

'Doenvermogen' is regularly discussed when talking about a number of social policies, especially in the areas of labor market policies and pensions.

In the case of labor market policies, politicians for instance regularly discuss the 'doenvermogen' of on-call workers in dealing with their employers and certain social policies (Handelingen I, nr. 29, item 5, 2019). 'Doenvermogen' is also often discussed when talking about the 'participatiewet' (participation law), a law that aims to encourage people to find jobs, even when they have a disability (Rijksoverheid, 2022b). Citizens who have to deal with this law are often experiencing multiple difficulties in their life due to for instance losing their jobs, restraining their 'doenvermogen' (Kamerstukken II, 34352, nr. 260, 2022). The 'participatiewet' should thus not ask too much of the 'doenvermogen' of these citizens in for instance their administrative capabilities (Kamerstukken II, 35394, nr. D, 2022).

Pensions is another policy area in which 'doenvermogen' is discussed on a regular basis. The main argument here is that citizens often do not pay much attention to their pensions because their retirement is years away. Because of this, their 'doenvermogen' is limited, and the government should keep this in mind when for instance constructing the different (default) options when making choices about one's pensions (Kamerstukken II, 35555, nr. 5, 2020; Kamerstukken II, 36067, nr. 44, 2022).

Within the policymaking process in the area of pensions of the 'doenvermogenstoets' also has an important place. When for instance discussing a number of policy changes regarding the transfer of small pensions, the state secretary of Social Affairs and Employment writes a full chapter on the 'doenvermogenstoets' (Kamerstukken II, 36004, nr. 3, 2021). He first discusses what 'doenvermogen' means and what implications this could have for policies, specifically referencing the WRR multiple times. He then goes on to discuss what impact each policy change has on the 'doenvermogen' of the people dealing with it.

Apart from labor market and pension policies, 'doenvermogen' is also occasionally discussed when debating other social topics and policies. An example of this is the restricted 'doenvermogen' of people who are in debt (Kamerstukken II, 35477, nr. 3, 2020). Problematic debts can have a "paralyzing effect" on people, lowering their 'doenvermogen' (Kamerstukken I, 35570 XV, nr. A, 2020, p. 26)

#### *Education*

In the field of education, politicians often discuss the 'doenvermogen' of students who are choosing what to study and what courses to follow in these studies. This problem is extensively discussed in explanatory memoranda on a number of changes in laws regarding higher education and student finance (Kamerstukken II, 36136, nr. 3, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 3, 2022). On the one hand, policymakers want students to have as much options as possible to have freedom of choice in what they want to learn. On the other hand, too much freedom of choice might also place too much pressure on the 'doenvermogen' of students, which can have negative effects for the wellbeing of the student. This is especially the case at the beginning of the study.

New students are faced with a lot of changes and new responsibilities, which all put a lot of pressure on the 'doenvermogen' of these new students (Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 3, 2022).

One area within higher education in which 'doenvermogen' is especially important is student funding (Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 3, 2022). It is very important that students are well aware of the consequences of their choices regarding their student funding, and the government should take the limited 'doenvermogen' of students when making these choices into account when making policies on the funding (Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 3, 2022). An example of this is that some students are eligible for an additional funding, but only if they have an income from part-time jobs that is below a certain threshold. They have to keep track of this themselves, but when they fail to do this due to limited 'doenvermogen' and they earn above the threshold, they sometimes have to pay back months of additional funding. This might lead to them having to pay back a considerable amount of money which might put them into debt (Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 4, 2022).

Here too the 'doenvermogen' plays an important role. In an explanatory memorandum on a number of changes in the student funding system, the minister of Education, Culture and Science discusses in detail what impact every change has on the 'doenvermogen' of students (Kamerstukken II, 36229, nr. 3, 2022). The minister explicitly mentions that the 'doenvermogen' developed by the WRR (2020) was used to assess this.

