

Parliamentary scrutiny of methods of open coordination. The involvement of the Dutch and British parliament in the EU governance of the knowledge-based society

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Abstract

Although the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) – a policy tool aimed at fostering mutual policy learning between EU member states – adds an EU dimension to national policies, no competences are shifted to the EU level. In addition, the OMC promises to involve a broad range of actors, among which members of parliament. Scholars have studied the OMC employment and OMC social inclusion and showed that the OMC breaks this promise by affecting the national policy making process outside of the control of national parliaments. This paper investigates the involvement of two national parliaments across three under-researched OMCs, related with the knowledge-based society theme.

Keywords: European Union, Open Method of Coordination, democratic legitimacy, national parliaments, knowledge-based society.

Introduction

Almost a decade after the launch of the Lisbon strategy, time has arrived to assess the effects of the strategy that aimed to turn the EU in the most competitive, dynamic and social cohesive society in the world in just ten years. In this context a vast amount of scholars has paid attention to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a policy tool codified in the Lisbon presidency conclusions and adopted on a variety of policy fields to reach the ambitious Lisbon goals. The OMC consists of target-setting between national governments of the member states of the European Union with the ultimate aim of starting a learning process between national governments about how to respond with national policies to universal political and social challenges (Chalmers and Lodge 2003: 17). In order to safeguard the effectiveness and input legitimacy of the OMC this learning process should be ‘open’, i.e. involve a broad range of (non-)state actors such as NGOs and national parliaments.

Until now the impact of OMCs on national policies received by far the most scholarly attention. More recently political scientists are developing an interest in the involvement of national parliaments (Borrás and Conzelmann 2007; Duina and Raunio 2007; Benz 2007). This paper investigates the scrutiny national parliaments exercise in practice over OMCs and explains variation in parliamentary involvement of the Dutch and British Upper and Lower Houses across three OMCs related with the knowledge-based society theme. Four hypotheses are formulated, predicting respectively, marginal involvement of parliaments in OMCs, conditional involvement, stronger involvement of

parliaments functioning in a consensus democracy, and more involvement of parliaments with strong EU affairs committees.

The next section introduces the main characteristics of the OMC, discusses its effect on policy-making processes in the member states, and the problems created by the low involvement of national parliaments for the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of the OMC. Subsequently, the literature on the involvement of national parliaments in OMCs is critically reflected upon and a need for a comparative analysis across parliaments and under-researched OMCs is identified. In a third step the four hypotheses are formulated and information on the data collection and analysis is provided. Fourth, empirical results are presented on the involvement of two parliaments in three OMCs. The concluding section discusses the hypotheses in light of the empirical findings, the limitations of the study, and topics for future research..

The OMC: infrastructure, effect, and national parliaments

The heads of state and government of the EU member states codified the OMC in 2000 by including four elements in the Lisbon presidency conclusions, together forming the institutional infrastructure of an OMC (Council of the European Union 2000). The complete infrastructure of the OMC consists of i) guidelines or objectives, ii) indicators and benchmarks, iii) reporting via National Action Plans (NAPs), iv) peer learning groups. In subsequent years these four elements came to function as a template for implementing OMCs on various policy fields related with the Lisbon goals; i.e. social inclusion, pensions, health care, education, research and development and internet

policy¹. Due to the use of this template, national governments play the central role in all OMCs; they approve by qualified majority in the Council the guidelines, indicators and benchmarks on which the different national policies are scored, and formulate NAPs in which it is specified how they plan to improve their policies. The respective European Commission DGs and experts of national ministries identify the factors that cause a national policy to perform best and review the NAPs and policies of the member states in peer learning groups. After the multilateral surveillance of national policies, the Commission and the Council draw up a joint report in which a summary is given of the progress made in each member state towards the objectives. Only in the case of the European Employment Strategy (EES) the Commission issued – until 2005 – non-binding country-specific policy recommendations.

