

Political awareness on ICT, eGovernment and service delivery issues in Dutch local governments

*Marcel Hoogwout
University of Tilburg
Tilburg Institute for Law, Technology and Society (TILT)
m.hoogwout@uvt.nl*

eGovernment is supposed to benefit from political attention. According to theory the stronger the politicians advocate change with ICT the more likely it becomes that results can be achieved. This paper investigates political attention towards ICT, service delivery and eGovernment in Dutch local governments by comparing how many town councils have nominated alderman responsible for these subjects. The results show that in Dutch local governments political attention towards eGovernment and service delivery issues is weak while attention toward ICT issues is common. Attention towards service delivery does pay off in higher rankings in the official eGovernment monitor.

Introduction

A society that develops towards an information society is expected to grow also political awareness towards issues associated with ICT and the changing role of citizens as customers of government. Political leadership is generally considered to be an important success factor in realizing eGovernment goals. In The Netherlands eGovernment was -among other central government programs- promoted by the OL2000 program and later the EGEM program for local governments. The goals of these programs predominantly consisted of putting the citizens perspective central in government service delivery, by -among other measures- making service delivery demand oriented, integrating public counters and using the internet as a distribution channel. In 2001 a phone survey among 272 Dutch local governments (54% of total number of local governments), showed that the goals of the OL2000 program were broadly shared by local public administrators (Stegers 2002). These administrators concluded that local governments at least have a moral obligation to address citizens as customers and to invest in discomfort reduction.

On a political level a comparable development should be visible. Service delivery improvement and eGovernment should be expected to be at least on the local political agenda. There is however little known about the role of political leadership in stimulating innovations in local governments. The small amount of literature available on this subject shows signs that the incentives for politicians to invest in client oriented service delivery are little. E.g. Tops argues that, if there is a relation between service delivery performance of a local government and the authority of the elected politicians, this relation will be weak and negative (Tops 1995). To put it differently: politicians won't gain votes if they emphasize service delivery improvement, but they can lose votes if service delivery deteriorates.

This paper tries to tell more about the relation between political leadership and ICT and service innovations in local governments. Therefore we investigate the development of the political awareness on service delivery issues and ICT issues in Dutch local governments. This is done by making a inventory of local alderman portfolio's in three election periods, in

the years 1994-1998, 1998-2002 and 2002-2006. In the Dutch system after each election a process of negotiation starts about a counsel program and the division of the alderman chairs in the board (College van B&W). After the aldermen are appointed all the political issues are divided over the different alderman and the mayor. They all become responsible for a so called portfolio of political issues/subjects. Because the portfolios only change by exception in between the elections we considered an inventory in only one measurement year per election period to be sufficient. The inventory is based upon the expectation that, if customer orientation and eGovernment are political issues in a local government, they will almost certainly be expressed in the division of political issues over the alderman. The set of political issues that an alderman has been given is called his or her portfolio. The inventory survey scanned all portfolio descriptions of a large group of local governments on words like eGovernment, service delivery integration, customer orientation, ICT, public counter, internet counter a.o.. The portfolio descriptions we used were published in the 1996, 2001 and 2003 editions of the Gids Gemeentebesturen (VNG-afdeling BIDOC 1996, 2001 and 2003), a yearly published guide with information on all mayors, alderman, counsel members and responsible civil servants in all Dutch local governments.

The first results based on the analysis of all local governments are described in the following paragraphs.

Political attention towards issues related to eGovernment is small but growing.

In the election period 1994-1998 in none of the alderman portfolios a reference was made towards eGovernment. Political attention towards eGovernment or the use of internet as a means to improve government performance was virtually non existent. These findings are consistent with other research. For example the number of local governments with a website on the internet was also very low. In the survey year 1996 less than 7% of all local governments were online (Leenes and Svensson 2005). Also in citizens and consumer surveys no questions were asked about web presence in this period (Hoogwout 2003).

In the election period 1998-2002 only one alderman portfolio (gemeente Apeldoorn) mentioned eGovernment or internet as a political issue. The liberal alderman in question was responsible for an internet project. In the survey year 2001 about 60% of all local governments already had web presence, while central government pushed hard to promote the use of internet in local governments during this period with several programs and subsidies.

In the survey year 2003 the number of alderman portfolios with a eGovernment reference grew towards 5. This is about 1% of all local governments. Web presence reached a full 100% in that year. The portfolios were referred to with the following names: digital government, website, e-local government, digital service delivery and electronic service delivery. Two out of the five portfolios were the responsibility of a social democrat (PvdA), one by a liberal (VVD) and one by a christen democrat and one by a party that is profiling itself on modernising government (Democrats '66). In general we have to conclude that based upon portfolio presence eGovernment cannot be considered yet to be a hot issue on the political agenda of Dutch local governments. The awareness is however growing.

