Evaluating political-administrative modernization in Flemish municipalities

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1. Introduction: changing politico-administrative relations

Over the last few decades European local authorities underwent substantial changes and transformations.¹ Many of these reforms were largely inspired by New Public Management (NPM) ideas, implying an openness to private business principles and practices as competition, delegation of tasks, steering based on agreements and contracts rather than hierarchy...²

These NPM-inspired reforms had substantial repercussions on the municipal political-administrative relations since they call for the need to distinguish more sharply between what are considered political matters on the one hand and administrative matters on the other hand. More specifically, politicians are expected to focus on strategic decisions and choices. The implementation of the decisions and the achievement of the policy output lies with the administrative bodies. In doing so, the administration is granted the necessary freedom in choosing methods, selecting means and interpreting rules to achieve this output.³

This evolution can be observed at the Flemish municipal level as well, at least in terms of rhetoric and legislation: with the introduction of the Local Government Decree (LGD), started in 2007, the legislator aimed to introduce some management principles at the Flemish municipalities. By introducing inter alia management teams and delegation possibilities from the political to the administrative level, the regulatory framework aspired the administration’s empowerment in the policy cycle.

However, the question how these new institutional structures and decision-making tools influence the municipality’s behavior and internal organization remains underexposed: empirical studies on this topic relate mainly to the decision-making process and the content of the innovations.

Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to scrutinize the LGD’s impact on the political-administrative relations in the Flemish municipalities. Drawing on surveys and interviews with Flemish municipal CEO’s, this paper provides an initial response to the following evaluative questions:

1. To what extent have the reforms left behind lasting traces of a managerial administration and/or organization culture?

2. Which variables declare intermunicipal diversity concerning the LGD’s implementation and impact?
Before answering these research questions, the shifting political-administrative relations shall be outlined, as well as the research agenda on institutional evaluation and the content of the reforms concerning the local political-administrative relations in Flanders.

2. Politico-administrative relations in NPM-times: back to the classical dichotomy?

Since the 1980s, European local governments have witnessed a tendency to embrace management ideas and practices. Inspired by the NPM-doctrines, a stricter separation between politics and administration has been pursued in countries as Italy, Germany, Finland, Sweden and Norway. In general, these reforms aim politicians who concentrate on strategic management, leave day-to-day-business of public administration for civil servants and only point the administration to main decisions and choices. Administrative bodies are granted the necessary freedom for interpreting rules and selecting means in order to implement the decisions and achieve the politically defined policy output.

As a matter of fact, these management practices appeal to new demands in terms of coordination and aim to change the politico-administrative relationship “from a situation of loyalty and hierarchy into a system of partnership and transaction”.

These new role conceptions for both politicians and administrators mean in most European settings especially on the local level - a trend reversal which is at odd with the logic of politics itself. LARSEN (2005:209) argues that a local government system in which local politicians are not allowed to concern themselves with particular or individual concerns makes councilors more or less redundant. In the long run, it may even undermine the legitimacy of local government.

SVARA (2006) argues that the NPM-inspired political-administrative model bears formal resemblance to the classical model of political-administrative relations. Going back to the work of Weber and Wilson in the second half of the 19th century, this model considers a clear separation between politics and administration as ideal: while politicians are expected to make policy choices, administrators are supposed to implement these decisions loyally, neutrally and efficiently. In contrast to the NPM-ideas, the administration was supposed to be subjected to the political level and formal rules and disciplines were considered crucial. Nowadays, AUCCIN (2011) emphasizes, ministers no longer have the right to intervene in the administration. In return, the administration

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is working under a contract that specifies expectations both in terms of products and in the level of productivity.\textsuperscript{10}

This return in the direction of the classical model is rather uncommon for modern administrators and politicians. During the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, together with the explosive growth of government, a growing overlap between political and administrative roles has been perceived: the increased complexity of the organization implied that politicians were not sufficiently specialized to control the civil service in detail nor to oversee all policy issues.\textsuperscript{11} As a consequence, ABERBACH, PUTNAM & ROCKMAN (1981) have perceived a gradual convergence between politicians’ and administrators’ roles at the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, which they describe as (p. 19) "the bureaucratization of politics and the politicization of bureaucracy".\textsuperscript{12}

On the local level as well an extensive interaction between politicians and administrators can be observed. MOURITZEN & SVARA (2002: 288) perceive a complementary relationship between both groups of actors “in which each needs the other and makes unique contributions to the other in conducting both shared and separate tasks.” The political-administrative relationship is characterized by interaction, reciprocal influence and mutual respect. Top administrators seem to be partners in leadership with the mayor and other leading politicians.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the added value of the MOURITZEN & SVARA study, the authors give little attention to the aforementioned NPM-reforms. Nevertheless, the question to what extent these reforms change the local political-administrative is very interesting. The next paragraph threatens the theoretical framework that is used for this assessment.

3. Institutional evaluation: theory and design

The research questions of this paper concern the assessment of new regulations’ effects and influence. In answering these questions, we are inspired by KUHLMANN & WOLLMANN (2011) who supposed a research agenda for the evaluation of institutional reforms at sub-national government levels.\textsuperscript{14}

The first paragraph describes the general process of institutional evaluation. Echoing WOLLMANN (2003: 4) we understand evaluation as: "an analytical procedure and tool meant to obtain all information pertinent to the assessment of the performance, both process and result, of a policy program or measure".\textsuperscript{15} Second, the new institutionalist perspective, the theoretical framework used to identify the independent variables, will be outlined.