#### *The legal system*

In regard to the legal system, 'doenvermogen' is mainly discussed with how a low 'doenvermogen' can result in a decreased accessibility to (subsidized) legal counsel of citizens, who might not be capable of finding their way in the Dutch legal system. Several members of parliament have expressed their concerns about this and called upon the government to help these people (Handelingen I, nr. 30, item 3, 2018; Handelingen II, nr. 50, item 7, 2019; Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 242, 2022). In addition, a motion was filed by members of the House of Representatives Van der Graaf (CU), Groothuizen (D66) and Van Dam (CDA) in which they requested to take the 'doenvermogen' of people into account when making further improvements to the subsidized legal council system (Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 169, 2019). In this motion the WRR and 'Weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017) were specifically referenced. The motion was accepted by the House of Representatives with only the VVD, PVV and FvD voting against it.

The minister for Legal Protection responded in July 2019 that 'doenvermogen' taken into account in the analysis of new plans for the subsidized legal council system (Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 177, 2019). Furthermore, the minister mentions how the WRR offered to help in this regard, and that two expert-sessions on this topic were organized with the WRR (Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 190, 2019).

In addition to the subsidized legal council system, there are several examples of a minister of the Ministry of Justice and Security explaining how attention is being paid to 'doenvermogen' in different legal fields (Kamerstukken II, 35498, nr. 3, 2020; Kamerstukken I, 29279, nr. H, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 36264, nr. 3, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 36327, nr. 3, 2023).

In addition to politicians, the Council of State also elaborately discussed that the 'doenvermogen' of the accused should be taken into account in criminal court processes (Kamerstukken II, 36327, nr. 4, 2023)

### *Healthcare*

There are a number of topics within the field of healthcare where 'doenvermogen' is discussed.

A first topic is the 'doenvermogen' of organ donors which was mainly discussed at the beginning of 2018. There were plans to implement a system in which people would automatically become organ donors, unless they registered officially that they did not want to be a donor (Rijksoverheid, 2022a). Opponents of this new system argued that people would fail to register due to a lack of 'doenvermogen' and that they thus automatically would become organ donors against their will (Handelingen I, nr. 17, item 3, 2018; Handelingen I, nr. 18, item 4, 2018).

Another topic is the prevention of health issues: people might know that certain aspects of their lifestyle are unhealthy, but they might experience difficulties changing that lifestyle due to a lack of 'doenvermogen'. The minister of Health, Welfare and Sport says for instance that it is important to take 'doenvermogen' into account when discussing the 'preventieakkoord' (prevention agreement) (Kamerstukken II, 29689, nr. 892, 2018), which includes a series of measures to reduce unhealthy things as smoking, drinking or being overweight (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2023).

A third topic is the 'doenvermogen' of people who require healthcare and have to deal with policies and processes to get the healthcare they need. Claims that these policies should take the 'doenvermogen' of the people who have to deal with them are made on several occasions (Kamerstukken II, 34104, nr. 332, 2021; Kamerstukken II, 35925 XVI, nr. 166, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 29477, nr. 759, 2022).

### *Integration*

The 'doenvermogen' of immigrants is frequently discussed when talking about the integration policy in the Netherlands. Senator Nooren (PvdA) for instance points out that refugees from other countries often come from pitiful situations in which they have experienced a lot of stress and uncertainty, reducing their 'doenvermogen'. The reduced 'doenvermogen' should be taken into account in the integration process of these immigrants, especially in terms of their administrative capacities (Handelingen I, nr. 31, item 4, 2017).

A second example is a number of questions asked by members of parliament from D66 and the Christian Union. They ask questions about how the 'doenvermogen' of immigrants is taken into account in different aspects of the 'inburgeringsplicht' (Integration obligation) (Kamerstukken I, 35483, nr. C, 2020). The minister of Social Affairs and Employment responds by describing in what way 'doenvermogen' was taken into account when constructing these policies (Kamerstukken I, 35483, nr. C, 2020).

