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Kicking in the locked door: The influence of policy consultants during Dutch policymaking.

Kramer, Tijme

Citation

Kramer, T. (2024). *Kicking in the locked door: The influence of policy consultants during Dutch policymaking.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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**Kicking in the locked door: The influence of policy consultants during
Dutch policymaking.**

Author: Tijme Olmo Kramer

Master program: Public Administration, Public Management and Leadership

Supervisor: Dr. Johan Christensen

Date: 8 March 2024

Word count: 13.640

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Chapter 1: Introduction to policy consultancy

1.1. Introduction

Consultants are externally hired by the government to assist with formulating new policies in different topics and sectors (Marciano, 2022, p. 1). Research that has been done on the matter of governments seeking policy advice from external sources focussed mainly on actors who stand in the spotlight (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 131). Examples of these actors are “political advisers, advisory committees, knowledge institutions and lobbyists” (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 131).

1.2. Academic relevance

However, this research focuses on policy consultants. Policy consultants are not quite as visible as the actors mentioned above. Also, in an academic sense, we do not know a lot about the role of policy consultants and to what extent they can exert influence on policymaking (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 131). We do know that the use of policy consultants has risen due to several changes and challenges that governments now face (Marciano, 2022, p. 2). For example, the complexity of policy challenges has increased and the capacity of governments has decreased (Marciano, 2022, p. 2). This can be explained by the emergence of New Public Management, the administrative reform that has led governments to be managed as efficiently as possible like the private sector. This left governments stranded with a lack of capacity, which is why governments now hire policy consultants for their policy expertise as well as their legitimacy (Marciano, 2022, p. 2). In doing so, policy consultants can take on roles such as bringing expertise to the table, coming up with new policy ideas, and they can analyse policies (Marciano, 2022, p. 15). Besides, policy consultants can direct government actors to other sources of information, “mediating expert knowledge and insights about other policy actors’ preferences and interests” (Marciano, 2022, p. 15).

However, the topic of the influence that policy consultants have on policy processes in the context of the Netherlands remains understudied. There is a limited amount of studies that involve the context of the Netherlands. Importantly, none of these studies address the topic of

how much influence policy consultants have on Dutch policymaking, and what conditions their level of influence. That is the knowledge gap that this research seeks to address.

1.3. Societal relevance

Beside the academic relevance, this topic is important in a societal sense as well. There has been a discussion on whether it is desirable to spend so many resources on externally hired personnel compared to normal civil servants (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 151). To further strengthen this argument, some critics mentioned the mediocre performance that externally hired staff bring with them (Kipping & Saint-Martin, 2005, p. 1). Also, critics have pointed out that the external hiring of personnel may lead to a decline in knowledge and efficiency within ministries (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 151). All of this may lead to a malfunctioning government, which is not in the interest of society. This is stipulated in the work of Mazzucato and Collington (2023) as well. They argue that governments learning from consultants is quite detrimental to their functioning. For instance, consultancy companies depend on acquiring future contracts. Therefore, these companies have an incentive to keep governments from learning and becoming independent. Otherwise, these consultancy companies become obsolete (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 153). On top of this, Mazzucato and Collington (2023) argue that using consultants leads to a decrease in organisational knowledge. They illustrate how this happens by saying “the less an organization does something, the less it knows how to do it” (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 153).

1.4. Purpose of the study and research questions

This research aims to answer the following research question: “How much influence do policy consultants have on Dutch policy, and what conditions their level of influence?”. An attempt will be made to answer this research question with a research design that involves a single-case study with qualitative data based on interviews with policy consultants and government employees who address the role of policy consultants, and what conditions their level of influence. Also, policy documents will be analysed, as well as government and consultancy reports. The single-case study that will be focused upon will be that of the SEPP-subsidy (Subsidieregeling Elektrische Personenauto’s Particulieren) policy from the Dutch

Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. This is a subsidy that stimulates citizens to purchase electric cars. This policy area has been chosen because of the interaction that exists between a consultancy company called MuConsult and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, as well as an abundance of accessible data about the policy process.

Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical argument

2.1. Introduction

This chapter of this thesis will include several theoretical frameworks about the influence of consultants in government. The question that will be addressed is as follows: “How much influence do policy consultants have on Dutch policy, and what conditions their level of influence?”.

Academic literature on the concept of management consultants has commenced with the work from Meredith and Martin (1970). They argued that consultants were hired in order to gain more capacity in terms of staffing, as well as gaining more expertise that is not present in an organisation (Meredith & Martin, 1970, p. 390). Furthermore, they predicted that the roles of management consultants were to become more prominent as time progressed (Meredith & Martin, 1970, p. 395).

From that moment forward, academics have made an attempt to grasp the influence and roles that consultants have on policymaking and processes (Bortz, 2023, p. 213). Nowadays, we know this area of academic work as the ‘consultocracy’ literature (Bortz, 2023, p. 213). This field has been enriched by a diverse set of angles and perspectives, such as “critical accounting, public administration, information communication studies, education studies, international political economy and organisational science” (Bortz, 2023, p. 213).

Several academics stipulated the capability of consultants to influence the process of policymaking. For example, Lapsley and Oldfield (2001) argue that consultants advise the government on forming and implementation of policies (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001, p. 525). Saint-Martin (2000) agrees at least to some extent with that notion. They argue that the influence of consultants is mostly dependent on political processes, which could hamper the ability of consultants to influence policy making (Saint-Martin, 2004, p. 206). By no means does this mean that consultants have no meaningful impact on policy making (Saint-Martin, 2004, p. 206).

2.2. Activities and roles of policy consultants

In their study, Marciano (2022) elaborated on the roles that consultants could have on policy formulation and why these are different in various contexts. They identify core and linkage roles for consultants (Marciano, 2022, p. 15). Core roles for consultants include policy advice, coming up with ideas for concrete policy alternatives, and policy analysis (Marciano, 2022, p. 15). Linkage roles differ from this, because these include more indirect activities. Examples are connecting the government to other actors and knowledge, and mediating expertise and insights of the interests of other actors (Marciano, 2022, p. 15). Furthermore, they explain that a demand for consultants is created by a lack of expertise from government agencies (Marciano, 2022, p. 15). Also, a policy environment with high complexity in certain policy sectors produces a demand for consultants (Marciano, 2022, p. 15).

In another study, Marciano (2023) recognized that consultants can be defined differently due to the various activities that consultants undertake (Marciano, 2023, p. 573). Traditionally, consultants are defined as experts (Marciano, 2023, p. 573). However, their roles are much more varied as they participate in policymaking in various ways. In this study, consultants are defined by means of four categories. Firstly, as workers who have expertise and knowledge and subsequently provide policy expertise and analysis (Marciano, 2023, p. 573). Secondly, they can highlight all actors of a policy field (Marciano, 2023, p. 573). Thirdly, consultants can think of ways to add legitimacy to policy (Marciano, 2023, p. 573). Lastly, consultants are able to navigate the preferences of all actors that are involved in the policy field (Marciano, 2023, p. 573).