Despite the non-binding character of OMCs, research on the EES showed that the OMC can have an indirect effect on national policy making processes in the member states through (re-)framing issues and problems (López-Santana 2006). A first element of the EES through which such a framing effect can occur is the European Employment Guidelines. These guidelines define common European problems that domestic policy-makers should act upon. A second framing effect occurs when individual recommendations to a member state trigger a discussion about why a condition (i.e. an event, a situation) should be defined by domestic policy makers as a problem. Third, the EU can highlight relative disadvantages and advantages by providing explicit performance comparisons in an OMC through qualitative indicators and benchmarks across member states. If a member state is not achieving what others are accomplishing

¹ Although the Lisbon Council is often seen as the birth of the OMC, the inspiration for this template was drawn from the European Employment Strategy, in function since 1998. The term OMC employment and EES will both be used in this paper to refer to this OMC.

then this relative disadvantage is framed as a domestic problem. Through these three framing effects a condition can be framed into a problem, and domestic policy-makers are persuaded to construct their proposals within the framework set by the OMC (López-Santana 2006; Bruno et. al. 2006). This framework is not an uncontroversial definition of sound policies but is touching upon issues of public interest and substantively affects the redistributive outcomes of policy making, often even before policies are debated in national parliaments (Tsakatika 2007: 550; Kröger 2007: 658; Duina and Raunio 2007: 502).

The latter finding has led several authors to conclude that the OMC is undermining the democratic legitimacy of the national political system in member states when viewed from a liberal democracy² perspective. This conclusion is often presented as the rationale for studying the involvement of national parliaments in OMCs. This paper departs from a different rationale and claims that the undermining effect of framing through the OMC is exaggerated in the literature. In fact, national governments are on a daily basis confronted with frames from which they can choose – e.g. from ministries, the media, independent think tanks, advisory councils, international organizations – without that the parliament is informed on the full range and origin of the choices. After one of the frames is taken as point of departure by a national government for developing new policies, it still is the national parliament that ultimately decides on the policy proposal of the government. This enables parliamentarians to reject the underlying frame of a policy

² In this paper a liberal democracy perspective is chosen, focusing on the involvement of national parliaments. A second perspective on the democratic legitimacy of OMCs that can be adopted departs from the claim that ‘arguing’ in an open public debate between free and equal citizens is at the core of democratic governance. To assess the democratic quality of soft modes of governance from this ‘deliberative democracy’ perspective it is needed to assess the possibility for direct and uninhibited societal input, the control of power asymmetries and the presence of arguing in the decision-making process (Borrás and Conzelmann 2007: 540; see also De La Porte and Nanz 2004; Smismans 2004; Friedrich 2006; Radulova 2007; Kröger 2007; Benz 2007).

proposal made to them, even when originating in an OMC. Hence, the OMC does not undermine the democratic legitimacy of national political systems through its framing effect on the national policy making process.

However, there are several valid reasons for studying the role of national parliaments in OMCs. First, the architects of the OMC made ‘openness’ one of the defining characteristics of the method in order to ensure the input legitimacy of the OMC and, accordingly, included in the institutional design the promise to involve stakeholders. This study will shed light on whether the OMC is able to uphold this promise. Second, the involvement of national parliaments is crucial for the effectiveness of OMCs. The OMC can only be an effective method when governments are held to account for policies that are under multilateral surveillance by the OMC. Without the involvement of national legislatures there will be no actor that can formally hold the government accountable for the performance of national policies in cross-national policy comparisons. As a result, the pressure on government to adjust its policies in case of underperformance is reduced. Hence, studying the involvement of national parliaments in OMCs provides insight on the extent to which the OMC can contribute to the ambitious Lisbon goals.

The involvement of national parliaments in methods of open coordination

Earlier studies on the involvement of national parliaments in OMCs provide support for the deparliamentarisation-thesis; i.e. parliamentarians do not have control over the decisions taken on the EU level with regard to the institutional development of the OMC

and are unable to scrutinize the output of the OMC (Duina and Raunio 2007). This claim forms the core of the first hypothesis that will be assessed in this article.