Over the years the 'doenvermogenstoets' was also incorporated in the integration policymaking process. The prime example of this was the explanatory memorandum on the new integration law in 2020 (Kamerstukken II, 35483, nr. 3, 2020). In this memorandum, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment extensively discussed how the 'doenvermogen' of immigrants was taken into account when constructing the new policy. The minister also discusses the results of the 'doenvermogenstoets' on the policy that was carried out by DUO, the executive organization that would be responsible for carrying out the policy. DUO concluded that the new integration system did indeed improve in taking the 'doenvermogen' into account in a number of ways (Kamerstukken II, 35483, nr. 3, 2020).

### *Other*

Apart from these policy fields in which 'doenvermogen' is discussed relatively often, there is also a wide variety of topics in which 'doenvermogen' is mentioned on a few occasions:

- The extent to which the digitalization of governmental services takes the lack of 'doenvermogen' in dealing with these digital services into account (Kamerstukken II, 26643, nr. 529, 2018; Handelingen I, nr. 10, item 12, 2022; Handelingen I, nr. 26, item 5, 2023).
- The 'doenvermogen' of prisoners in changing their behavior while in prison (Kamerstukken I, 35122, nr. B, 2020; Kamerstukken I, 35122, nr. C, 2020).
- The 'doenvermogen' of people with an intellectual disability (Kamerstukken II, 24170, nr. 198, 2019).
- The discrimination of people with a lack of 'doenvermogen' (Handelingen I, nr. 39, item 5, 2022).

And the list goes on and on until very specific topics like the 'doenvermogen' of owners of a monument that want to apply for a subsidy for the maintenance of that monument (Kamerstukken II, 32156, nr. 111, 2021).

What becomes clear from this chapter is that the discussion about how the 'doenvermogen' of citizens is taken into account in policy has spread to a wide variety of policy fields.

There is however one specific context that played an important role in the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands: The 'toeslagenaffaire' (Child benefit scandal).

### *The child benefit scandal*

In 2013, the Dutch government discovered a number of fraud cases in which people who were not eligible for receiving child benefits did in fact receive them (NU.nl, 2022). In response to these frauds, the government together with the Tax Administration started to implement measures to prevent people from receiving these benefits in a fraudulent manner. They went way too far in this however, causing thousands of parents to be unjustly labeled as a fraud. This meant that these people, that often did not have much money, suddenly had to pay back thousands of euros, causing big financial problems which in turn caused major other problems such as losing their house, their job or their partner (NU.nl, 2022). It took a long time before the full scale of the problems that caused the child benefit scandal, as it is now called, and the damage inflicted by it was discovered and recognized by the government. In December 2020 a parliamentary enquiry committee published its report about the scandal, concluding that unprecedented injustice was inflicted by the government on the victims of the scandal (NOS, 2020). The controversy that arose because of this was so big that eventually in January 2021 the government resigned because of it (NOS, 2021).

One of the major problems that caused the child benefit scandal, was that parents were labelled 'fraudulent' for very small mistakes. If a parent forgot to turn in a receipt (NU.nl, 2022), or made a small mistake filling in a form or filled in a form too late, they were immediately labeled as a fraud and had to pay back all the benefits they had received until then, which often was thousands of euros (NOS, 2019).

The child benefit scandal is a perfect example of how the government did not take the 'doenvermogen' of parents, that was lowered by the situation they were in, into account in policymaking.

The Tax Administration basically did not allow for any mistake to be made by the parents, although due to a lack of 'doenvermogen' it could be expected that parents unintentionally would make mistakes. The parents were then severely punished by the Tax Department causing them great harm that lasted for years (NOS, 2020), all because of a small mistake.