\textsuperscript{10} P. AUCOIN, “The political-administrative design of NPM” in T. CHRISTENSEN & P. LAEGREID (eds.), The Ashgate research companion to new public management, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, 42-43.
\textsuperscript{13} P.E. MOURITZEN & J.H. SVARA, Leadership at the Apex. Politicians and Administrators in Western Local Governments, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2002, 31-42.
3.1 Institutional evaluation

Institutional (reform) policy aspires the transformation of political and administrative structures and the redrawing of the institutional setting in which policy making takes place. Consequently, evaluating this particular type of public policy, specified by WOLLMANN (2003) as ‘polity policy’, requires a complex analytical framework that copes with different interacting problems. WOLLMANN (2003) distinguishes three phases in the evaluation of ‘polity policy’: institutional evaluation, performance evaluation and outcome evaluation.

The first step of the evaluation process analyzes the changes within the politico-administrative system: to what extent has the intended institutional change been achieved and what factors explain this state of affairs? Second, the impact of the institutional changes on the effectiveness and performance of the institutional setting needs to be considered. The key question of the so-called ‘performance evaluation’ is to what extent the institutional reform has realized the expected changes in the operation of the institutional setting under study. Finally, the ‘outcome evaluation’ scrutinizes the external impact of the institutional reforms. The reforms’ effects on the wider political, socio-economic environment are to be mapped. To explain the variation in the implementation and effects of the reform initiatives, the why-question has to be treated in each of these three steps.

Drawing on KUHLMANN & WOLLMANN (2011) figure 1 represents the three-step model graphically.

Figure 1: Evaluation of local institutional reform policy: research model

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This paper is limited to the first two stages of the evaluation process (the part in the frame). In the first step, we examine the implementation of the reform measures with regard to political-administrative cooperation. The objective of the second step is to find out how these institutional changes have affected the political steering.

Different reasons motivate our choice for a two-step model of reform. The first reason relates to the recent nature of the new regulatory framework. Since the LGD only entered into force on January 1, 2007, it is probably too early to assess external effects of the changes. In addition, the Flemish municipalities have undergone several changes in recent years. For example, the merger debate received renewed attention and the municipalities’ financial situation was and is a current topic. All these intervening factors make it difficult to identify the net effects of the LGD: any changes in the outcomes can be declared by a wide range of factors that are not necessarily rooted in the legal innovations. Third, the political-administrative modernization aspires mostly changes in the municipality’s internal organization.

3.2 A new institutionalist perspective on institutional evaluation

An important part of our study deals with the explanation of varying degrees of change. In order to identify internal as well as external explanatory variables, we draw on the “new institutionalism”. Unlike classical institutionalism, new institutionalists do not equate institutions with formal organizational structures and constitutions. The concept refers more generally to forms of social organization, to predictable patterns of interaction which make clear to actors what is expected of them in certain situations and impose limitations.²¹ LOWNDES and WILSON (2013: 41) describe institutions as: "the sets or routines, norms and incentives that shape and constrain individuals’ preferences and behavior".²²

Evaluating an institutional reform, the new institutional literature not only focus on the formal institutional architecture, but also on the organization’s internal values and on how actors apply the practices.²³ More specifically, LOWNDES and LEACH (2004) distinguish three components that mediate the institutional framework’s influence on behavior: informal elements, the wider institutional environment and actors.

In the first place, informal elements can influence the way in which institutions take form. OSTROM (1999) distinguishes the rules-in-form from the rules-in-use. While the first point to the formal legal framework which determines the division of powers and the decision-making rules, the rules-in-use emphasize the importance of values, power relations and habits for a good understanding of institutions.²⁴

However, these informal rules may not be interpreted too general: not every social fact can be considered an institution. LOWNDES (2010: 73-74) defines the concept by referring to "standard operating procedures". These procedures should be distinguished from personal habits or rules of thumb. In general, they have three common features: (1) they are specific to a particular setting, (2) they are recognized as such by the actors in this setting, and (3) they can be described and explained to the researcher. 25 Getting a picture of these informal practices requires a long term focus which allows the researcher to outline the development of such practices and to identify the creative impact of these informal opinions. 26 We will take these considerations into our analysis by including variables that capture the informal rules and aspects of institutions. The time aspect is captured by making a comparison between data collected in 2008 and 2012.

Second, institutions are embedded in a broader institutional framework: both the external political environment and the local context have an influence. With regard to the external environment LOWNDES and LEACH (2004) refer to the influence of the central-local relations. We consider this relationship as a constant for the Flemish municipalities. As a consequence, we try to incorporate the impact of the broader institutional framework by taking up variables that refer to the local context.

Finally, institutions only make sense through the interpretation and the behavior of individual political actors. Politicians, after all, apply the rules in different settings and under different circumstances.27 This focus on the individual is very strong within the rational school of new institutionalism. The starting point of this school is the strategic individual: leaders seek to maximize their preferences and interests within the prevailing institutional framework.28 In order to outline the individual actor’s impact, we include variables that capture the characteristics of key actors within the municipal political-administrative relations. In the context of this paper, we restrict the analyses to the secretary’s characteristics.

Regarding institutional changes, informal constraints, embedded in customs, traditions and codes of conduct, are less responsive to conscious changes. While formal rules can be relatively quickly redrawn, changing informal rules and conventions is a time-consuming process. Moreover, informal constraints may generate institutional stability, despite a modified formal context. 29 The attention for the informal practices underscores the fallibility of the design process. It highlights the opportunities for non-elite actors to interpret and apply the procedural rules in their own way, a process which may contribute to a discrepancy between the design of an institution and the actual implementation and impact on the ground. 30 Summarized, KUHLMANN and WOLLMANN (2011: 492) consider new institutionalist approaches appropriate to carry out an institutional assessment.

"because they share the idea that institutions influence, shape and restrain actor behavior and output performance, but do not determining it".  