H1: national parliaments are unwilling and unable to scrutinize OMCs.

Scholars claim that parliamentarians are not interested in following OMC processes because judge the impact of the OMC on the national policy making process as marginal (Duina and Raunio 2007: 298-299; Kerber and Eckhardt 2007). Moreover, it is claimed that parliamentarians are not able to scrutinize OMCs. Unlike normal EU legislation, the OMC does not have a clear beginning or end, or rules guiding the behaviour of actors. This makes the OMC hard to follow (Raunio 2006).

There are also factors on the side of national executives that can hinder parliaments to scrutinise OMCs. In all OMCs representatives of national governments are involved in drawing up NAPs and Joint Reports and participate in peer learning groups on the EU level. As a result, information becomes concentrated in the executive branch (Raunio 2006). Moreover, effective deliberation in an OMC peer learning group requires intense in-group communication among actors involved. This creates a dense network of government representatives from different member states which cannot be controlled by external actors as these networks are usually unknown to them (Benz 2007: 515). There is anecdotal evidence that national governments used this distance between the national parliamentary arena and the OMC arena to prevent criticism on national policies voiced on the EU level from coming through in national parliaments (Jacobsson 2005: 123; Visser 2005: 199-200; Raunio 2006: 130; Kröger 2007; Tsakatika 2007).

While earlier studies provided empirical support for the deparliamentarisation-thesis, more recently scholars claim that a meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of OMCs can take place when certain conditions are fulfilled. Duina and Raunio present empirical findings on how the presence of NAPs and Joint Reports in OMCs allows opposition parties at the national level to acquire information that can be used to criticise the policies of national executives (Duina and Raunio 2007: 498). According to Benz, however, it is quite likely that in a party political context the government will dismiss the negative messages on national policies as ignoring the particularities of the national context. Moreover, the NAPs and Joint Reports that are discussed in OMCs are all drawn up by the national government (in cooperation with the Commission in the case of Joint Reports). Hence, national parliaments have to rely on information that can be manipulated by the government (Benz 2007: 516). Benz claims that the only way to ensure the involvement of national parliaments in OMCs is by increasing cross-national policy comparisons on a competitive basis. This means that simple benchmarks and ranking of the policy performance of member states according to indicators need to be present in OMCs, ‘so that experts and policy makers of national ministries participating in the OMC network are not needed to interpret the results of the OMC’ (Benz 2007: 518). This claim leads to a second hypothesis.

H2: when simple benchmarks are present in an OMC and policy performances of member states are ranked according to indicators, parliamentarians can and will use the information from the OMC arena to hold their government accountable for the performance of national policies vis-à-vis other member state policies.

Benz does not find any empirical evidence in current studies of the OMC – which are all focused on the OMC employment and the OMC social inclusion – that hint at empirical support for this hypothesis, but indicates that other OMCs have developed on which much is still unclear. Hence, there is a strong need for comparative research across under researched OMCs.

Apart from a need for comparative research across under researched OMCs, this study claims that country-specific differences influence the degree of scrutiny a national parliament exercises. It can be expected that parliaments will exercise scrutiny over OMCs in a different way depending on the institutional structure of the democratic system in a country, i.e. in either a majoritarian or consensus model of democracy (Lijphart 1999). In a majoritarian model such as that of the UK, the one-party government of the day has an assured majority among members of parliament and can rely on getting all of its legislation through. Because of this executive dominance, the parliament in the Westminster majoritarian system is labeled as a ‘talking assembly’, with the opposition seeing its role as criticizing the government rather than work together to arrive at better legislation in parliamentary committees (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2000). Hence, the government in a majoritarian model will be less inclined to provide information on the performance of national policies voiced in the OMC arena on the EU level – especially when negative on the policies of the incumbent government – and is more eager to push its own policies through, regardless of objections of the opposition parties. In a consensus model of democracy (e.g. the Netherlands), governments consist of multiple parties, have a genuine give-and-take relationship with parliament and try to

find broad consensus for their plans (Hague & Harrop 2001; Tans 2007). The close collaboration between government and parliament and the presence of a strong specialized committee system led to assigning the label of ‘working assembly’ to parliaments functioning in a consensus model of democracy (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2000). This less confrontational attitude of governments and parliaments in consensus models, makes it more likely that information is provided by the government to parliament on the performance of national policies in the OMC arena – even when this information is unfavorable for the policies of the incumbent government. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Parliaments in consensus democracies are likely to receive more information from their government on the OMC and its output, which leads to a stronger involvement in OMCs when compared to parliaments in majoritarian democracies.