'Doenvermogen' subsequently played an important role in the public debate that followed after the child benefit scandal, and because of the large public interest in the child benefit scandal, 'doenvermogen' was made more visible by it. The indirect impact of the child benefit scandal on the attention for 'doenvermogen' was also that it is used as an example for why paying attention to 'doenvermogen' is important in policymaking in general. In fact, the WRR (2020) uses the child benefit system as a wrong example in the aforementioned publication on the 'doenvermogenstoets'. An example from the public debate is a letter sent to parliament by the state secretaries of Finance (Kamerstukken I, 35026, nr. U, 2020). In this letter they state that the problems with which citizens were confronted during the child benefit scandal are exemplary for how important it is to take the 'doenvermogen' of citizens into account when making policy. But not only the ministry of Finance use it as an example. In a debate about the integration policy in the Netherlands, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment says "A core question, of course also following the Parliamentary Interrogation Committee on Childcare Benefits, is if the new law has taken the human dimension and the 'doenvermogen' into account." (Kamerstukken II, 32824, nr. 323, 2021). The minister of Justice and Security too uses the child benefit scandal as an example, to state that more attention should be paid to the 'doenvermogen' of people in need of legal counsel (Kamerstukken I, 31753, nr. F, 2023). These examples show that the child benefit scandal did not only result in more attention for 'doenvermogen' in child benefit policies or even tax policies in general, but also in completely other fields like integration policy and legal counsel.

#### *Temporary Commission Executive organizations*

Another relevant development was the research that was done by the 'Tijdelijke Commissie Uitvoeringsorganisaties' (Temporary Commission Executive organizations). This temporary parliamentary commission was tasked with finding out what the problems in the execution of governmental policy were and how these problems could be solved. The commission published its final report 'Klem tussen balie en beleid' (Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 2, 2021) in February 2021. 'Doenvermogen' played a central role in this report, being mentioned a lot of times throughout the report. In addition, one of the main recommendations of the report was to pay more attention to the practicability of policy and 'doenvermogen'. After its publication, the report was referenced by actors in the public debate on a number of occasions when arguing that more attention should be paid to 'doenvermogen' in policies (Handelingen I, nr. 34, item 7, 2022; Kamerstukken II, 32545, nr. 174, 2022; Aanhangsel Handelingen II, 1569, 2023).

The report (Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 2, 2021) makes a lot of references to the original report (WRR, 2017) as well as to the follow-up publication (WRR, 2020). The report also pays a considerable amount of attention to the 'doenvermogenstoets'. Mark Bovens and Anne-Greet Keizer, writers of 'weten is nog geen doen' (WRR, 2017), were invited for a hearing and were even asked by the temporary commission to write a position paper based on their report specifically for this research. Bovens and Keizer accepted this request and wrote the position paper, which was discussed a considerable amount of times in the final report of the commission (Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 2, 2021).

## Use of Doenvermogen

In almost all cases ‘doenvermogen’ is used in public debate, it is used at least to some extent to describe the non-cognitive capacities for which it was created by the WRR. It is however sometimes used in a different way than was originally intended.

The first way, which has been mentioned before, is that on a few occasions actors mention ‘doevermogen’ instead of ‘doenvermogen’. Another mistake that is sometimes made is that the word is used more grammatically wrong in a sentence. An example of this is when the ChristianUnion asks a question to the minister of Social Affairs and Employment about the new integration law: “How does the government rate the ‘doenvermogen’ of this bill?” (Kamerstukken I, 35483, nr. K, 2020, p. 11). What the ChristianUnion probably means is how the government rates the degree to which the lack of ‘doenvermogen’ of people is taken into account with this bill. What they literally ask is how much ‘doenvermogen’ the bill itself has, which for obvious reasons does not make much sense.