4. Political-administrative relations in Flemish municipalities

Before analyzing the LGD’s impact, it is important to outline the regulatory framework’s starting points. Starting from the new institutionalist approach, the question must be asked to what extent the LGD changes the informal practices and working procedures in the municipalities. As a consequence, before outlining the legislative reforms, we first describe the political-administrative cooperation in the municipalities before the enactment of the new decree.

4.1 Political-administrative cooperation in the Flemish municipalities v1.0

The Flemish region in Belgium has 308 municipalities. Each municipality has a council, whose members are directly elected for a six-year period. Among its members the council elects the aldermen and the mayor. The latter is nominated by the regional minister of internal affairs. The mayor and aldermen together constitute the executive board of the municipality, which is a collegial body that can act only on the basis of collective responsibility. Since the members of the executive power are selected from the council’s ranks and retain members of the council, the Flemish system can be considered a monistic one.

With regards to the administration, Belgian local government traditionally bears resemblance to the classic Weberian organization, with departments established according to policy domains and heads of these departments hierarchically subordinated to the municipal secretary. In addition, several studies show that the contribution of the municipal administration in the policy work is more limited than in other European countries or Wallonia.

However, practice differs from legal provisions. Although the council is formally considered to be the heart of the local political institutions, the executive board plays a pivotal role in decision-making. The board is not only responsible for the execution of the council’s decisions, but also prepares the council’s agenda and formulates the decisions presented to the council. Due to a strong party discipline and majority logic, board proposals are only in exceptional cases rejected by

32 Art. 45 §1 & Art. 59 §1 LGD
the council. This tendency is strengthened by the fact that the members of the college are the most popular politicians and have—contrary to the other councillors—a semi-professional statute.\textsuperscript{38}

The strong position of the board of mayor and aldermen has implications for its relation with the administration. Since aldermen are assigned portfolios covering one or more policy domains, they have extensive discretion to develop policy within these domains, supported by the other members of the college of mayor and aldermen.\textsuperscript{39}

At the end of 20\textsuperscript{th} and the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, this led to the dominance of the so called \textit{aldermen model}, if it were in a subdued or mixed form (see figure 2). In this model, the responsible aldermen deliberate directly with "their" heads of department during policy preparation. Afterwards they try to find a political base for their policy choices in the executive board and/or the council. This way of working implies not only a highly fragmented municipal organization but also a loss of influence for the secretary, who is not capable to coordinate the administration. This practice of aldermen’s direct steering of the departments, stood in stark contrast to the former and current regulations according to which aldermen do not have any individual executive power.\textsuperscript{40}

The strong position of the board being intertwined with the Belgian / Flemish municipal level has already been evident during the implementation of the so-called "legal model" of the 1990 New Municipal Law. This regulatory model pushed the secretary forward as the central pivot of the municipal organization and as the link between politics and administration. However, research showed that only a small minority of 14\% of the municipalities met this model.\textsuperscript{41}

The following figure gives an overview of the legal model, the aldermen model and the management team model.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38} J. ACKAERT, "Transformation of the Political Executive in Belgian Local Government" in R. BERG & N. RAO (Eds.), \textit{Transforming Local Political Leadership}, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 169.


\textsuperscript{42} K. STEYVERS, H. REYNAERTS & T. BLOCK, "Team work or territorial war? Assessing the introduction of a management team in local government: The Flemish region of Belgium", \textit{Public management review} 2010, Vol. 12, No. 1, 16.
4.2 Political-administrative modernization according to the Local Government Decree

The fifth federal Belgian state reform of 2001 carried over the responsibility for municipality competences to the regions. In Flanders, this resulted in 2005 in the approval of the Flemish LGD which has been enacted in 2007. Content analyzes show that many of the old recipes are maintained in areas like the political institutions. However, the decree’s innovations on political-administrative interaction can generally be referred to as radically, at least in terms of rhetoric and legislation.

With respect to the political-administrative relations, the decree aims a stronger differentiation between administration and politics. The LGD’s explanatory memorandum states politicians’ responsibility for making policy choices and determining the direction of the government and its organization. The secretary and its services on the other hand are expected to manage the policy preparation, execution and evaluation. Entrusting the administration a vital role in the management cycle is another important policy objective of the decree.

In order to achieve these objectives and to enhance the administration’s autonomy, the LGD offers the municipalities different instruments. Two of them are obligatory: the management team (MT) and the note of agreement.

In the literature, a MT is defined "as a group of managers at the same organizational level who are a part of the organizations formal management structure." This description is only partly

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applicable to Flemish local governments since only the secretary, the treasurer and the deputy secretary (if applicable) are obliged to take part of the MT. Since 2009, the mayor (or a designated alderman) takes part in the MT with an advisory vote. The municipal council is entitled to appoint additional members and/or to remove them from office.\(^{46}\)

The legislator’s high expectations with regard to the MT become clear in the powers of the team: the MT coordinates the municipal departments in carrying out the policy formulation, execution and evaluation and is involved in the preparation of the preliminary draft of the strategic (multi-) annual plans and budgets. In addition, the MT is involved in decision making procedures concerning the organizational structure, the legal position of civil servants and workforce issues.\(^{47}\)

The introduction of the MT implies significant changes regarding the municipality’s internal organization. More specifically, the LGD has the ambition to replace the aldermen model with a ‘management team model’.\(^{48}\) While the college of mayor and aldermen dominates local decision making in the former strongly divided internal organization model, the secretary, treasurer and heads of departments are at the top of strategic decision making in the management team model. The MT is meant to deliberate collectively with the college of mayor and aldermen. By placing an administrative, consultative body on the level of the college of mayor and aldermen, the regulatory framework aims an administration which is more equal to politics.\(^{49}\)

Furthermore, cooperation between the MT and the college of aldermen has been formalized by means of a note of agreement which is drawn up after the renewal of the municipal council.\(^{50}\)