The argument by Marciano (2023) that policy consultants are able to provide legitimacy to policy is especially relevant in explaining why they are hired. Research has indicated that policy consultants are used by the government as an instrument to legitimise disputed or debatable policy issues, such as “downsizing, outsourcing, and privatisation” (Marciano, 2023, p. 579). Policy consultants that provide legitimacy to government programs are also highlighted in the work of Leys (1999). In this study, the National Health Service from the United Kingdom has been brought together with policy consultants. In doing so, Leys (1999) showed a negative side of policy consultants giving legitimacy to government plans. Consultants were used by the government to get legitimation for a policy that a ministry

already wanted to perform, whether it was in the best interest of the public or not (Leys, 1999, p. 448). This was mostly done for financial reasons (Leys, 1999, p. 448). Consultants themselves will not give advice that a ministry does not want to hear, since that might damage their relationship with their client (Leys, 1999, p. 448). This is problematic because consultants are reliant on getting consultancy work (Leys, 1999, p. 448).

In their study, Momani and Khirfan (2013) also found that policy consultants can give legitimacy to government plans. This study sought to explain why consultants were used in the planning of cities in Ontario, Canada. They looked for answers from a functionalist and constructivist perspective. From a functionalist perspective, it is argued that consultants are hired due to the lack of resources in terms of staffing and time (Momani & Khirfan, 2013, p. 405). From a constructivist viewpoint, it is said that consultants are used for their legitimacy (Momani & Khirfan, 2013, p. 405).

Momani (2017) stipulates that not much is known about the ever-increasing role of consultants in government affairs (Momani, 2017, 245). Consultants have marketed their expertise as indispensable in complex and pressing government affairs (Momani, 2017, 245). Consultants have given advice in various areas, such as education, health care, taxation and the privatisation of government agencies (Momani, 2017, 245). In this study, four tactics of consultants were identified in how they exert their influence on policy making. Firstly, consultants sell their ideas by acting as “analysers of unique knowledge leading to ‘Big Data’” (Momani, 2017, 245). Secondly, consultants mention that they are able to stay on top of developments in a policy field and sketch a picture of this (Momani, 2017, 245). Thirdly, consultants incorporate a positive language that brings a cheerful manner of solving problems (Momani, 2017, 245). Lastly, consultants can translate ambiguous and complex matters into a plan of action, which enables the government to act upon these matters (Momani, 2017, 245).

Speers (2007) views the relationship between consultants and the government as one that has both tension and opportunity. The hiring of consultants has led to “opportunity for civil servants to gain external knowledge about how to improve their processes, programmes, services and policies” (Speers, 2007, p. 197). Also, consultants are presented with the opportunity to improve their own skills and services (Speers, 2007, p. 197). Furthermore, the policies can be enhanced to the wishes of citizens and politicians (Speers, 2007, p. 197). However, there is also a tension in the sense that consultants might get too much influence over policy processes (Speers, 2007, p. 197). Besides, the goals of the private sector are

different from those of the public sector (Speers, 2007, p. 197). For example, the primary goal in the private sector is to make a profit, while the main goal in the government is often more complex (Speers, 2007, p. 198). This can be explained by the fact that the goals of the government involve many actors and interests (Speers, 2007, p. 198).

Speers (2018) makes another interesting insight. Besides doing policy analysis, consultants are also hired to influence policy for other actors (Speers, 2007, p. 204). For example, consultants are hired by business enterprises to do policy analysis in a specific manner that will affect government dealings (Speers, 2007, p. 204). Sometimes, these actors might be in a competition with each other to influence the government in the way they want (Speers, 2007, p. 204). At other times, these actors work together (Speers, 2007, p. 204). This gives consultants a lot of influence over the policy process. According to Speers (2007), consultants are now present in all stages of the policy process.

Howlett and Migone (2013) have also attempted to grasp the amount of influence that consultants have. In their study, they point out a concern over the costs that come with the hiring of consultants (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 241). Also, they point out to the downside that the democracy and direction of policy can be undermined by consultants (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 241). However, they have found that the influence of consultants in the policy process is hard to grasp (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 244). They argue that scholars look differently on this topic and it is hard to make a clear conclusion due to a lack of empirical data and research into the consulting sector in the public sector (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 244). Therefore, they pointed out some difficulties in the data and methodologies they have identified during their research on the influence of consultants on the policy process. One of these issues is that governments can report weakly on contracts and consulting (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 245). This was problematic for studies that tried to investigate the scale of the use of consultancy services by governments (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 245). Also, this made it hard to differentiate between different types of consultancy practices within governments in terms of different policy areas (Howlett & Migone, 2013, p. 245).

2.3. The level of influence by policy consultants

Bortz argues that the influence of consultants on policymaking is highly variable (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). In his research, he highlights which variables are important when one is trying to explain variability in the influence of consultants on policymaking. These variables can be described as follows.

Firstly, ‘openness’ is a key variable in explaining the influence of consultants on policy making (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). Openness is conceptualised as the accessibility of state institutions to consultants (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). An important mechanism behind this variable is that policy consultants have gained more access to public institutions, such as ministries. This is manifested in collaborations between the public and private sector (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). Importantly, an example of this is the increased accessibility of consultancy companies to public institutions (Bortz, 2023, p. 214).

Secondly, ‘trust’ is another important explanatory variable in explaining the influence of consultants on policy making (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). Trust is conceptualised as the usage of personal relations and networks by consultants to exert influence on policymaking (Bortz, 2023, p. 214). The key mechanisms behind this variable can be understood by the following example. For instance, when a consultant increases trust over time with important public managers, said public managers will increasingly count and depend on a consultant for policy advice (Bortz, 2023, p. 214).

Lastly, ‘resonance’ is vital in explaining the extent of the influence that consultants have on policy making (Bortz, 2023, p. 226). Resonance is conceptualised as the ability of consultants to use a familiar language with regards to their client (Bortz, 2023, p. 227). This mechanism becomes clear in the following example. When a consultant and a public manager collaborate, it will be important to the public manager that the consultant is able to use the same concepts, terms and jargon. In other words, the consultant needs to use a similar language as his client in order to increase his influence in policy making. Importantly, openness and trust are necessary but insufficient conditions to gain influence on policymaking (Bortz, 2023, p. 227). Consultants need to make sure that their counsel resonates to make a meaningful impact (Bortz, 2023, p. 227).

In their study, Brint (1990) has found that consultants do not have that much influence. They have described the influence of consultants as a limited mandate, although there are cases where consultants have more influence. This study also suggests that more research needs to be done on why there is variation in the amount of influence that consultants have (Brint, 1990, p. 361). Therefore, a framework for analysing this variation has been proposed in this study. Four positions have been identified in how many influence consultants have (Brint, 1990, p. 365). The first two positions go from a lot of influence to essentially no influence. The last two positions are in between these views.

Firstly, technocracy, which refers to a situation in which technical experts have the most power (Brint, 1990, p. 365). This idea is based on a situation when people with technical knowledge and expertise gain increasingly more power and authority, while traditional politicians only express a direction by showing interests and values (Brint, 1990, p. 365). In other words, experts become the dominant driving factor in the policy process.

Secondly, the servants-of-power position. This is a position that seems to be the one that is the most widely accepted within the realm of social scientists (Brint, 1990, p. 366). In this view, it is said that the views of consultants are only secondary to the views and interests of economic and political actors (Brint, 1990, p. 365). This view means that consultants essentially have no influence whatsoever, especially in contexts where there is controversy (Brint, 1990, p. 365). Also, consultants are only being brought in when their suggestions further strengthen and legitimise existing policies (Brint, 1990, p. 365).