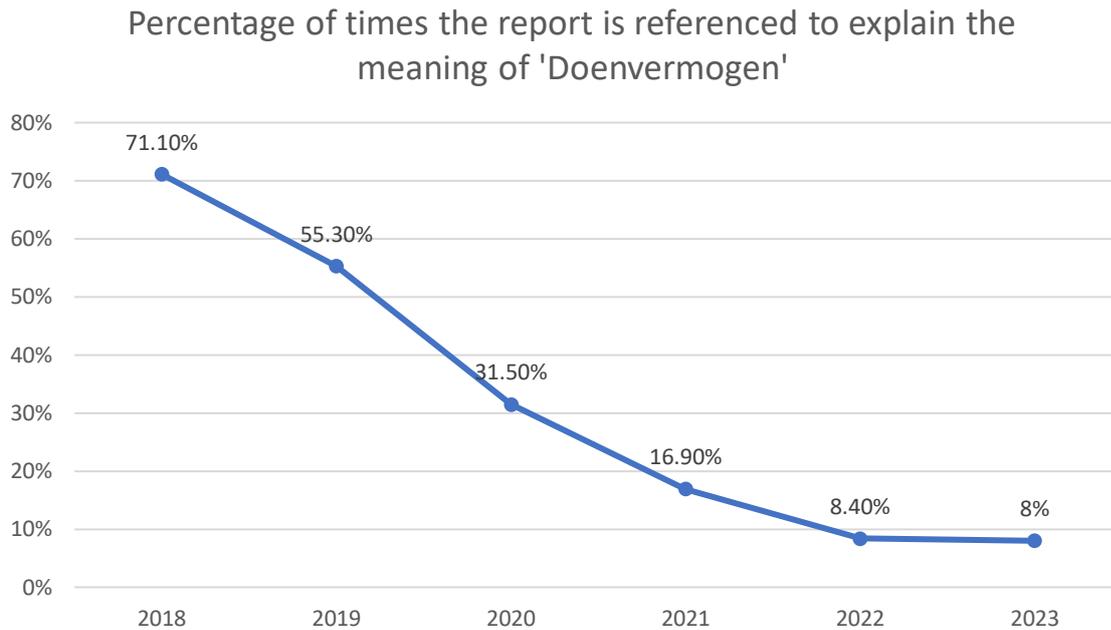
Finally, ‘doenvermogen’ is sometimes used to describe something else than the phenomenon for which it was created. As Mark Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023) also pointed out in the interview, ‘doenvermogen’ was created to describe non-cognitive capacities, but people sometimes mistakenly use it to describe the exact opposite: cognitive capacities. An example of this is that ‘doenvermogen’ is sometimes used to describe people who are illiterate (Kamerstukken I, CXLVI, nr. R, 2022).

Although ‘doenvermogen’ is thus sometimes used in a different way, in general the word is almost always used to describe the non-cognitive capacities for which it was created by the WRR (2017). Part of the reason for this is probably that, as mentioned before, in the first two years after its publication the original report was referenced a lot when talking about ‘doenvermogen’ to explain what it meant. The fact that ‘doenvermogen’ was created in an extensive report by the WRR likely enhanced the understanding of actors in the public debate about what exactly was meant by ‘doenvermogen’.

Part of the reason that the way ‘doenvermogen’ is used has remained rather consistent so far might also be because of its rather recent creation. It would be interesting to analyze how this would develop over the next years, but as of now there are no signs that the way it is used will change in the near future.

## References to the report.

One way of investigating whether ‘doenvermogen’ has become a commonly known word in the public debate is by looking at how often the word is used without explaining what it means. For this I have analyzed how often the original WRR report is referenced to explain the meaning of ‘doenvermogen’ when ‘doenvermogen’ is used. The result in percentage per year is shown by figure 5 below.



*Figure 5. % of times the report is referenced to explain the meaning of 'Doenvermogen' (2017 left out because of small N (N=3)).*

As figure 5 clearly shows, the amount of times the report is specifically mentioned when talking about 'doenvermogen' has rapidly declined over the years. This indicates that through the years more and more people assume that others know what 'doenvermogen' means, and that it thus is a commonly known word in the public debate.

An observation that can also be drawn from figure 5 however is that the report played a very important role in making the word commonly known. The fact that in the first two years after its publication the report was referenced more than 50% of the times 'doenvermogen' was mentioned indicates that the report was paramount in making 'doenvermogen' more known under the actors in the public debate. Apart from simply referencing the report to explain the meaning of the word, it was also often referenced to explain why it was important to pay attention to 'doenvermogen', using arguments from the report to support this standpoint (Kamerstukken II, 34775-XV, nr. 2, 2017; Kamerstukken II, 31753, nr. 169, 2019; Handelingen I, nr. 23, item 8, 2020).

On occasion it is even specifically mentioned that the term 'doenvermogen' has become institutionalized due to the WRR (Kamerstukken I, 31731, nr. I, 2021).