Another country-specific difference that can have an influence on the involvement of a national parliament in the OMC is the strength of the parliamentary EU affairs committee in a member state parliament (Jacobsson 2005: 109, 111). In classifications of parliaments with regard to their EU scrutiny rights that can be found in the literature, the Danish parliament is seen as exercising the strictest parliamentary control because can mandate ministers and as such is able ‘to formulate its own political assumptions about the daily EU business’ (Maurer & Wessels 2001). In countries such as Austria, Sweden and Finland the scrutiny system is less binding for government but parliaments are nevertheless seen as strong policy makers (Maurer & Wessels 2001). The Netherlands

and Germany are seen to follow suit, as their parliaments carry out in-depth scrutiny of EU legislation but are committed to avoid confrontations with their government. The French and the British parliaments are seen as cases of modest policy-making legislatures. Both parliaments are able to voice their opinions on EU legislation by way of reports, resolutions and so called parliamentary scrutiny reserves. However, they are not able to fundamentally change or amend a governmental position on EU affairs (Maurer & Wessels 2001). On the other side of the spectrum we find countries such as Greece and Portugal that are seen to have weak scrutiny powers when it comes to EU affairs (Wessels & Maurer 2001; Hegeland & Neuhold 2002; Raunio 2005). In this paper it is claimed that the strength of an EU affairs committee in a member state parliament is positively related to the parliamentary involvement in an OMC. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: The more an EU affairs committee in a member state parliament is scrutinizing the activities of the national government at the EU level, the more members of parliament in this committee are able and willing to scrutinize OMCs.

Cases and methods

Scholars focused until now primarily on the EES and the OMC social inclusion to assess the parliamentary involvement in member states. In contrast, this paper studies under researched OMCs, all applied to a theme that became over the last 10 years more important on the national and European political agenda; i.e. the knowledge-based

society. Accordingly, the OMC education, OMC R&D and the OMC e-Europe were studied. Two of the three OMCs under study – the OMC education and OMC R&D – have few but simple and focused benchmarks/targets and explicitly rank the policy performance of member states on indicators³. Hence, the second hypothesis predicts for these OMCs a stronger involvement of parliaments than for the OMC e-Europe, which remained largely underdeveloped institutionally in the period 1999-2008.

The involvement of parliaments was measured through coding parliamentary documents such as letters of ministers to parliaments, minutes of plenary debates and debates in committees, questions of MPs and answers of the ministers, and policy documents discussed in parliament. The documents for coding were selected through using search strings including references to the European Union, the policy field on which the OMC is adopted, the OMC as such, and elements/output of the OMC such as National Action Plans, National Reform Programmes, peer learning, Joint Reports, indicators and benchmarks.

The extensive coding of parliamentary documents was executed for the Upper and Lower houses in the UK and the Netherlands⁴, respectively a majoritarian and consensus model of democracy. The EU affairs committees in the Dutch parliament are stronger than the EU affairs committees in the British House of Commons and House of Lords

³ Five benchmarks were defined in the OMC education – with a time schedule running till 2010 – touching upon the following themes: i) early school leavers; ii) young people with upper secondary education; iii) low-achieving 15 year-olds in reading; iv) graduates in mathematics; v) participation in lifelong learning (European Commission 2004). To measure the progress on these benchmarks, 8 key issues were identified, with 29 concrete indicators to rank the performance of member state education policies (De Ruiter 2009). The Barcelona Council of 2002 formulated two concrete objectives for the OMC R&D: i) an increase in R&D investment in all member states from 1.9% of GDP in 2000 to 3% in 2010 and, ii) an increased share of business funding that should reach 2/3 of total R&D expenditure. The member states made CREST – a member state-led advisory body for R&D issues – responsible for measuring and analyzing the progress on these targets (De Ruiter forthcoming).