Besides these two obligatory instruments, Flemish municipalities can choose to delegate responsibilities from the political to the administrative level. More specifically, the college of mayor and aldermen can choose to delegate certain responsibilities to the municipal CEO. A similar instrument is the introduction of budget holders, a form of internal autonomy whereby an official or agency shall be empowered to manage a task-based budget. The possibility to delegate budgets to the municipal secretary and/or other staff members should increase these actors’ involvement in the policy cycle.\(^{51}\)

Together with these choices for delegation, cooperation and a division of responsibilities, the legislator considers a system of internal control necessary.\(^{52}\) Consequently, the municipal CEO is expected to establish –in consultation with the MT- an internal control system which is subject to the approval of the municipal council.\(^{53}\)

\(^{46}\) Art. 96, LGD.
\(^{47}\) Art. 87, 93, 96 & 98, LGD.
\(^{50}\) Art. 87, LGD.
\(^{53}\) Art. 100, LGD.
5. Research design & data

To examine to what extent management ideas with respect to political-administrative relations has already been introduced in the Flemish municipalities, we choose for a mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

The quantitative part of the study consisted of a web survey, organized in the summer of 2012. The dataset has been developed in the context of the Policy Research Centre - Governmental organization - Decisive Governance's. The questionnaire was largely based on the surveys drawn up in the context of the research project 'Evaluation of the innovations in the LGD on the local administrative and political work', which were conducted in the two years after the implementation of most of the articles of the decree. The similarity of both questionnaires makes it possible to detect any changes in the decree's implementation and appreciation.

All municipal secretaries, mayors, aldermen and council members were invited to participate in the survey. This paper focuses on the answers of the municipal secretaries. In order to map the state of affairs of the implementation of the LGD, this group of respondents received both factual and perception questions. The local politicians only received evaluative questions. From all the Flemish municipal CEO’s, 59.1% participated in the survey. The realized sample is representative by size and province. A more detailed description of the research process and development of the dataset can be found in previous research reports.

The second phase of the research is qualitative in nature: case studies in six Flemish municipalities should allow us to explain the implementation of the political-administrative reforms in depth. SEAWRIGHT & GERRING (2008: 296) describe a case study as "the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) analysis of a single unit or a smaller number of units (the cases), where the researcher's goal is to understand a larger class of similar units (a population or cases)"

While questionnaires could be used to get answers to questions about the who, what, where and how much, case studies are more suitable to outline the how and why of certain developments or decisions. Applied to the subject of this study, we hope the qualitative part to expose the more latent and unexpected effects and consequences of the implementation process.

Case studies were organized both in 2008-2009 and 2015. Each time, the same municipalities participated. This selection of cases was based on five independent variables: the province, the scale, the composition of the executive body (coalition of absolute majority), the continuity of the administration and the hierarchy of municipalities. The selection was confined to the municipalities of the provinces of Antwerp, Limburg and Flemish Brabant. Within each province two municipalities were selected. For each of the other selection variables a maximal differentiation was pursued.

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In the selected municipalities additional information was gathered by the mayor, the city manager and the aldermen of finances using semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews a so-called topic list is used: the researcher determines the issues to be discussed in advance, but the exact question wording and order of the topics depend on the development of the interview. 57 Topics that were discussed during the interview were the relation with (other) politicians, the relation with the administration, the role of the administration in the policy cycle, the MT’s position, the note of agreement, the internal control system and the policy and management cycle.

6. Institution evaluation: the implementation of the politico-administrative reforms

The phase of institutional evaluation covers the actual institutional change as required by the reform measures. 58 Given the subject of the paper, the focus is on the implementation of the note of agreement, the management team, the possibility to delegate responsibilities from the political to the administrative level and the introduction of an internal control system.

![Figure 2: Implementation of political-administrative instruments](image)

Except for the delegation possibility from the political to the administrative level, the political-administrative innovations are compulsory. That this obligation not necessarily leads to implementation, can be deduced from the results regarding the note of agreement. By the summer of 2012 'only' 59% of the Flemish municipalities had such a memorandum. By comparison, in 2008 it was present in 51% of the municipalities. However, this increase is not significant. 59

The interviews show that the drafting of a note of agreement is generally not considered a priority by the administration, nor by politicians. A secretary literally said "I did not spent energy on this topic because of other priorities." Another secretary argued: "I have informed the board several times that we had to make a note agreements. That it is obliged by the decree. I asked him in which direction they want it to go. I've never gotten any response there". Most respondents point to the legal obligation as the main reason for introducing the note of agreement.

Looking at the content of the note of agreement, this document explains in 64% of the municipalities that the MT and the board meet at regular intervals. Nearly seven in ten notes of

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59 We reach the same conclusion when we only include those municipalities in the analyses that participated in both the 2008 and 2012 survey.
agreement determine how the MT reports to the college about its daily activities. Concrete work agreements between college and MT can be found in 69% of the current notes of agreements. During the interviews it became clear that the document is usually a written record of how the cooperation between politics and administration runs in practice. It should come as no surprise then that the impact of the document on the cooperation between politics and administration is estimated low. An illustration: "It's present, but I don't dare stabbing my hand in the fire to question the members of my management team and staff about it."

The results concerning the internal control system are rather similar. Despite the legal provision's obligatory character, only six out of ten secretaries confirmed the presence of an internal control system in their municipality. However, internal control systems have become more widespread in the course of the term 2008-2012.