## Discussion

In this section I will discuss the results of my research. I will start by discussing the development of 'doenvermogen' in the Dutch public debate. Then when we have established how the word has developed, we can move on to the main question in this thesis: what role did the WRR play in this development? Did the WRR impact the development of 'doenvermogen' and if so, how?

After this I will discuss the implications of my research, which will include the research methods I used in this thesis.

### The development of 'doenvermogen'

There are multiple indicators that clearly indicate that 'doenvermogen' has become increasingly institutionalized in the public debate in the Netherlands. The first and most straightforward indicator is that the amount of times it is used in parliamentary debates and documents has been consistently and substantially growing since its creation (Figure 2). In addition, the relative amount of times that the word is explained by referencing the report has been consistently decreasing, indicating that the word is not only used more, but is also more and more assumed to be commonly known (Figure 5).

Apart from the absolute growth of use, there is also a wide variety of contexts and different policy areas in which the 'doenvermogen' of citizens is debated. Furthermore, figures 3 & 4 show that there are a lot of different actors in the public debate, cabinet members as well as members of parliament from a range of different political parties, who used 'doenvermogen'. These two indicators show that it is not just a few actors advocating the importance of 'doenvermogen' in specific areas, but that the debate about its importance has spread to a wide variety of actors and contexts.

Apart from the use in the public debate, my research has also provided an indication that attention for 'doenvermogen', primarily through the 'doenvermogen-toets', has become increasingly institutionalized in the policymaking process. There are a number of letters from government and explanatory memorandums that extensively discuss how 'doenvermogen' was taken into account in the making of new policy, and what the consequences of this new policy require from the 'doenvermogen' of citizens. This is enhanced by the fact that the 'doenvermogen-toets' has been included in the 'Beleidskompas', and that the Council of State now assesses the degree to which new policy has taken the 'doenvermogen' of citizens into account.

A final observation from this research is that the theories of Den Hoed & Keizer (2007), Scholten (2009) and (Šetka-Čilić & Ilić-Plauc, 2021) about the importance of societal developments for the impact of reports and development of a neologism are clearly true for the case at hand.

Developments like the child benefit scandal and the research on executive organizations have attracted a lot of attention to the importance of 'doenvermogen'. Furthermore, the child benefit scandal shows that a lot of attention for a subject in one policy area (child benefits) can spill over into other policy areas (General tax policy and immigration policies).

Taken together, these indicators show that 'doenvermogen' has increasingly become a regular talking point in the public debate and the policymaking process, and there are no indications that this will change in the near future. The fact that 'doenvermogen' has recently been added to one of the main Dutch dictionaries supports this view.

But what influence did the WRR have on this process?

## The role of the WRR in the development of 'doenvermogen'

Apart from creating the word, there are a number of ways in which the WRR played an important role in the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate.

First of all, as figure 5 shows, especially in the first two years the report (WRR, 2017) was often used to explain what the word 'doenvermogen' means and why more attention to 'doenvermogen' in policymaking was important. Through the report, the WRR thus helped actors understand what the word meant. This would explain why the word is used almost exclusively describing the non-cognitive capacities, for which the WRR created it. In addition to explaining the meaning of the word, the report was also regularly referenced to argue why paying attention to 'doenvermogen' in policy was important and that it thus should be included more in the policymaking process. Through the report, the WRR therefore impacted the development of 'doenvermogen' by providing a clear explanation for what was meant by 'doenvermogen', as well as elaborate reasons for why attention for 'doenvermogen' was important.

The impact of the WRR did not stop at the publication of the report however. As Mark Bovens (Personal communication, April 17, 2023) said, the writers continued giving presentations to policymakers and politicians for years after the publication of the report, discussing its results with those actors. In the early stages, in these discussions the writers discovered the need for a more detailed description of the 'doenvermogenstoets'. This led to the follow-up publication 'doenvermogen: van toets naar tools' (WRR, 2020), providing practical tools for how to implement a 'doenvermogenstoets' and what should be in it. As mentioned above, the 'doenvermogenstoets' subsequently became more and more institutionalized in the policymaking process, with it even receiving a structural place in the 'Beleidskompas', which referenced the report as well as the follow-up publication several times. By inventing the 'doenvermogenstoets', providing details on how to implement it and promoting it in presentations and discussions, the WRR clearly had a direct impact on the institutionalization of the 'doenvermogenstoets', and through this on the institutionalization of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate.