Thirdly, the limited mandate position. This position only allows for a limited amount of influence that consultants can have compared to other views (Brint, 1990, p. 366). Whereas consultants will have an unlimited amount of influence on technical matters, they will only have limited influence on matters with a national urgency. Examples of this include “whether or not to finance a supersonic transport, to build antimissile defences in space, to ban the use of a carcinogenic chemical, or to extend high levels of additional aid to debt-ridden nations” (Freidson, 1986, p. 142). This view shows that consultants can only exert influence in technical issues, but not in political issues (Brint, 1990, p. 367).

Lastly, the extensive mandates position. This position is somewhat related to the position of technocracy, but it does not go as far. (Brint, 1990, p. 367). In this position, consultants lay their attention on specific policy areas where they can exert their influence (Brint, 1990, p.

367). In these policy areas, consultants have an authority which is only limited to a specific policy area (Brint, 1990, p. 367). This stands in contrast to the technocracy view, as in that view consultants can exert influence in every policy area due to their expertise. Beside the proposition of these views, this study also identified some factors that are important in explaining the variability in the amount of influence that consultants have. Three factors were identified.

The first factor is rationalisation (Brint, 1990, p. 373). With rationalisation is meant that a policy issue can be framed or disguised by policy consultants as a mere technicality, while in reality it has considerable societal impact (Brint, 1990, p. 374). Rationalisation is conceptualised as the ability of consultants to frame or disguise policy issues in such a manner that they seem like a mere technicality, while in reality they have a considerable societal impact (Brint, 1990, p. 374).

Another factor is the political environment (Brint, 1990, p. 376). The political environment can be weakly established because of the creation of new institutions. New institutions will face challenges, such as mass immigration and industrialism (Brint, 1990, p. 376). That is where the consultants come in as they can provide guidance in these challenges. The political environment is conceptualised as the ability of consultants to provide guidance in situations where new institutions are faced with societal challenges such as mass immigration and industrialism.

The last factor that is addressed is defined as occupational characteristics (Brint, 1990, p. 377). This entails “the various professions’ relative centrality in social regulation” (Brint, 1990, p. 380). Occupational characteristics are conceptualised as the ability of consultants to “seize power” by taking advantage of a workplace (Brint, 1990, p. 378). Not all workplaces can be taken advantage of by consultants to exert their influence (Brint, 1990, p. 378). According to Brint (1990), only occupation on the social side can be taken advantage of by consultants, such as “law, economics, medicine, and higher education” (Brint, 1990, p. 378).

2.4. Policy consultants in the context of the Netherlands

The topic of the influence that policy consultants have on policy processes in the context of the Netherlands has been understudied. In fact, there is only one study that addresses the roles of policy consultants in the context of the Netherlands. In the study of Van den Berg et al.

(2019), the activities that externally hired policy consultants participate in have been investigated in the context of the Netherlands. In this study, policy consultants were asked about the nature of their activities (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 140). It became clear that there are four different types of activities, which are “policy advice, policy implementation, policy evaluation and process support activities” (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 140). Externally hired policy consultants partake the most in giving policy advice and providing process support (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 140). Policy consultants are less frequently engaged in the activities of policy implementation and policy evaluation (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 140). Furthermore, policy consultants have been involved in the policy process in all ministries (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 141). However, it is apparent that the activity of policy advice by policy consultants is reported the most at the ministries of Social Affairs and Employment, Infrastructure and Environment and Public Health, Wellbeing and Sports (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 141). Participation in the activity of policy implementation by policy consultants was reported most frequently at the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs and Social Affairs and Employment (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 141).

Besides, Van den Berg et al. (2019) addresses the activities of externally hired policy consultants from the viewpoint of governments as well. That is to say which activities the Dutch government hires the policy consultants for (Van den Berg, 2019, p. 142). A distinction is made between “a) policy-sensitive activities, b) policy support activities, and c) non-policy-related support activities, hired through generic employment agencies” (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142).

Policy-sensitive activities can consist of different types of advice, such as organisational change and how to communicate changes in policies (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). In other words, these activities mean that policy consultants give policy advice. In this study, policy-sensitive activities are categorised in three concepts. Firstly, in giving policy-substantiating advice, which entails creating and changing policies (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). Secondly, in giving policy support, which could include giving workshops and hosting conferences with experts to form new policies (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). Lastly, in giving policy expertise, which includes policy evaluations (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). An example of this could be a cost-benefit analysis (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142).

Policy support activities, not to be confused with policy support from the last paragraph, consist of policy consultants giving advice on new and existing policies (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). Examples of this include policy consultants giving advice on legal, ICT, and financial matters (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). Legal advice refers to a situation where policy consultants can advise on how a new or existing policy will work out in a legal sense. Advice on ICT means that policy consultants advise on how to develop certain ICT products (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). An example of a financial case is an internal audit and accountancy activity (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142).

The last category, non-policy-related support, refers to hiring external employees to increase the capacity of ministries (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142). This is most needed in periods of high demands from society (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 142).

On a final note, the study by Van den Berg et al. (2019) concludes that policy-making advice is one of the least conducted activities by policy consultants in the Netherlands. Across ministries, only 3.5 percent of responding policy consultants reported that they participated in this kind of activity (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 144). This is an interesting finding, since policy-making advice might be associated with the amount of influence that policy consultants have on policy. This study has given insight in how policy consultants work and the activities that are associated with them in the context of the Netherlands. This is quite insightful for the purpose of this thesis. However, it is important to note that this study did not go into any factors at play that can explain how much influence policy consultants actually have.

2.5. Theoretical expectations

Now that some factors that condition the levels have been identified in the literature, a number of theoretical expectations will be made. The theory chapter has shown that factors like openness, resonance, trust, framing of issues, political environments, and occupational characteristics are associated with the level of influence that policy consultants have on policymaking. Therefore, the following theoretical expectations will be formulated.

Theoretical expectation 1: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater openness, which means the accessibility of state institutions to consultants.

Theoretical expectation 2: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater trust, which means the usage of personal relations and networks by consultants to exert influence on policymaking.

Theoretical expectation 3: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater resonance, which means the ability of consultants to use a familiar language with regards to their client.

Theoretical expectation 4: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater rationalisation, which means the ability of consultants to frame or disguise issues with considerable societal implications as mere technicalities.

Theoretical expectation 5: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is a turbulent political environment, which means the ability of consultants to provide guidance in situations where new institutions are faced with societal challenges such as mass immigration and industrialism.

Theoretical expectation 6: Policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there are more favourable occupational characteristics, which means the ability of consultants to take advantage of a workplace in order to seize power. In the event that policy consultants are externally hired, they might gain access to higher bureaucrats and exert their influence on them.

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1. Research design

In order to answer the research question: “What activities are policy consultants involved in during policy processes and what factors condition the level of influence that policy consultants have on Dutch policy?”, an explanatory, deductive, qualitative, research design has been used involving a single-case study. A single-case study research design involves a research on a single unit or case, analysing a set of different types of evidence (Toshkov, 2016, p. 285). The examination of evidence is from within the case, meaning that no comparison will be made between multiple cases. Instead, evidence will be only used that is gained from within the case (Toshkov, 2016, p. 286). Single-case study research designs can provide meaningful insights in a situation with or without a lot of well-founded theories (Toshkov, 2016, p. 285).