In the spring of 2015, the internal audit theme was high on the agenda in the Flemish municipalities, as appears from the interviews. The main reason for this attention was Audit Flanders, the Flemish government's agency that is charged with the evaluation of the internal control system of the Flemish administration and the local authorities. Since the external audit of Audit Flanders was announced to take place in every municipality before the end of the 2013-2018 term, many municipalities opted for introducing or adapting procedures for internal control. The interviews show that the system of internal control is primarily an administrative matter. A secretary illustrates this point: "We do report about the internal control system to the municipal council every year, but we are getting very little questions on this topic. This topic doesn't concern politicians."

The obligation to establish a municipal management team seems to be better respected by the municipal authorities. In the summer of 2012, all participating secretaries indicated having a management team in their municipality. Thus, the proportion of municipalities complying the legal provision increased compared to 2008. At that time, 96.9% of the municipalities had a management team (p = 0.020).

With regard to the membership, the explanatory memorandum initially prescribed the management team to be an administrative organ. However, the 2008 survey showed that members of the board of mayor and aldermen systematically participated in the meetings of the management team in 5% of municipalities. The statutory change of 2009 renounced the official composition of the management team and made it possible for the mayor, or, where appropriate, the alderman designated by him, to take part in the management team’s meetings. In the summer of 2012, seven out of ten municipalities proceeded to the inclusion of the mayor in the management team. In only four percent of the municipalities other members of the board systematically participated in the deliberation of the management team.

The inclusion of politicians in the management team was received with mixed feelings by the secretaries, according to the interviews. One secretary, for example, holds the opinion that the presence of politicians in the management team negatively influenced the debate during the

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61 Art. 64 decreet tot wijziging van het Gemeentedecreet, *BS* 4 februari 2009.
meetings, with administrators feeling inhibited by their presence. In contrast, another secretary takes the view that distrust between politics and administration is reduced due to the inclusion of the mayor.

Finally, the LGD provides the board of mayor and aldermen with the ability to delegate certain powers to the municipal secretary. This form of delegation occurs significantly more often in 2012 than in 2008. While the aldermen in 2008 in 13% of municipalities delegated powers to the secretary, this share more than tripled in 2012. The delegated powers relate primarily to personnel matters.

Delegation of budget-holders is more common in 2012 than in 2008. As in the previous measurement over 97% of the municipal secretaries indicated that the budget-holders has not been delegated, it is about 90% in 2012. If the responsibility for the budget is delegated, this happens mostly to other staff, on the advice of the secretary. Delegation to district committees and/or citizens' initiatives not or hardly occurs. Several respondents expected the demand for delegation of budget-holders to increase after the integration of community and social services, since this practice is strongly established in the public centers for social welfare (PCSW).  

The different yes / no questions concerning the implementation of the political-administrative instruments are coded to 0=no and 1=yes. Summing these codes we construct an index that reflects the extent to which the political-administrative reforms have been implemented in the Flemish municipalities. The index' values may vary from 0 to 5. The chart below shows the distribution of this constructed variable.

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62 In 2014, the new Flemish government announced the full integration of the municipalities and the so-called PCSW's - organizations present on the municipal level that are responsible for the municipalities' social policy- by the end of the 2013-2018 term.

63 The different questions: 1. Does your community work with a management team? 2. Have you made a note of agreement with the college of mayor and aldermen? 3. Does the college of mayor and aldermen delegate responsibilities to the municipal secretary? 4. Does the college of mayor and aldermen delegate the budget-holding? 5. Has the municipal council laid down an internal control system?
On average, the Flemish municipalities have introduced 2.72 out of five innovations concerning the modernization of the political-administrative relations. About two thirds of the municipalities have introduced two or three instruments. Only nine municipalities indicate having introduced all five innovations, 16 municipalities have implemented one renewal. In all these municipalities it shows out to be the management team.

7. The performance evaluation: the political-administrative modernization’s impact

For the ‘performance evaluation’ three areas of assessment can be distinguished:

(1) changes in output legitimacy: effectiveness, efficiency, productivity;
(2) changes in processes of coordination and direction: vertical and horizontal coordination;
(3) changes in the input legitimacy: democratic accountability, political accountability, citizen participation, transparency. ⁶⁴

In outlining the political-administrative reforms the strengthening of the output legitimacy, neither of the input legitimacy seem to have been a priority for the legislator. The decree’s objectives regarding the interaction between politicians and civil servants are mainly concerned with the internal municipal organization and processes. Consequently, the evaluation focuses on the political-administrative innovations regarding changes in the processes of management and coordination.

In concrete terms, this paper scrutinizes whether the procedures of the political steering of the administration have been changed. We do this by using the following statements, which are partly inspired by DE LEEMANS (1998):

- The members of the executive board deliberate directly with the various services without contacting the secretary;
- There is a confidential relationship between the board members and the various services;
- Employees not allow themselves to be influenced by members of the board of mayor and aldermen;
- The secretary enjoys the members of the executive board’s trust. He gets complete freedom to organize and coordinate the municipal services;
- The board members leave the preparation of the board’s and the council’s decisions for the secretary and his services;
- The board members only capture the main points of the policy to be pursued, the administration decides on policy implementation;
- The board members give maximum space to employees for developing and implementing policy;
- The mayor is first and foremost a politician who is more concerned with policy than with administrative details.

The response options ranged from "Not at all" to “To a considerable extent” on a 5 point Likert scale. The table below shows the results.