⁴ In total 472 documents were coded, of which 131 documents were discussed in the British Upper and Lower House, and 341 documents in the Dutch Upper and Lower House.

(see previous section). Hence, on the basis of the third and fourth hypothesis one would expect that the Dutch parliament is better informed about the policies to which OMCs are applied, the institutional design of OMCs, and the output of OMCs (i.e. Joint Reports and NAPs).

In previous contributions to the literature on the involvement of parliaments in OMCs, no distinction is made between national governments informing parliament about the existence of the OMC and/or parliamentarians actively using the information from the OMC arena to hold the government to account. This study measures the involvement of parliaments in a more precise way. The parliamentary documents were coded along the lines of four categories of references to the OMC. These categories were identified through a pre-study of the documents collected for the Dutch Upper and Lower Houses in the case of the OMC education. First, general references to the development of an OMC in infrastructural terms (i.e. the introduction of guidelines, indicators, benchmarks, reporting, and peer learning activities) were put in a category with the label ‘informing infrastructure’. This type of reference is used by the government to inform parliament on developments with regard to the OMC that are not directly related to policies. Neutral references to policies discussed in OMCs – i.e. without mentioning the policy performance of member states – form the second category. This type of reference is used by governments to inform parliament of policies discussed in OMCs and is labeled ‘informing policy’. The third category consists of a positive reference to the performance of national policies in an OMC. The government is likely to refer to the OMC in this way in order to ‘fame’ its own policies. Accordingly, the third category is labeled ‘faming’ and sheds light on the control of national government over the information flow coming

from the OMC arena. The fourth category is the mirror picture of the third category and consists of a negative reference to the performance of national policies in an OMC. This category is labeled ‘shaming’. By categorizing the data obtained from the coding of the parliamentary documents, sufficient insights were obtained to test the first hypothesis.

	<i>Informing infrastructure</i>	<i>Informing policy</i>	<i>Shaming</i>	<i>Faming</i>
NL OMC education	66	55	23	14
NL OMC e-Europe	49	117	8	16
NL OMC R&D	51	111	52	24
UK OMC education	39	35	6	5
UK OMC e-Europe	33	52	1	6
UK OMC R&D	14	27	9	2
Total	252	397	99	67

Table 1: Amount of references in documents discussed in the Dutch and British Upper and Lower House in the period 1999-2007 across four coding categories.

Through the study of Commission and Council documents and the NAPs drawn up by the Dutch and British government, insights were obtained on the presence of simple benchmarks and ranking of the policy performance of member states on indicators. These data proved insightful for assessing the second hypothesis. For the assessment of the third and fourth hypothesis, information on the differences between the Dutch and the British political systems were derived from secondary literature on consensus and majoritarian democracies, and from classifications on the strength of EU affairs committees of national parliaments.

Results

The parliamentary discussions in which information was used from the OMC arena took place in the European Affairs Committees of the British and Dutch parliament. The total

amount of references to the OMCs varies considerably between the parliamentary committees of the two member states (see figure 1).