As mentioned before, relevant societal developments like the child benefits scandal and the research on executive organizations played important roles in showing why more attention for 'doenvermogen' is important, also spreading to other policy areas. The WRR in their turn however can have an impact on those developments.

A clear example of this is the research on executive organizations. The final report of the Temporary Committee Executive Organizations (Kamerstukken II, 35387, nr. 2, 2021) showed multiple forms of direct WRR impact: Both the report and the 'doenvermogenstoets' publication were regularly referenced, the commission invited the writers of the report for a hearing and they were even requested to write a position paper that was used in the research. The WRR thus impacted the research, and the research had a positive impact on the development of the use and perceived importance of 'doenvermogen' in the debate. Through impacting the research, the WRR thus had an indirect positive impact on the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate.

The above shows that the WRR has had several forms of direct as well as indirect positive impact on the growth and development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands.

I also hypothesized that the WRR could have an unintentional negative impact on the development of 'doenvermogen', because opponents of the WRR are likely to oppose its ideas and thus the idea of paying more attention to 'doenvermogen' in the policymaking process. I was however unfortunately not able to test this hypothesis.

## Research methods

As discussed in the theory section, the research on the development of neologisms in the public debate, and the role an actor like a think tank can play in that development, is rather uncharted territory. The methods used in this thesis might thus serve as a starting point for future research on the development of neologisms in the public debate and what factors play a role in that development. I will now briefly discuss how these methods can contribute to said research.

What is important to notice however, especially for the methods used to analyze the role of the WRR, is that every neologism is created in a different context, by a different actor and develops in a different way, with diverging factors impacting its development. The methods in this thesis can thus only provide suggestions and ideas to future researchers on how to analyze the development of the neologism they want to analyze. In the end the researcher has to qualitatively and sometimes inductively assess in what way the development of this neologism can best be analyzed given its context.

### The development of a neologism in the public debate

The first and most straightforward method is of course the counting of the amount of uses per year. This method provides a first indication of whether the neologism has been adopted in the public debate at all, and more importantly if the use of the neologism has been increasing over the years, which would indicate that it is becoming more institutionalized.

This first method thus tells us something about the vertical development of the neologism, is the use of the word in total growing or declining? Two other methods: the analysis of who uses the neologism, and in what contexts it is used, tell us something about the horizontal development of the neologism, how widely is the neologism used?. The first method shows whether the use of the word is restricted to actors or groups of actors, such as certain political parties/movements, or that the word is used by a broad base of different actors and groups of actors across the public debate. The second method tells us something about whether the word is only used in some very specific contexts, or that it has spread out to a wide variety of diverging contexts in the public debate. The relevance of this method does however depend on the nature of the neologism. In the case of 'doenvermogen', it is very relevant since the main message behind the word is that more attention should be paid to 'doenvermogen' in the policymaking process as a whole, and thus not only in certain contexts/policy areas. If the neologism is however rather specific, such as 'vaccine nationalism' (Riaz et al., 2021), which only applies to the debate about vaccines, and in a little broader sense healthcare, the spread of the neologism amongst different contexts is less relevant. Both methods can thus tell us something about the development of the neologism until now, but they also might help in predicting its future: If the use of the neologism is constricted to a few actors/contexts, and the relevance of those actors/contexts decline, the use of the neologism is probably also likely to decline. If on the other side the use of the neologism is spread out between a wide variety of actors/contexts, the neologism is probably more resilient and has a higher chance of long-term survival in the public debate.

A fourth method is analyzing how often the meaning of the neologism has to be explained when using the word. If the word is at some point used naturally in a sentence without having to explain it a lot in the public debate, this might indicate that the word has become, or is at least perceived as, more commonly known in the public debate.