The five local governments that had a responsible alderman for eGovernment issues scored in the official Dutch eGovernment monitor by Overheid.nl¹ on the ranks 3, 7, 16, 192 and 205

¹ The Overheid.nl monitor ranking can be found at <http://advies.overheid.nl/continu/gemeente/>

(out of 467). The last two local governments with the average ranking were relatively small towns. There seems to be no statistical significant relation between the appearance of an alderman portfolio on eGovernment and the eGovernment ranking in the Overheid.nl Monitor. The relation between size of local government (number of inhabitants) and the ranking scores is much stronger.

Political attention towards service delivery improvement is growing.

The second item the portfolios were screened on was service delivery or customer orientation. Customer orientation became a hot item during the mid 1990's in local government organisations. Especially among civil servants the ideology to treat citizens as customers at local government counters inspired many managers. This was partly due to the efforts of central government that stimulated these thoughts through program offices like Public Counter 2000 (OL2000). Figure 1 shows the percentages of local governments with a service delivery related portfolio. In 1996 also virtually non-existent the number of local governments with a service delivery portfolio raised to 28 and in 2003 to 31. The portfolios have names like customer affairs, public service delivery, central or integrated service counter, citizens services, OL2000, front office and service delivery quality. Mayors were in 28% of the local governments with a service delivery portfolio in 2001 responsible for the portfolio. This percentage grew to 38% in 2003. The growth of the number of mayors responsible for service delivery can be explained by a change in the local governments act which obliged mayors to justify and be accountable for the efforts they invest in improving citizens relations.

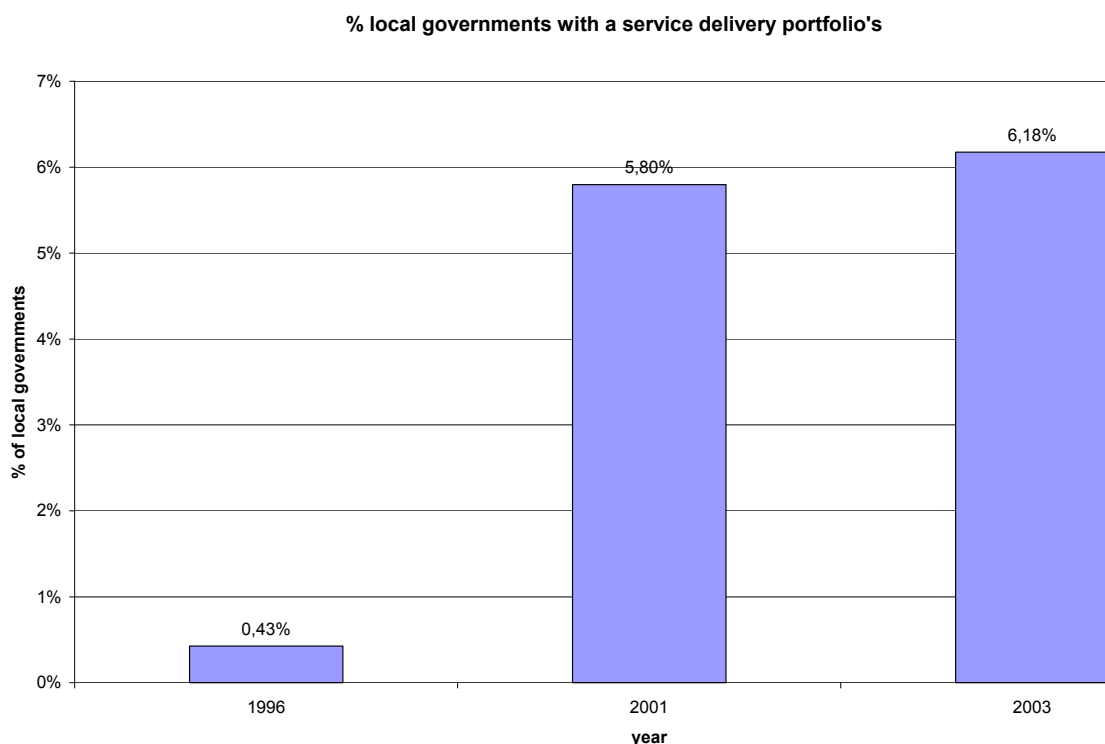


Figure 1: number of service delivery portfolio's is small but increasing

The political colour of the mayors and aldermen responsible for the service delivery portfolio was in 2003 as follows:

Political party	As a % of total number of service delivery portfolio's	As a % of total portfolios held by this political party
Labour/Social democrats (PvdA)	19,4%	1,43%
Christen democrats (CDA)	32,3%	1,64%
Liberals (VVD)	22,6%	1,86%
Democrats '66 (D66)	12,9%	6,99%
Green Socialists (GroenLinks)	3,2%	2,08%
Local parties	9,7%	0,7%