In most cases, single-case study research designs are used to try and fully explain certain decisions or results within cases (Toshkov, 2016, p. 288). Furthermore, single-case study research designs are useful for the testing of theories (Toshkov, 2016, p. 290). For example, to investigate whether a mixture of independent variables have an effect on a dependent variable (Toshkov, 2016, p. 290). Another example is when one investigates whether the causal mechanisms mentioned in the hypothesis are working as predicted (Toshkov, 2016, p. 290). In this single-case study research design, existing theories will be tested and potentially new theories might be created. This research design is modelled in such a way that it is possible to analyse the case study at a significant depth and to delve into the causal chain of variables. This is a significant advantage of a single-case study research design compared to comparative large-N studies, which oftentimes attempt to find “a systemic relationship between variables and purport a causal mechanism that connects them, but do not bring evidence that the mechanism operates in reality” (Toshkov, 2016, p. 291). In short, this single-case research design attempts to try and search for new information to gain more insights in the causal chain of this particular case study. In doing so, existing theories will be tested in a scenario from the real world. At the same time, it is possible that new insights are gathered that can provide the basis for new theories.

To do this, a method of doing case study research is needed. However, much is still unknown on how to measure the influence of experts on policies (Christensen, 2022, p. 2). One of the reasons that there is a lack of research on this topic is due to a lack of know-how to undertake such studies (Christensen, 2022, p. 2). Christensen (2022), attempted to remedy this by coming up with different methodologies to study the influence that experts have, including policy consultants. Five methodologies were formulated to be fitting for studying expert influence (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Two of these are somewhat traditional, which consist of “process-tracing and surveys of attributed influence” and three are relatively new ways to study expert influence, which consist of “quantitative analysis of preference attainment, text reuse analysis and citation analysis” (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). As stated earlier, this research is of a qualitative nature and it will use the methodology of process tracing.

Process tracing involves following a policy process from the beginning to the end (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). That is from the beginning of the policy process, indicating the preferences of policy consultants to the end of the policy process, which entails the resulting policy decisions (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Process tracing can be done by undertaking five steps. Firstly, by uncovering “the initial preferences of experts and those of other political actors” (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Secondly, by tracing “the access of experts to decision-makers” (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Thirdly, by tracing the efforts that experts make to promote their preferences to decision-makers (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Fourthly, by uncovering how decision-makers react to the influence efforts that experts make (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Lastly, by showing to what extent the preferences of experts are reproduced in an eventual policy decision (Christensen, 2022, p. 6). Typically, these steps are based on data such as policy documents and semi-structured interviews with persons who were involved in the policy process such as bureaucrats and experts (Christensen, 2022, p. 7). Examples of these persons can be bureaucrats and experts (Christensen, 2022, p. 7).

In this study, the policy process is described by reviewing government and policy documents, as well as consultancy reports. Examples of this include decision notes and letters to the House of Representatives. Besides, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with government employees and policy consultants from MuConsult. Interview questions have been formulated in such a way that the topic of policy consultant influence is addressed. In doing so, the preferences of government employees and policy consultants are described. Then, the access of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to policy

consultants is described. After this, it is described whether the policy consultants try to advertise their preferences to the ministry, as well as the ways in which the policy consultants attempt this. Next, it will be highlighted in which ways the ministry employees reacted to this. Lastly, the potential preferences of policy consultants that are reproduced in the final policy decision will be focused on.

3.2. Case selection

The case study will be that of the subsidy called “Subsidieregeling Elektrische Personenauto’s Particulieren” (SEPP-subsidy) from the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. More specifically, the decision of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to postpone the yearly reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024.

This case study has been chosen, since it provides an opportunity to examine the dependent and the independent variable(s) of this study. The dependent variable, the level of influence that policy consultants have on Dutch policymaking, as well as the independent variables, the factors that condition the level of influence from policy consultants can be examined. After all, the SEPP subsidy is a Dutch policy that can be influenced by policy consultants. Another reason why this case study has been chosen is that the factors that condition the level of influence of policy consultants on Dutch policymaking has not yet been studied in the context of the Netherlands. This single-case study is in the Dutch context, which enables this study to explore these factors in the Dutch context. Furthermore, this case allows for analysing the causal mechanisms that were identified in the theory chapter in the real world (Toshkov, 2016, p. 291). But what makes this case-study stand out from others is that it presents a sufficient amount of available and accessible data. When looking at other potential case studies, this is not the case. The fact that this case study presents plentiful data is highlighted by the number of people who were involved in the policy process that were willing to participate in interviews. Besides, there are other available sources to be examined, such as policy documents and consultancy reports. Therefore, the methodology of process tracing can be used to reconstruct and analyse the case study in full.

3.3. Data collection methods

In this study, the data has been collected by evaluating policy documents, consultancy reports, and conducting interviews with people who were involved in the policy process. The documents that have been reviewed consist of policy documents from the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and consultancy reports from MuConsult, a consultancy company involved in the policy process. In this way, the involved actors of the policy process have been identified. Besides, several other components of the policy process were traced from these documents, such as the chronology of the policy process and the motivations behind the decisions that were made by the various actors involved in the policy process. The latter was made possible through the analysis of citations in both the policy and consultancy reports to examine the influence of policy consultants from MuConsult on the final decisions of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management regarding the SEPP-subsidy.

After reviewing the available documents, interviews were conducted based on the insights that were obtained during the reviewing phase of the policy documents. The interviews were narrative and semi-structured. In this way, a reconstruction was made of the chain of events and the roles of various actors (Neuman, 2013, p. 496). Besides, more empirical insights about the dependent and independent variable(s) and the motivations of actions were examined. The interviewees have been asked about the nature of their involvement with the policy process and the chain of events. They were also asked about what they think about the influence of consultants and the mechanics behind that.

At first, interviewees were selected based on the employees that were identified on the website of MuConsult. During the interviews with the employees from MuConsult, involved actors from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management were identified by asking which employees from the ministry were also involved in the policy process. All interviewees were contacted by means of e-mail and telephone calls. In this study, four respondents have been interviewed. There are two interviewees who are employed at MuConsult and two interviewees who are employed at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

The employees from MuConsult who were interviewed are policy consultants. They were both involved in the policy process of the SEPP-subsidy policy by conducting a research and

report as an assignment for the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. One policy consultant was responsible for the analysis and research itself, while the other policy consultant was responsible for the writing of the report. During this research, they were both motivated by their interest in the cars and the sustainable developments of the car sector.

The employees from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management who were interviewed are a policy officer and a program manager. These interviewees were also involved in the policy process of the SEPP-subsidy policy. However, they had different roles. The policy officer was involved in the policy process from his position as he was responsible for developing policies on the domain of electric transportation. He was responsible for stimulating electric transportation through financial means. The program manager was involved in the policy process as he was responsible for the ministry department on the topic of sustainable mobility. His role is explaining the activities of the sustainable mobility department to the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

All interviews were conducted through the platform of Microsoft Teams. In doing so, records were made of the interviewees so that the data could be processed afterwards by transcribing and coding the interviews.