Lastly, through qualitatively analyzing the development and use of the neologism, relevant societal developments that had an impact on the use of the neologism might also be discovered. Through this we not only learn how a neologism developed, but also learn more about what factors played a role in this development. The second analysis, central to this thesis, that might help answer a part of this

'why' question, is the analysis of what role the creator of a neologism, in this case a think tank, might play in the development of a neologism.

### The role of a think tank

I used a number of different methods to analyze in what way the WRR played a role in the development of 'doenvermogen'. These methods can be used as a starting point for analyzing the influence think tanks, or maybe other actors, might have had on the development of a neologism in the public debate.

First of all I analyzed how the neologism was created and what actions the creators undertook that might have influenced the development of the neologism. Doing this provided me with background information and context surrounding the creation and development of 'doenvermogen', on the base of which I could come up with hypotheses of how the creators could have influenced the development of the neologism.

I then went on to do a thorough qualitative analysis, with methods as described earlier, of the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate. Through this analysis I was able to discover multiple ways in which the WRR continued to have an impact on the development of 'doenvermogen' years after its creation. As these ways of impact will probably be different with every neologism, the best way to discover them in my view is to do a broad and detailed qualitative analysis of the development of the neologism, to inductively discover ways in which the creator could have influenced the development of the neologism.

Another method I used was to analyze how often the WRR was referred to when using the word, in order to explain the word. By analyzing how often the creator is referenced when explaining the meaning of a neologism, we get an indication of how important the creator not only was for the creation of the neologism, but also for making it understandable. Apart from this, the specific analysis of 'doenvermogen' in this regard also uncovered that the WRR report in which it was created was regularly referenced to argument why it was important to pay more attention to 'doenvermogen'. Through this analysis we might thus also find how the creator, and in this case its report, might not only influence how well the word is understood, but might also have an impact on the awareness of the importance of the word.

Another, more or less unintentional, way in which a creator might have an influence on the development of a neologism, is the views that actors in the public debate have of this actor. I hypothesized that actors who might oppose the creator of the neologism might also oppose using the neologism itself, as using it could be seen as supporting the creation of the actor they oppose. I was however due to aforementioned reasons not able to test this hypothesis, future research could show if this can indeed be a relevant factor to analyze.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I broadly analyzed how the use of the neologism 'doenvermogen' developed in the public debate in the Netherlands, and what role the WRR, a Dutch think tank and creator of 'doenvermogen' played in this development.

As shown by my analysis, the use of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands steadily increased since its creation in 2017. In this time, the debate about 'doenvermogen' spread to a number of different contexts and actors from almost all corners of the political arena took part in this debate. Apart from the usage of the word, this thesis has also shown a number of signs that indicate that 'doenvermogen', and the idea that more attention should be paid to 'doenvermogen', has become increasingly institutionalized in the public debate and in the policymaking process. These results are thus also relevant for people interested in the developments of policymaking in the Netherlands: 'doenvermogen' has gained an increasingly prominent role in the policymaking process, and there are no signs that that is about to change in the near future.

This thesis also provided a number of ways in which the WRR had an impact on this development. From the original report being vital in spreading awareness of the word and its importance to the many efforts that were put in by the WRR to make 'doenvermogen' and the related 'doenvermogenstoets' more institutionalized, the WRR played a key role in the development of 'doenvermogen' in the public debate in the Netherlands.

This thesis thus not only contributed to the field of neologisms and political discourse, but also explored an indirect way through which think tanks can impact policy: the creation of a neologism that subsequently starts playing a role in the public debate. More research could be done to explore whether other think tanks, or even other actors, used this form of impact.

The research in this thesis is an attempt to uncover some of the factors that influence the development of neologisms in the public debate, and more specifically how the creator of the neologism can affect the subsequent development of the neologism. The obvious limitation of this thesis is that the results are only a small part of the presumably large quantity of factors that play a role in the development of neologisms in the public debate. Furthermore, the results are only drawn from one neologism. More research is needed to uncover what other factors are and how they interdependently determine how different neologisms enter the public debate and how they develop. The research methods used in this thesis can form a basis for future research on this subject.

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