Table 1: The political steering of the administration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Confidential relation between board &amp; services</th>
<th>Employees are not influenced by mayor &amp; aldermen</th>
<th>Employees get maximum freedom</th>
<th>Board only captures the main points of the policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>7,6</td>
<td>9,7</td>
<td>10,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a limited extent</td>
<td>30,1</td>
<td>27,5</td>
<td>28,7</td>
<td>34,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a certain extent</td>
<td>37,2</td>
<td>33,3</td>
<td>44,1</td>
<td>38,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a great extent</td>
<td>26,5</td>
<td>24,6</td>
<td>16,4</td>
<td>13,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a considerable extent</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>7,0</td>
<td>1,0</td>
<td>2,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>169</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chi²</td>
<td>p=0,095</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>P=0,084</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preparation of the board and council decisions left for the administration</th>
<th>Secretary enjoys the aldermen's trust</th>
<th>Direct contact between the members of the executive board and the services</th>
<th>Mayor is first and foremost concerned with policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0,5</td>
<td>1,8</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>4,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a limited extent</td>
<td>8,2</td>
<td>6,5</td>
<td>17,9</td>
<td>12,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a certain extent</td>
<td>24,0</td>
<td>17,6</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>27,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a great extent</td>
<td>48,0</td>
<td>43,5</td>
<td>42,3</td>
<td>35,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a considerable extent</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi²</td>
<td>p=0,077</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>p=0,005</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, opinions are divided on the relation between the mayor and aldermen on the one hand and the municipal services on the other hand: while roughly one third of the municipal secretaries strongly agrees with the proposition that the members of the college trust the different services, an almost equally large group is negative about this relationship. Compared with data from 2008, the views of the secretaries are more pronounced. Yet, during the interviews different secretaries consider confidence a crucial condition for a good cooperation with politicians.

According to the secretaries, the members of the executive body seem to be relatively influential vis-à-vis the administration: almost half of the secretaries thinks municipal employees are influenced by the members of the board of mayor and aldermen. Furthermore, nearly 30% of the municipal secretaries holds the opinion that the members of the college contact the various services directly and a relatively large group of 44% not or only slightly agrees with the statement that the college only captures the policy’s main features.

Despite these results, the steering of the staff generally seems to be the secretary’s responsibility: roughly 55% of the municipal secretaries agrees with the statement about having the necessary freedom to organize and coordinate the municipal services. Compared with 2008, the secretaries feel growing confidence of the college.
In general, the interviews confirm these findings. During our conversations, the secretaries mention frequent contacts and regular feedback moments between politicians and administrators. This direct dialogue is unproblematic for the secretaries as long as it does not imply direct political steering of the administration. Besides, an experienced secretary noticed during the interviews that the trust between politics and administration grows in the course of the term. This is a possible explanation for the growing trust between the secretary and the executive board.

Furthermore, the administration seems to play its role during policy preparation. Compared to 2008, the staff seems to get more freedom for developing and implementing policy. Furthermore, nearly 75% argues that the preparation of the board’s and the council’s decisions is one of the responsibilities of the secretary and his services. Secretaries perceive a positive evolution in this context: the proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement has increased by more than 10%.

A final thesis assesses the extent to which the secretary perceives the mayor as a politician who is more concerned about policy than about administrative details. The secretaries are divided on this topic: while over four in ten believe that the mayor in the first place is concerned about policy almost 30% not at all or only slightly agrees with this statement.

Factor analysis shows that the different items measure a common dimension that reflects the degree of interconnectedness between politics and administration (Explained variance: 50.26%). These items also form a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.851). The figure below shows the distribution of the constructed scale.

![Distribution political-administrative steering scale](image)

Figure 4: Distribution political-administrative steering scale

We use the above constructed scales as dependent variables in the following analyses. The new scale constructions on political-administrative implementation and political-administrative steering,
however, are not normally distributed. Consequently, we prefer a binary logistic regression analysis over a linear regression model. For this analysis, we divide our dependent variables into two almost equal groups, with the lowest group used as a reference category. For the scale with respect to implementation, this concerns all the scores to 2 (N = 66). For the scale concerning the administrative autonomy, 25 is used as limit (N=81).

8. Explaining political-administrative differentiation

To what extent do meso and micro factors have a mediating influence on the implementation of the political-administrative reforms and on the municipal political-administrative organizational culture? Before discussing the results of our regression analyses, the next section identifies the independent variables that will be included.

8.1 Independent variables

In line with the new institutionalist ideas, three groups of independent variables are included in the analysis: a group of community features, a group of variables related to the informal organizational culture of the municipal and personal characteristics of the secretary.

A. Municipality characteristics

The first group of independent variables combines a number of municipality characteristics, previously found to have an impact on institutional innovation. A first interesting indicator characterizing the locality is the municipal scale. In line with the findings that modernization advances with increasing scale and bigger municipalities start quicker with the introduction of institutional reforms, we expect the implementation to be more advanced in larger localities (hypothesis 1a). In the same line we expect the political-administrative relationships to be more professionalized in more populous municipalities (hypothesis 1b). This expectation is consistent with previous results from Plees & Laurent (1998) who found a negative correlation between the size of the municipality and the perceptions about the efficient organization: secretaries of small municipalities argue to a lesser extent that their municipalities are working inefficiently.

A second indicator at the municipal level is the political continuity. Previous research found a positive correlation between change in leadership and the degree of implementation of reforms. In line with Weets (2012), concluding that the board of mayor and aldermen is more receptive for

65 Implementation index: Kolmogorov-Smirnov = 0.198; df=149; p=0.000/Steering scale: Kolmogorov-Smirnov=0.066; df=159; p=0.090.
change if it exists for the majority of people without managerial experience\textsuperscript{69}, we expect a positive correlation between our dependent variables and the political discontinuity (hypotheses 2a & 2b).

Thirdly, we expect the implementation of the policy happening faster in municipalities with an homogeneous composite executive board (hypothesis 3a).\textsuperscript{70} However, the high degree of competition in coalition-controlled municipalities seems to be an impulse for a bigger reform willingness as well, with the implementation of the guidelines going slower, but in more depth.\textsuperscript{71} As a consequence we hypothesize the political-administrative modernization being more far-reaching in coalition controlled municipalities (hypothesis 3b). \textsuperscript{72}

In terms of financial possibilities, we hypothesize -based on former research on local reforms in Flanders\textsuperscript{73}- a more far-reaching implementation of the innovations (hypothesis 4a) and a less close relationship between politics and administration (hypothesis 4b) in those municipalities with a favorable financial profile.