Table 1: Democrats '66 and liberals are more likely to hold service delivery portfolio's

The Christen Democrat Party (CDA) is responsible for the most service delivery portfolio's. This is however also the party with the most alderman and mayors in the Netherlands. If we weight the appearance of service delivery portfolio's with the number of alderman and mayor chairs held by the political parties, the liberals and Democrats '66 seem to be more likely contestants for a service delivery portfolio². This is more in line with the expectations. The Democrats '66 party profiles itself as a party that advocates modernisation. The liberals traditionally emphasize the reduction of discomfort citizens have to endure while dealing with government.

When we compare the rankings of the local governments with a service delivery portfolio in the Overheid.nl monitor, these local governments have on average a significant higher ranking than the governments that do not have an alderman responsible for public service delivery. Also there seems to be a significant relation between the presence of an alderman responsible for public service delivery and the size of the town. The bigger the town the more likely it is to find a service delivery portfolio.

ICT is a generally accepted alderman portfolio issue

ICT as a subject has a longer history in local government than eGovernment or service delivery/customer orientation. Figure 2 shows that the number of local governments that have appointed a responsible alderman for ICT issues has grown significantly in the past decade. The ICT portfolio's appeared with names like: I&A (44,3%), I&O, ICT (10%), IT (1%), Automation (26,9%), Informatisation (3,2%) and Information policy (2,9%).

² The Green socialist scores are neglected because of the statistical relevance of the small number of cases (1) involved.

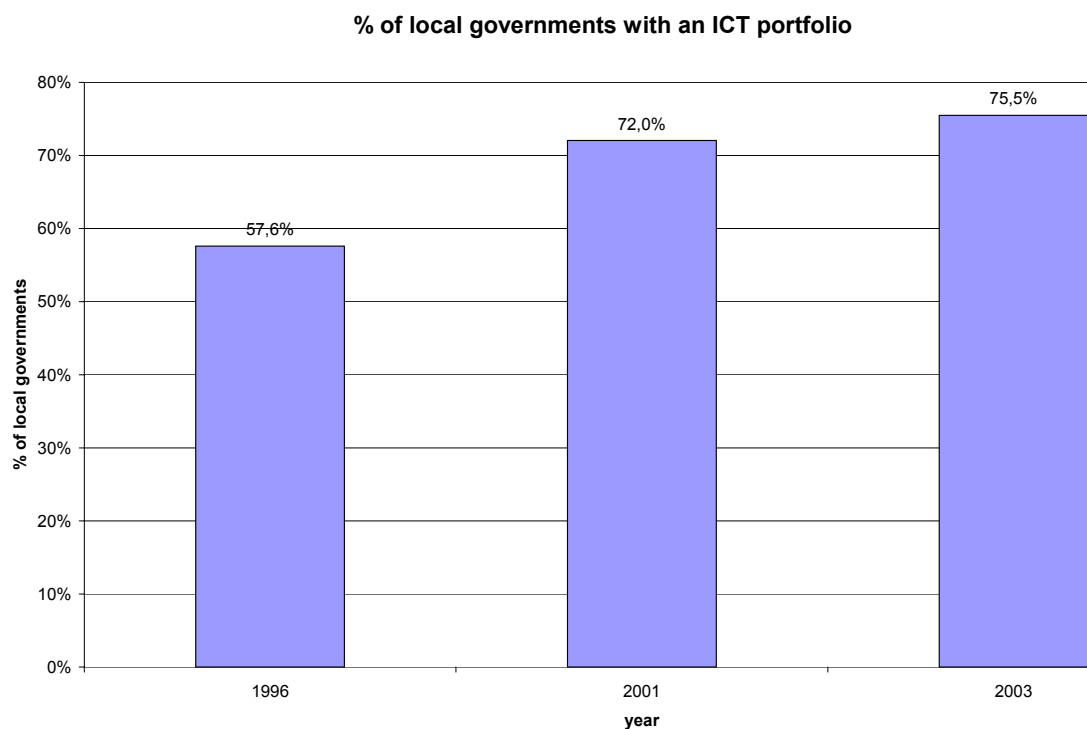


Figure 2: increasing number of ICT portfolio's in Dutch local governments.

Table 2 shows that the ICT subject not seems to be dominated by one of the political parties in 2003:

Political party	As a % of total number of ICT portfolio's	As a % of total town councils in which the political party holds alderman and mayor seats
Labour/Social democrats (PvdA)	23,0%	31,1%
Christen democrats (CDA)	31,1%	29,7%
Liberals (VVD)	21,6%	29,9%
Democrats '66 (D66)	4,2%	28,6%
Green Socialists (GroenLinks)	1,8%	15,2%
Local parties	12,7%	N.A.