3.4. Operationalisation of variables

In this part of the chapter, the dependent and the independent variable(s) will be operationalised. The dependent variable, the level of influence that consultants have on Dutch policymaking, will be operationalized “as a policy change that would not have happened without the advice of consultants.” Indicators of this include citations in decision notes and letters to the House of Representatives that point to the report of MuConsult being used in the final policy decision. Other indicators were identified by asking questions during interviews, in which interviewees were asked whether they believe if the research and report conducted by MuConsult was influential in the decision of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to postpone reducing the subsidy budget of the SEPP-subsidy in 2024.

The independent variables openness, resonance, trust, rationalisation, political environments, and occupational characteristics are operationalized with the interview question “which factors do you think that contributed to the report being influential?”. The reason that the independent variables are operationalised with an interview question is that the interviews are

used as the main strategy for identifying the independent variables. This general question is the only question that is asked about these independent variables for the sake of ensuring neutral answers and preventing bias. In a situation where the interviewer asked specifically about each independent variable, the answers of interviewees might have been steered in a way that would not have happened if the question was asked neutrally.

3.5. Threats to validity and reliability

This part of the chapter will highlight the threats to this single-case research design. As is the case with all research designs, there are some threats and flaws that need to be taken into account. In this research design however, the first threat is the generalizability of the research design. It is within the nature of this research design to only address one case study. Such a small number of case studies is not likely to be representative of the general population (Christensen, 2022, p. 7). Because of this, it can be difficult to create general conclusions that are applicable to a lot of other cases (Christensen, 2022, p. 7). Therefore, the external validity might be compromised (Toshkov, 2016, p. 304). In a situation where the population of policy processes is homogeneous, this would not necessarily be a threat. However, in reality, the population of policy processes is highly heterogeneous. Every policy process incorporates different actors, each with their own motivations and contributions to the policy process. Also, the political environments in which policy processes happen can differ greatly. This makes for a significant threat to the generalizability of this research. At the same time, the use of a single-case research design can contribute to creating new insights and new theories. In turn, these might be worthwhile to explain other cases (Toshkov, 2016, p. 305).

Another threat to this research design is that it is dependent on already created theories (Toshkov, 2016, p. 305). If this theory is absent and the causal structure between events is missing, it becomes quite hard to put together well-founded explanations (Toshkov, 2016, p. 305). At the very least, there must be a high probability that actions are linked together (Toshkov, 2016, p. 305). Thankfully, this research design makes use of a case with plentiful information. Still, this threat is a serious consideration in conducting this study.

Process tracing itself is not free from threats either. This becomes especially apparent when conducting interviews. Interviewees might not answer in a truthful manner (Toshkov, 2016, p. 306). There can be many reasons for this, such as answering in a socially desirable way. Or

the information that is asked by the interviewer might be classified, which could put the interviewee in a difficult situation (Toshkov, 2016, p. 306). Interviewees might also be reluctant toward the risk and fear of exposing their own actions to the public if a study is published, which could influence their answers. To sum up, there are several threats and considerations that need to be taken into account in conducting this research.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1. Background and early years of the SEPP-subsidy policy from 2020 until 2022

This part of the chapter will start with an introduction of what the “Subsidieregeling Elektrische Personenauto’s Particulieren” (SEPP-subsidy) is and a general chronology will be given up until the point where the case study begins.

The SEPP-subsidy is a subsidy that is supposed to stimulate the choice for electric cars in the smaller and middle class segments of the car market (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). The subsidy does so by attempting to make the price difference between electric cars and cars that use fossil fuel smaller (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). Specifically, the subsidy is for private individuals who purchase or lease a new or used electric car with a price between €12.000,- and €45.000,-. The subsidy for new electric cars is in effect for five years until June 2025 and it has a budget of €152 million (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). This differs from the subsidy that is available for used electric cars, which is in effect for four years until June 2024 with a budget of €100 million (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). Citizens who buy an electric car are supposed to keep it for at least three years, whereas citizens who lease an electric car are supposed to keep it for at least four years. If they do not comply, then they must pay the remaining subsidy back with regards to the remaining duration (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6).

The amount of subsidy that citizens can apply for when buying a new electric car will decrease from €4.000,- in 2020 to €2550,- in 2025 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). The reasoning behind this is that the price of electric cars are expected to decrease as time progresses. The amount of subsidy that citizens can apply for when buying used electric cars will be set at €2.000,- for the whole duration of the subsidy (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 6). This means that there are two separate budgets available for new and used electric cars.

The timeline of the SEPP-subsidy started on the 4th of March in 2020, when the intended concept version of the SEPP-subsidy was presented to the House of Representatives. The

cabinet wanted that driving electric cars would become affordable and an interesting option for every driver in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Infrastructuur, 2020, p. 1). Therefore, it was agreed upon in the National Climate Agreement of 2019 that more incentives were needed to be created for citizens to drive electric cars. After all, one of the goals in the agreement is that every new sold car is supposed to be electric in 2030. In creating these incentives, the second-hand market for electric cars would be enhanced. Another goal of the agreement is that there is a fully developed second-hand market for electric cars in 2025. The SEPP-subsidy was supposed to be such an incentive and it would enable citizens to apply for subsidies to buy or lease an electric car. In the formulation of the policy, an agency called the “Formule E-Team” (FET) was involved. The FET is an agency that includes a public-private collaboration which represents the business sector, consumer organisations, and expert bodies on the subject of electric-powered mobility.

On the 1st of July in 2020, the SEPP-subsidy has taken effect (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 2). From this day onwards, citizens were able to request subsidies at an institution called the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (in Dutch: Rijksdienst Voor Ondernemend Nederland), which is responsible for the execution of the subsidy.

In 2021, an evaluation was conducted on the SEPP-subsidy. This evaluation was supposed to investigate the question whether the subsidy was still achieving its goals and whether it could be improved (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 8). The answer during the evaluation was that it was fundamentally achieving its goals (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 8). However, it was concluded that there was a huge demand for the subsidy. The available budget for 2020 was depleted rapidly for both new and used electric cars. Therefore, the decision was made to make the budget for the subsidy of 2021 available during the year of 2020 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2021, p. 9). As a result, during 2021, there was no subsidy budget left and citizens were not able to apply for the SEPP-subsidy anymore in 2021, both for new and used electric cars. In the years that followed, up until 2022, the budget for the subsidy was used in full as well (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). Up until 2022, it can be concluded that the subsidy performed well. Each year, the annual subsidy budget was spent in full. In 2023, however, this trend would change dramatically. The next part of the chapter will dive into this change. Furthermore, it is important to note that this point in chronology marks the start of the case study in this research.

4.2. A change of trends in the SEPP-subsidy policy in 2023

In 2023, the bureaucrats at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management were busy with the analysis, performance and evaluation of the SEPP-subsidy (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). As stated before, during 2020, 2021, and 2022, there was a large amount of requests for the subsidy. As a result, the budget for the subsidies was used up each year (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). However, in early 2023, the ministry observed that this trend changed drastically. There were not as many requests for the subsidy in 2023 as in the years before (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024).

The ministry extrapolated this trend and came to the conclusion that the budget was not going to be fully spent in 2023 (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). The sentiment that the demand for the subsidy was not at the same level in 2023 compared to the years before is reflected in a letter that was sent to the House of Representatives as well. In this letter, it is mentioned that there was going to be 43,5 million euros left of the subsidy budget for new electric cars in 2023 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 2). Still, the ministry did not immediately act upon this. Instead, they waited to see if this situation would change over time. Also, the ministry discussed the situation with external parties of the car sector, asking them for their insights (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024).