In the analysis on the political-administrative steering, we include an additional variable giving a picture of the degree of implementation of the innovations. In line with the LGD, we expect a more far-reaching implementation going hand in hand with political-administrative relations that are streamlined to the management team model (hypothesis 5).

B. Organization culture

The second group of independent variables refers to the organization culture in the Flemish municipalities. A first variable clarifies whether the municipality already had a (form of) management team before the legal obligation in January 2007. Although these early management teams were still looking for their identity and position within the organization\textsuperscript{74}, an earlier start may reflect a greater openness towards the reforms.\textsuperscript{75} As a consequence, we do expect a more far-reaching implementation of the reforms in municipalities that had a MT before the new decree (hypothesis 6a). For the political-administrative steering we do expect a positive relationship with the moment of implementation of the MT as well (hypothesis 6b).

Furthermore, the argument on the administration’s influence is fairly clear in the literature, with secretaries being more likely to implement innovations if they are working in organizations where the necessary expertise is available and the participation of the staff in the reform process is


\textsuperscript{71} T. STEEN, Gemeenten in verandering: De sturing en implementatie van de krachtlijnen voor een nieuw personeelsbeleid, Brugge, Die Keure, 2001, p. 237.

\textsuperscript{72} Despite the decrease in homogeneous majorities in the Flemish municipalities, we do prefer this variable to the variable concerning the number of parties in the executive board since cartel formulas complicate the operationalization of the latter.


\textsuperscript{75} Other possible motivations may be: more opportunities for training and support, less time pressure in implementation, etc.
ensured. Consequently, we expect a positive correlation between the staff's motivation on the one hand and the implementation (hypothesis 7a) and impact of the reforms (hypothesis 7b) on the other hand.

C. Background characteristics

The third group of independent variables covers the characteristics of the municipal secretaries. Drawing on previous research suggesting women to be more in favor of deliberative forms of decision-making, but also sticking more closely to the classical political-administrative dichotomy, we expect that municipalities with a female secretary stand further in the implementation and modernization of the political-administrative relations (hypotheses 8a & 8b). By analogy with the previous research we expect the same for highly skilled secretaries (hypothesis 9a) and secretaries with little experience. Several studies indicate the arrival of a new secretary as an important incentive to start with a reform process. Secretaries holding their office for some time, are expected to be less supportive towards renewal (hypothesis 9b).

Finally, the analysis includes one attitudinal characteristic that may be expected to lead to a more far-reaching implementation and modernization of the political-administrative relations, that is, the extent to which secretaries support the LGD's general starting points (hypotheses 10a & 10b).

Different authors identify a positive attitude towards reforms as an important forecast for taking actions regarding the implementation of innovations.

8.2 Results

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses with the implementation scale for different groups of independent variables. While the first step only considers the municipal characteristics, the two subsequent steps include respectively variables concerning organization culture and the secretary's background. Data in the table represent the strength of the odds ratio (Exp(B)) and the level of significance (Sig.). In the last row, the Nagelkerke R² is presented as an expression of the explanatory power of the model.

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77 This scale is composed of three propositions: (1) The staff support the broad ideas of the LGD; (2) The services in my community work in a creative and innovative way; and (3) My municipality plays a lot of attention to the participation and motivation of staff (answering possibilities: 5 point Likert scale from 1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree). Factor analysis shows that the various statements measure a common dimension (explained variance = 60.47%). In addition, a reliability analysis shows that the statements constitute a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.672).
81 We asked the secretaries to what extent they agreed with the following statement: "I do support the basic assumptions of the LGD" (5 point Likert scale from 'Totally not agree' to 'Totally agree').
Table 2: Binary logistic regression analysis of the degree of implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp (B)</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>Exp (B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0,031</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity (ref: changed)</td>
<td>2,419</td>
<td>0,075</td>
<td>2,477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition majority (ref: coalition)</td>
<td>0,318</td>
<td>0,024</td>
<td>0,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial situation (ref: healthy)</td>
<td>0,411</td>
<td>0,196</td>
<td>0,414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT before 2007 (ref: no)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (ref: man)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (ref: no univ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support LGD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0,161</td>
<td>0,194</td>
<td>0,265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first step only studies the effect of municipal characteristics on the implementation process. The explanatory power of these variables is rather high. In line with our expectations, the implementation of the political-administrative innovations is more advanced in large municipalities and in municipalities where the majority remained unchanged after the 2006 local elections. This last finding is confirmed in the interviews, in which both politicians and secretaries mention a transition period at the beginning of the term. In this context, a secretary argued: “You can’t expect from new politicians that they know the decree’s content in two years. They are hard at work expressing themselves politically and ensuring their re-election. That is what bothers them.”

Furthermore, the composition of the executive board seems to modify the reforms’ implementation, but in an unexpected direction: having an absolute majority leads to a significantly lower score on the implementation index. It seems that competition between coalition partners keeps politicians alert and stimulates modernization initiatives.

Adding variables concerning the organizational culture enhances the overall explanatory power of the model. As expected, municipalities with a well-trained and supportive administration have implemented more renewals than their counterparts with a less supportive administration.