Table 2: Owners of the ICT portfolio by political party

The green socialist (GroenLinks) seem to be the least interested to hold the ICT portfolio, while the social democrats are well represented among the alderman holding ICT portfolio's.

In 2003 in about 41% of all town councils the mayor was responsible for the ICT portfolio. This is a significant high percentage given the fact that on average the portfolio's are shared over four council members (aldermen and mayors together = 4,05). A normal chance would have been around 25%. In previous election periods the dominance of mayors on the ICT subject was even higher: 48% in 1996 and 45% in 2001. The most heard explanation for the dominance by mayors is a combination of two factors:-

- Traditionally ICT is seen as a subject related to internal process management. Internal management questions do not have a high political priority. ICT is seen as a liability instead of an asset. It costs money while it is hard to gain votes with issues the public does not see. Because most of it is out of sight from the public ICT is considered to be a subject with a low political sensitivity.
- Mayors in The Netherlands are not (yet) elected but are appointed by the minister of internal affairs. They are supposed to position themselves above the political parties

that contest for the voters choice in the town council. In the allocation of portfolio's they are awarded the portfolio's that are the least political sensitive.

The increase of the number of ICT portfolio's not held by mayors, might indicate that ICT becomes a more strategic and political sensitive issue. The absolute number of mayors holding ICT portfolio's is however not decreasing.

If the ICT portfolio is a responsibility assigned to the social democrats, in 53% of the local governments it is held by the mayor, for the christen democrats this percentage is 51%, for the liberals 41% and for the democrats '66 in 63% of the councils they hold the ICT portfolio the portfolio is held by the mayor. Christen democrats and social democrats over time tend to position the ICT portfolio more often in the hands of alderman, while the liberals tend to place their ICT portfolio's in the hands of their mayors over time. This might indicate that the christen democrats and social democrats see ICT increasing as a political issue, while liberals see it as a decreasing issue.

In 2003 about 24% of all local governments did not appoint an alderman or mayor on an ICT portfolio. An important part of these local governments can be characterised as small towns. However also a considerable group of big cities do not have an explicit alderman responsible for ICT issues. There is no statistical significant relation between the ranking of a local government in the Overheid.nl e-Government monitor and the presence of an ICT portfolio.

Conclusions

This paper investigated the relation between the political attention towards eGovernment, service delivery and ICT and several characteristics and performance aspects of local governments. The political attention was measured by comparing portfolio's of political issues for which the alderman and mayor take responsibility for in their town councils. We have assumed that the presence of a portfolio on the investigated issues indicates that the subject has political attention.

Based on this measurement method we can conclude that political attention for eGovernment as a separate political issue is still negligible small. The attention for public service delivery issues is however small but raising. Local governments that had a responsible council member for service delivery also performed better in the eGovernment monitor. Political attention to public service delivery seems to pay off on eGovernment performance. ICT as a political issue or alderman portfolio is widespread but on the other hand does not relate to eGovernment performance.

The role of Dutch mayors in service delivery and ICT responsibilities is attracting attention. Mayors are significant more responsible for these portfolio's as one might expect based on their numbers. We expect that this had to do with the status of ICT and public service delivery as relatively insensitive political issues. Because mayors are in the Dutch democratic system not elected but appointed, they tend to have especially non-political sensitive portfolio's, while alderman from the elected political parties share the politically high profile issues between each other. A shift towards a higher or more sensitive political status is however noticeable, especially among the social democrats and christen democrats.

The subject ICT is not significantly dominated by one political movement. Only the green socialist party (GroenLinks) seems not exceptionally interested in the subject. A slight preference for public service delivery subjects can be seen among liberals and the Democrats '66. This preference can be explained by the traditional profiles of these political movements.

The small number of councils with eGovernment or service delivery portfolio's is in contrast with the generally expressed opinion among local government officials that improving service delivery is an important issue for local governments. What the mouth says is hardly translated yet to political responsibilities in alderman portfolio's. It is also not in line with general theories about the role of political leadership in eGovernment developments. At least two possible, apparently mutual exclusive conclusions can be drawn from this result:-

- either the political level is not as important as we thought for eGovernment development and service delivery improvement. This might imply that central government initiatives like stimulation programs or the middle management levels in local governments are much more important for progression than local politics.
- or the lack of political awareness works as a brake on the development of eGovernment and service delivery improvement. Developments of electronic counters and service delivery integration might be much more evolved and sophisticated if the political attention would have been higher in the past decade.

Further research must determine which of the explanations is the closest to the truth. In both cases the results seem to support the theory about the weak negative relation between the authority of local politicians and the emphasis on service delivery as presented by Tops (Tops, 1995).

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