At the same time, the ministry started to delve into possible causes of the lacklustre performance of the SEPP-subsidy in 2023. Possible causes that were identified included the rising price of electricity and electric cars themselves, as well as the loss of tax benefits for electric cars in 2026 (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). The rising price of electric cars was especially thought to be detrimental to the performance of the SEPP-subsidy, because the subsidy budgets were originally formulated with the idea that the prices of electric cars would decrease over time (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024).

The bureaucrats at the ministry wanted to know whether their hypotheses were right about the low amount of requests for the subsidy (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water

Management, January 26, 2024). Therefore, the ministry wanted to task an independent agency to look into the causes of the low amount of requests for the subsidy (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). MuConsult was asked for this and they took on this assignment.

4.3. The research and report conducted by MuConsult in 2023

From the viewpoint of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, MuConsult was specifically asked to do this independent research based on their experience (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). MuConsult had already successfully conducted another study for the ministry in the past and they had left the ministry with a positive experience (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). Furthermore, MuConsult was chosen based on their access to a relevant panel of respondents (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). The decision of the ministry to choose MuConsult was based on trust and their way of working, and since the assignment did not exceed the threshold of €15.000,-, the ministry was legally free to search for a partner within their network for this assignment (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). Besides, the personal relationship between MuConsult and the ministry might have played a role in the reason why the ministry chose MuConsult (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024).

Moving on, the report conducted by MuConsult and its outcomes will be addressed. The report has been published on the 31st of August, 2023. According to a letter to the House of Representatives, the research conducted by MuConsult was supposed to investigate the causes of why the number of requests for the SEPP-subsidy for new electric cars lagged behind in comparison to previous years (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 3).

The research consisted of a survey of 494 persons who recently purchased a car or are planning to do so within three years (MuConsult, 2023, p. 4). These persons were part of a panel. In their research, MuConsult attempted to answer a number of research questions, such as which aspects play a role in the purchase of a car that uses fossil fuels versus electric cars, what reasons there are for citizens to not want an electric car, and what is the importance of

these reasons (MuConsult, 2023, p. 4). The research questions also addressed differences between citizens themselves, such as differences between citizens who recently purchased a car or citizens who are planning to do so, citizens who buy a new or second-hand car, and differences between citizens due to different levels of income (MuConsult, 2023, p. 4). Also, research questions were formulated about the opinions of citizens about driving electric cars due to higher prices for energy or the uncertainty of costs that accompany driving electric cars in the future (MuConsult, 2023, p. 4). The last research question addressed what needs to change to let citizens consider electric cars.

The most important outcome of the report is that the purchase costs of electric cars play the largest role in the decision to want or not want an electric car (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, citizens find matters like the range and charge performance of electric cars important as well (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). In the past year, the public opinion has shifted among buyers of a new electric car. One of the reasons for this is the high prices of electricity (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Furthermore, a large number of citizens who do not consider an electric car now stipulate that this might change in the future (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Only 7% of buyers of a new car pointed out that they will never want an electric car (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3).

The first outcome that holds relation to the SEPP-subsidy is that the amount of subsidy that citizens can apply plays a limited role in the decision-making process of citizens to (not) consider an electric car (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Next, 19% of citizens who bought or considered buying an electric car say that the subsidy plays a significant role in their decision, while 43% say that the subsidy plays a large role (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Other factors that influence their decision even more are the purchase or lease costs of electric cars, options to charge at home, user costs, maintenance costs, and environmental aspects (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). Still, the subsidy amount can play a role. For 53% of respondents, a higher subsidy amount is a reason to “definitely”, “probably”, or “maybe” consider an electric car in the future (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). After the ability to charge an electric car through solar panels, this is the most mentioned condition to consider an electric car (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3). This holds even more true for buyers of a new car as that is 62% of respondents (MuConsult, 2023, p. 3).

Importantly, no policy recommendations have been formulated in this report and MuConsult was conflicted about the nature of their research. The employees from MuConsult had

different views on whether the research could be considered a policy evaluation or a policy analysis (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024; Interview 2, MuConsult, January 17, 2024).

4.4. The final policy decision of the ministry in 2023

Moving on, on the 25th of September 2023, the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management have submitted a decision note for the State of Secretary, Vivianne Heijnen. This decision note contained advice on moving forward with the SEPP-subsidy, as well as some considerations the ministry took into account in formulating the concepts of a policy decision on the SEPP-subsidy. This policy decision was to postpone the yearly reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024.

Furthermore, this decision note contains a proposition for the contents of a letter to the House of Representatives. In such a letter, the House of Representatives is informed that the Ministry wants to change the existing subsidy. The policy change that is described in this decision note includes the postponement of the planned reduction of the subsidy budget for new electric cars in 2024 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 1). With this change, the subsidy for new electric cars will not be reduced to €2.550,- in 2024. Instead, it remains at €2.950,- in 2024, which is the same amount as in 2023. Furthermore, in this decision note, it is suggested that the House of Representatives was to be informed about the background of the SEPP-subsidy, the issue at hand regarding the subsidy, and the most important results of the research conducted by MuConsult (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 1).

According to this decision note, the highlight of the consultancy report by MuConsult is that the purchase costs of electric cars play the largest role in the decision of citizens not to buy an electric car (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 1). This research outcome from MuConsult is directly copied by the ministry to justify their final policy decision (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 1). It is highlighted that by postponing the reduction of the SEPP-subsidy for new electric cars in 2024, a positive gesture is made to citizens who consider buying an electric car in 2024.

The decision note continues by mentioning that there is not much room to stimulate the use of electric cars more, which can be explained by the outgoing status of the cabinet since 7 July

2023. Because of the outgoing status of the cabinet, the House of Representatives has declared the policy on sustainable mobility after 2025 as controversial (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 2). Even still, it is mentioned that changes can be made within the existing SEPP-subsidy (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 2). The last thing to note of this document is that the proposed change of the SEPP-subsidy is made possible by the fact that the subsidy budget that is not used up in 2023 will be carried over to 2024 (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat, 2023, p. 2).

On the 5th of October 2023, a letter was sent to the House of Representatives. Importantly, this letter marks the last event in the policy process. With this letter, the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, Vivianne Heijnen, informed the House of Representatives about the policy decision of the ministry to postpone the yearly reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024. In this letter, Heijnen touches upon several topics that were touched upon in the decision note, such as societal and economic developments, the background of the SEPP-subsidy, as well as reporting the outcomes of the research conducted by MuConsult (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). In doing so, she takes up the advice from the bureaucrats of the ministry.

It is stated in the letter that increasingly more citizens are choosing to drive an electric car, which is an important development (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). Heijnen mentions that half of the CO₂ emissions in the mobility sector is caused by cars, which is why the lagging behind of the requests for the SEPP-subsidy is worrying to the ministry (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). The letter goes on by mentioning economic and societal developments, such as the falling away of tax advantages that come with driving an electric cars from 2026 and on, and the higher prices for electric cars due to recent inflation (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1).

The letter continues by stating that electric cars still need to become more accessible to a large group of citizens, despite of the aforementioned circumstances (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). Heijnen mentions that only a new cabinet can decide on whether new stimulating policies for electric vehicles will be instated from 2025 and on (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1). Still, she wanted to look at the possible options that existed (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 1).