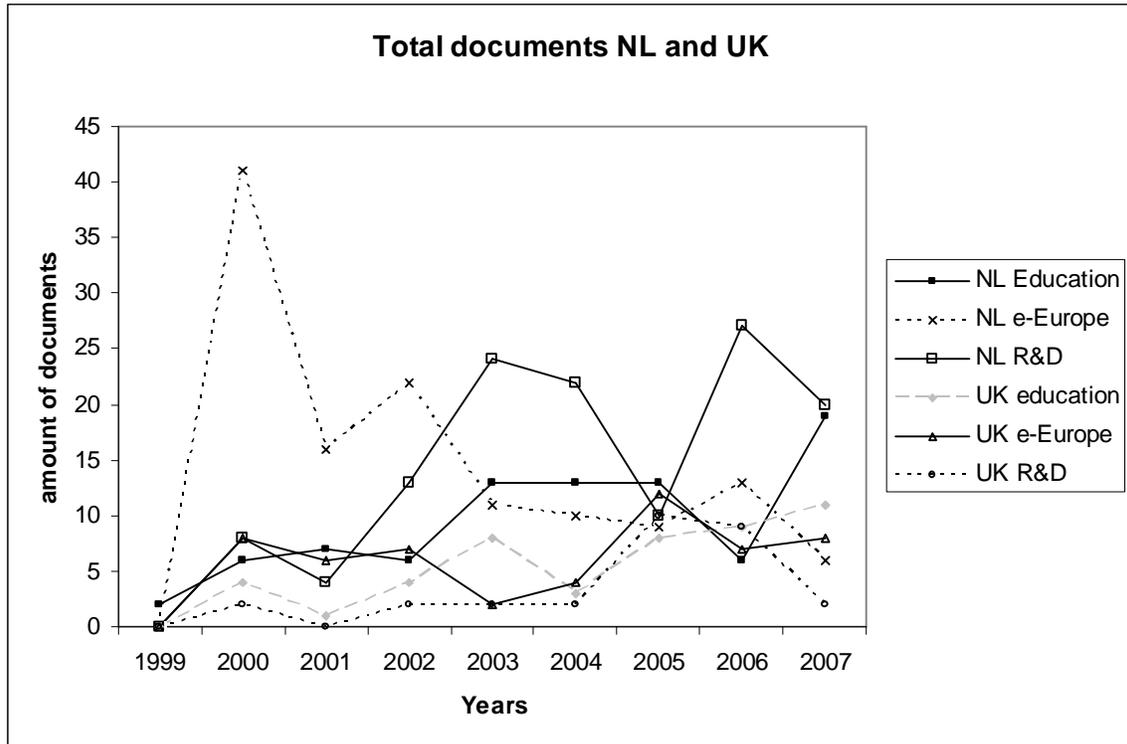


Figure 1: Total amount of references for the Netherlands (NL) and the United Kingdom (UK).

In order to assess the four hypotheses, a more detailed picture of the variation between OMCs and parliaments needs to be provided. In this section the distribution of the data across the four categories of parliamentary involvement is discussed.

Information infrastructure

When we look at the information provided by the Dutch government to the Dutch parliament on the development of the institutional design of the OMC at the European level, the OMCs adopted on the e-Europe and R&D domains show a decreasing trend

after peaks in respectively 2002 and 2003. This is in line with the actual developments on the EU level (De Ruiter 2007). The reporting on the institutional design of the OMC education to the Dutch parliament shows several peaks (2003, 2005, 2007), with a starting point in reporting comparable to the OMC R&D (around 2002). The peaks in reporting on the institutional design of the OMC education can be explained by continuous restructuring and development of benchmarks, indicators and reporting requirements at the EU level. Hence, there is a good fit between what is reported by the government to parliament and the actual EU developments with regard to the three OMCs.