Finally, the third step includes background characteristics of the secretary. Adding those kind of variables raises the explanatory power of the model to 26,5%. Nevertheless, only experience matters. As expected, there is a negative correlation between the secretary’s experience and the degree of implementation. Furthermore, the inclusion of these variables modifies the effects found in the first step: under control of personal characteristics, a more rose-colored financial situation implies a more intensive implementation of political-administrative reforms.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the regression analysis concerning the politico-administrative connection.
Table 3: Binary logistic analysis of the degree of the administration’s autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp (B)</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>Exp (B)</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>Exp (B)</td>
<td>Sign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0,312</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0,150</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity (ref: changed)</td>
<td>0,921</td>
<td>0,865</td>
<td>1,107</td>
<td>0,844</td>
<td>1,082</td>
<td>0,882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition majority (ref: coalition)</td>
<td>0,401</td>
<td>0,066</td>
<td>0,302</td>
<td>0,029</td>
<td>0,293</td>
<td>0,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial situation (ref: healthy)</td>
<td>10,147</td>
<td>0,037</td>
<td>11,252</td>
<td>0,035</td>
<td>9,253</td>
<td>0,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of implementation</td>
<td>1,502</td>
<td>0,069</td>
<td>1,373</td>
<td>0,170</td>
<td>1,322</td>
<td>0,244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MT before 2007 (ref: no)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,566</td>
<td>0,333</td>
<td>1,678</td>
<td>0,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1,417</td>
<td>0,010</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>0,007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (ref: man)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1,032</td>
<td>0,960</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0,522</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support LGD</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0,720</td>
<td>0,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0,194</td>
<td></td>
<td>0,293</td>
<td></td>
<td>0,308</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By analogy with the results regarding the introduction of the political-administrative innovations and in line with the hypothesis, we note that the political-administrative interweaving is less strong in communities which are led by a coalition. Besides, there is a positive relationship between the implementation of the new instruments and the political-administrative innovation. However, this effect disappears under the control of the cultural variables.

In contrast to the results regarding implementation, the modernization in political-administrative relations is more far-reaching in municipalities with a bad financial situation. This is confirmed by a secretary: "I think we are just about the poorest municipality of the province. We should always be more creative. That’s why you will notice that we can handle certain developments, while others moan and groan under the modernization of the policy and management cycle and the obligatory introduction of an internal control system." However, in another municipality the secretary perceives the relation in the opposite direction: "There is a huge difference between this term and the previous one and it has everything to do with budgetary constraints. This term, there is more political interference in the organization because of the limited financial resources."

Adding organizational culture variables in the second step of the analysis, increases the overall explanatory power of the model. Again, we note a positive correlation between the administration’s positive reform attitude and the modernization of the political-administrative culture within the municipalities.

Finally, the third step includes the secretaries’ background characteristics. Despite a slight increase of the explanatory power of the model, none of the included variables has an impact on the political-administrative interweaving.
9. Conclusion and discussion

Inspired by New Public Management ideas, the Local Government Decree aimed a professionalized cooperation between politics and administration, without politicians being concerned with particular or individual questions and concerns and with a more autonomous administration, playing a pivotal role in the policy cycle.

To that end several instruments were created possibly influencing political-administrative interaction. First, with the introduction of a MT and a note of agreement, the legislator aimed to integrate administrators in decision-making and to give them more weight vis-à-vis the college of mayor and aldermen and the individual aldermen, who traditionally had a direct steering role towards 'their' heads of department. Other relevant instruments were the delegation possibilities and the introduction of an internal control system.

This paper has tried to investigate the Local Government Decree's impact on the political-administrative interaction in the Flemish municipalities. This article used a new institutionalist perspective to study the mediating effect of contextual, organizational and individual factors on the effects of the regulatory framework.

Our exploration combining quantitative and qualitative data from two Flemish research projects has shown the existence of an implementation gap: despite the obligatory character of the legal provisions concerning the note of agreement and the internal control system, only six out of then municipalities have implemented these instruments. However, the presence of an external pressure, as the external audit, seems to increase the pressure on municipalities to obey the LGD. The instruments without obligations as well have become more wide-spread in the Flemish municipalities. However, these practices are less common than the obligated ones.

With regard to the political steering of the administration some evolutions, pursued by the legislator, can be identified. Compared to 2008, the trust between the college of mayor and aldermen and the municipal secretary seems to have grown. Furthermore, the administration’s role in policy preparation and implementation is strengthened. Nevertheless, the college of mayor and aldermen remains an influential body in the policy cycle vis-à-vis the administration.

However, the mere introduction of political-administrative renewals will not suffice to change the political-administrative culture. First, this becomes clear from the interviews with secretaries admitting for example the limited impact of the note of agreement. Second, the relation between the formal implementation and the political-administrative interconnectedness disappears under control of organizational characteristics. As a consequence, organizational culture seems to be more important in the explanation of political-administrative steering than the mere implementation of renewals. In addition, our explanatory analyses have confirmed the importance of municipal characteristics for the implementation and impact of institutional reforms.

First, size matters for the implementation of the instruments and the political continuity is of particular importance as well. Furthermore coalition-led municipalities seems to be more supportive for institutional reform than municipalities with a homogenous majority. Finally, the financial situation influences the implementation intensity as well as the administration’s autonomy. However, correlations are opposite: while municipalities with a more rose-colored financial situation
on average have implemented more political-administrative instruments, their political-administrative cooperation has changed less.

With regard to organizational culture, especially the administration’s attitude seems to be decisive for the success of the reforms. Finally, our regression analyses have shown that the secretary’s characteristics only have a limited explanatory value to understand intermunicipal variation. This conclusion possibly implies that leading administrators, who are supportive to the institutional change, are not the only factor to take into account when implementing institutional change. Standard operating procedures, norms and the political environment seem to have a constraining influence.

Moreover, other actors’ perceptions could be relevant as well. Since we did collect similar data for mayors and aldermen, following work will compare the administrators’ and politicians’ opinions. These analyses will deepen our view on political-administrative cooperation.