At this point in the letter, a background and outline is given of the SEPP-subsidy, after which the research outcomes from MuConsult are discussed. These topics have already been addressed in an earlier chapter of this thesis and will not be repeated again in this section. It is important to note, however, that the letter directly copies every conclusion from the consultancy report by MuConsult in order to justify the policy decision from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, pp. 3-4). Examples of this are as follows:

“In this report, it became clear that the purchase costs of electric cars play the largest role in the decision to want or not want an electric car” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“Besides, citizens find that factors such as the range and recharging performance of electric cars important as well” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“In the last 12 months, the opinion on driving electric cars has changed among buyers of a new electric car. The high prices for electricity are a reason for this” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“When asked directly, citizens believe that the amount of money that they can apply for within the SEPP-subsidy plays is of limited importance” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“Among citizens who have already bought an electric car or consider to do so, 19% would say that the SEPP-subsidy played or plays a decisive role in their decision to drive an electric car” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“Another group of citizens of 43% say that the subsidy is not a decisive factor in their decision to buy an electric car, but it is still important” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

“Another outcome of the research by MuConsult is that citizens find that factors such as the purchase costs of electric cars, usage costs, maintenance costs and environmental aspects are more important than the SEPP-subsidy itself” (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat & Heijnen, 2023, p. 3).

Indeed, the ministry copying insights from consultancy reports in policy documents leaves one wondering how much influence the policy consultants of MuConsult had on the final decision of the ministry to postpone the reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024.

Another important question is what conditions the level of their influence?

The ministry believes that the report was influential to a limited extent (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024; Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). Before the report by MuConsult was published, the bureaucrats at the ministry already had assumptions on why there was a reduction in the requests for the subsidy (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). Also, the ministry already had reasons to believe that it would not be a good idea to reduce the subsidy budget. In that sense, the report was mostly used to strengthen their own views (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). At the same time, the consultancy study was one of the foundations on which the final policy decision on the SEPP-subsidy was made (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). The consultancy study provided factual information to support their own views (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). If the consultancy report by MuConsult was not there, the ministry would have been left with a mere hypothesis (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024).

According to the ministry, the consultancy report helped as it provided an independent backup for their own advice, as well as a means to reinforce the direction the ministry was going in (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024).

The policy consultants of MuConsult had a different view on the amount of influence that their report had on the final policy decision of the ministry. MuConsult was of the opinion that the report was influential (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024). According to them, the bureaucrats at the ministry needed to be able to explain why there was such a large amount of subsidy budget left in 2023 (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024).

MuConsult believes that this budget could otherwise be spent on other important issues (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024). Importantly, MuConsult believed that the decision to postpone the reduction of the subsidy amount would not have happened if they did not do their research (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024).

Moving on, the next question that is important is what conditions the level of influence from policy consultants?

MuConsult believes that the trust that the ministry has in MuConsult conditions the level of influence of policy consultants (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024). The contractor from the ministry came personally to MuConsult to ask them to do this research, which MuConsult is quite telling (Interview 1, MuConsult, January 16, 2024).

According to the ministry, the amount of legitimacy that policy consultants can give is an important factor that can condition the level of influence from policy consultants (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024). This legitimacy is provided by consultants in the form of factual data (Interview 3, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, January 26, 2024; Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). Furthermore, the ministry believes that the clarity that policy consultants use in their language is important, especially in the reports that they write (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). The last factor that the ministry thinks can condition the level of influence from policy consultants is the nature of the work that consultants do (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024). In the event that a policy consultant is externally hired for policymaking, policy consultants can get access to higher policymakers, such as the Secretary of State, who in turn needs to make a decision based on the information that they are given by such an externally hired consultant. So, the nature of the work that consultants do lies at the base of the amount of influence that consultants can exert (Interview 4, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, February 21, 2024).

4.5. Discussion

This part of the chapter will discuss the empirical findings from the document analysis and interviews in light of the theory. In doing so, an attempt will be made to answer the research questions “How much influence do policy consultants have on Dutch policy, and what conditions their level of influence?”

The first research question that will be addressed is how much influence policy consultants have on Dutch policy. An empirical finding that holds a relation to this question is that the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management has directly copied the outcomes of the

consultancy report in both their policy documents to justify their policy decision. Whereas only one research outcome from the consultancy report by MuConsult was copied in the decision note from the ministry, this is seen in a more extreme form in the letter to the House of Representatives. In that letter, every single research outcome from the consultancy report by MucConsult has been copied by the ministry. This could relate to the theoretical expectation that policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater resonance, which means the ability of consultants to use a familiar language with regards to their client. The fact that the ministry has copied the outcomes of the consultancy report from MuConsult in multiple policy documents could indicate that the language that is used by MuConsult is familiar. It is possible that this familiar use of language increases the influence of the policy consultants from MuConsult. Furthermore, the ministry copying the consultancy report outcomes could point to the ministry holding the integrity of the information from MuConsult in high esteem. It could also mean that the information from the policy consultants from MuConsult has been used as expert knowledge in making a decision about the policy of the SEPP-subsidy. In other words, MuConsult has brought expertise to the table that the ministry used to formulate their policy decision. This finding relates to the work of Marciano (2022), in which it is argued that consultants can mediate their expertise.

Another empirical finding that relates to the question of how much influence policy consultants have on Dutch policy can be found in the interviews. Although their views differed, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and MuConsult agreed that the consultancy report was at least partially influential in the final policy decision to postpone the reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024. The ministry found that the report was influential only to a certain extent, because even before the research and report was published, the bureaucrats already had their own thoughts about why the subsidy was not performing as desired. The consultancy report from MuConsult was only used to confirm their own thought process.

MuConsult believed that their report was influential to a larger extent. They stipulated that the policy decision from the ministry would not have happened without the consultancy report. However, this sentiment needs to be considered carefully, since we cannot confirm that statement counterfactually. We cannot go back in time to see what would happen without the report. Besides, it is important to note that the consultancy report did not formulate any

policy recommendations. That could potentially limit the influence of the policy consultants of MuConsult, because they only provided the ministry expertise in the form of information.

It is also important to critically assess these empirical findings about the amount of influence that the policy consultants of MuConsult had on the policy process of the SEPP-subsidy. The ministry and MuConsult differed in their views on the amount of influence that policy consultants had. That finding holds significance in the sense that this might point to the possibility that the amount of influence the policy consultants had on the policy process of the SEPP-subsidy is hard to quantify. If the measurement of the amount of influence from the policy consultants of MuConsult could be put in quantifiable data, perhaps the views on this would not have differed as much.

The second and last research question that will be answered is what conditions the level of influence of policy consultants. A finding that relates to this research question is that MuConsult was chosen by the ministry based on trust and their network. Because of the appointment of MuConsult, the policy consultants were in the position to potentially influence the policy decisions about the SEPP-subsidy. The fact that MuConsult was chosen based on personal relations and trust in their way of working enabled the policy consultants from MuConsult to influence policy decisions. Therefore, at least to some extent, this finding is related to the theoretical expectation that policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater trust, which means the usage of personal relations and networks by consultants to exert influence on policymaking.

Another empirical insight is that the ministry believes that legitimacy is a factor that can condition the level of influence of policy consultants. This is a striking finding, because up until now, legitimacy has not yet been associated with conditioning the level of influence from policy consultants. Legitimacy can be provided by policy consultants in the form of factual information. This empirical finding also holds a relation to the theory. Multiple studies that were addressed in the theory chapter mention that policy consultants can be hired for their legitimacy (Marciano, 2023; Leys, 1999; Momani & Khirfan, 2013). But no mention was made that legitimacy could also condition the level of influence of policy consultants.

Another empirical insight is that the ministry believes that the clarity of the language that policy consultants use can condition the level of influence that policy consultants have. This finding corresponds to the theoretical expectation that policy consultants will have a higher

level of influence when there is greater resonance, which means the ability of consultants to use a familiar language with regards to their client.

The last empirical finding about this research question is that the ministry mentioned that the nature of work that policy consultants are hired for can condition their level of influence. Depending on the nature of work that policy consultants are hired for, consultants might get access to powerful bureaucrats such as the Secretary of State. If a policy consultant is externally hired for policymaking, said policy consultant can act as a bureaucrat. In turn, the Secretary of State informs their decisions based on the insights of bureaucrats. According to the ministry, this is when the policy consultant can exert their influence. This empirical finding corresponds to the theoretical expectation that policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater openness, which means the accessibility of state institutions to consultants. The Secretary of State is one of the higher state institutions within a ministry. Policy consultants having access to such state institutions can condition the amount of influence.

Summing up, this research has provided important empirical findings and answers to the research questions. In this analysis, it became clear that the findings correspond with three theoretical expectations. However, some theoretical expectations have not been confirmed. This could be due to the fact that this research presents a single-case study. It is entirely possible that these theoretical expectations might have been confirmed if more cases would have been analysed. Furthermore, the results with regards to the research question which factors condition the level of influence of policy consultants must be considered carefully. The answers to this research question come predominantly from interviews. Therefore, it needs to be taken into account that these answers could be based on personal opinions rather than facts.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary and discussion of the findings

This research has focused on policy consultants. There exists a large knowledge gap about how much influence policy consultants have and what conditions the amount of influence that they have in the context of the Netherlands. Next to the academic relevance, the topic is important on a societal level as well. A question that is frequently raised is whether it is desirable to spend so many public resources on policy consultants (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 151). Therefore, this research has attempted to answer the research question “How much influence do policy consultants have on Dutch policy, and what conditions their level of influence?”. In doing so, theoretical expectations were formulated, after which a single-case study was conducted. This case study consisted of tracing the policy process of the decision by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to postpone reducing the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024. Answers to the research questions have been found through the analysis of government and policy documents, consultancy documents and conducting interviews. These interviews have been conducted with bureaucrats from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, and policy consultants from MuConsult.

The answer to the research question how much influence policy consultants have on Dutch policy is answered by investigating how influential the consultancy report from MuConsult was in the final policy decision of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to postpone the reduction of the SEPP-subsidy budget in 2024. The main finding is that policy consultants have been influential in this decision. However, it is debatable to which extent they were influential. It has been found that the ministry has copied research outcomes from a consultancy report, which points to policy consultants being influential. At the same time, the ministry believed that this influence was of a limited extent. The policy consultants thought that their influence was of a larger scale than the ministry. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a definitive answer as to how much influence the policy consultants had on the final policy decision of the ministry.

The research question, which factors condition the amount of influence that policy consultants have, can be answered with more clarity. The main findings of this study with

regards to this research question is that trust, the clarity of language, legitimacy, and the nature of work that policy consultants are hired for, condition the level of influence of policy consultants. These insights correspond to three theoretical expectations of this research, which include that policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater trust, policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater resonance, and policy consultants will have a higher level of influence when there is greater openness. There have been no indications that other factors were at play that could answer the question which factors can condition the influence of policy consultants. At the same time, the possibility of other factors at play cannot be fully excluded. It is possible that some relevant information is classified. Therefore, it is possible that the respondents did not disclose all information that they had during the interviews. Furthermore, it is important to carefully assess the results. Especially with regards to the answers to the research question what conditions the level of influence of policy consultants. These answers were predominantly based on interviews. Therefore, there is a risk that respondents gave answers based on their own opinions and views instead of facts. Besides, in interviews, there is a risk that respondents answered in socially desirable ways. These issues were at least partly dealt with by ensuring the respondents that the accessibility of this research will be limited.

5.2. Implications for the literature

This research has been undertaken due to a knowledge gap in the academic literature. The topic of the influence that policy consultants have on policy processes in the Dutch context is understudied. This research has addressed this knowledge gap by showcasing how much influence policy consultants have on policy processes in the Netherlands and explaining which factors condition their level of influence. Some of these factors were already known in other contexts than the Dutch context such as trust. Another known factor is the clarity of language, which corresponds to the known factor resonance. Next, the nature of work that policy consultants are hired for corresponds partly to openness, another factor that is known to be associated with conditioning the level of influence from policy consultants. It is worthwhile to mention that we now know how these factors operate in the context of the Netherlands. One finding in particular is striking for the literature on this topic. That is that legitimacy can also condition the level of influence of policy consultants. That is a new insight that can be learned from this research.

5.3. Limits of the research

This research has been limited by the fact that it only dealt with a single-case study. Because of this, the insights have only been gathered from a single policy context. Although this single-case study has brought an abundance of relevant findings, it cannot be denied that the external validity is limited. It is possible that the policy context of the SEPP-subsidy is unique in comparison to policy contexts at other Dutch ministries. That might be even more so in the policy context of a province or municipality from the Netherlands. Besides, the way of working from MuConsult might be unique to them in comparison with other consultancy companies. Therefore, a limit of this research is that the results might not be representative to the whole population of public institutions and consultancy companies in the Netherlands. At the same time, however, this research has contributed to creating new insights in the topic of consultancy influence in the context of the Netherlands. These contributions might be worthwhile to explain other cases (Toshkov, 2016, p. 305).

5.4. Directions of future research

Future research should aim to address the lack of data that still persists about the topic of consultancy influence in the context of the Netherlands. In that sense, it could be worthwhile to test existing theories on the factors that condition the level of influence in more policy contexts. Other policy contexts include case studies at other ministries, provinces and municipalities, and policy areas. It might be worthwhile to try and incorporate multiple case studies, for the sake of external validity, as well as the large amount of data that this could bring. Another direction that future research can focus on is to try and formulate a framework on how to measure the influence of policy consultants. Such a framework should focus on making the amount of policy influence, as well as which factors condition that influence measurable.

5.5. Recommendation to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management

Finally, a recommendation will be made to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, so that they can learn how to deal with policy consultants in a better way. It is

recommended to the ministry to invest in independent studies that address the influence of policy consultants on their policy domain. A coherent framework needs to be developed that provides the ministry with a means to measure the exact amount of influence that policy consultants have on their policy processes. This will be beneficial for the ministry, because they will know precisely what the consultancy sector brings them compared to how much they cost. In that way, a more efficient cost-benefit analysis can be made for every decision about externally hiring policy consultants. Aside from the benefits that the ministry will get from such studies, this will be beneficial on a societal scale as well. There is a societal discussion on whether it is desirable to spend so many public resources on policy consultants (Van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 151). By investing in such studies, citizens are informed about the interactions between the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and the consultancy sector, addressing the discussion that is happening now on a societal scale.

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