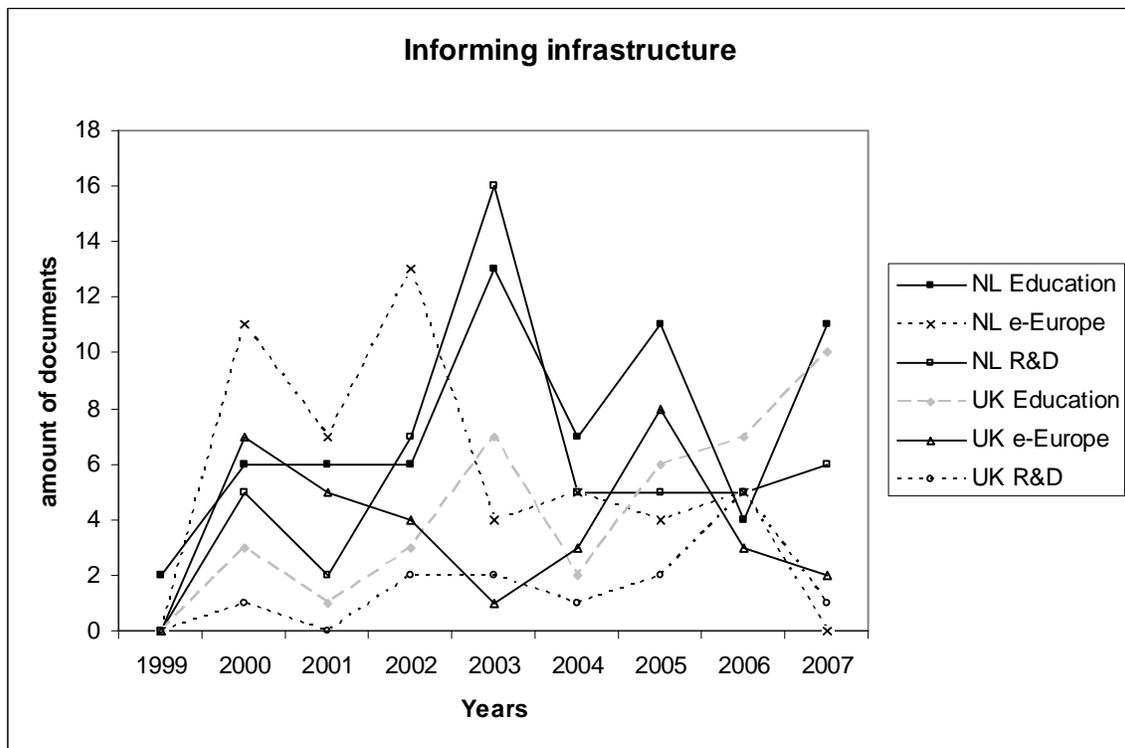


Figure 2: Information on institutional design of OMCs provided by the Dutch and British governments.

The reporting of the British government to parliament on the development of the institutional design of the OMC e-Europe shows peaks around 2000 and 2005. The latter

peak in reporting cannot be explained by progress in the institutional design of the OMC e-Europe but is related with the Council presidency of the UK in 2005. At the time the UK took over the EU helm, one of the points on the Council agenda was the agreement on a new e-Europe Action Plan. The UK presidency made reaching agreement on this plan one of its priorities, and reported to the British parliament on the institutional design of the OMC e-Europe. The reporting on the development of the institutional design of the OMC R&D and OMC education increased in parallel with the development of the infrastructure of these OMCs on the EU level, i.e. after 2002. However, the British parliament was never fully informed about the developments in the institutional design of the OMC R&D, with no additional reporting in 2003 – a year in which the infrastructure of the OMC R&D developed rapidly. The government did consider it worthwhile to inform parliament about the increased reporting on R&D investments in the new National Reform Programmes, leading to a peak in 2006. The reporting on the OMC education showed peaks in 2003 and high scores in the period 2005-2007. This is in line with the EU developments with regard to the infrastructural developments of the OMC education.

With regard to the information provided by the government to the parliament on the institutional design of OMCs, there are clear differences between the Dutch and the British parliament. The Dutch government keeps over time and across OMCs the parliament up-to-date on the institutional developments on the EU level. This is mirrored in consistently higher scores across the three OMCs for the Dutch case.

Informing policy

The information provided by the Dutch government to parliament on the policies on which OMCs were adopted show a large amount of variation across OMCs. The reporting on the OMC e-Europe shows that government informed parliament extensively on what issues the method would touch. This is especially visible in 2000, around the time of the internet bubble. After 2001 the attention on the EU level for internet policy decreased rapidly due to the burst of the internet-bubble (see also De Ruiter 2008). This is mirrored in lower scores on the category ‘informing policy’ after 2001-2002. The reporting on the policies the OMC R&D and OMC education touch upon shows an increasing trend, with more attention for R&D policies.

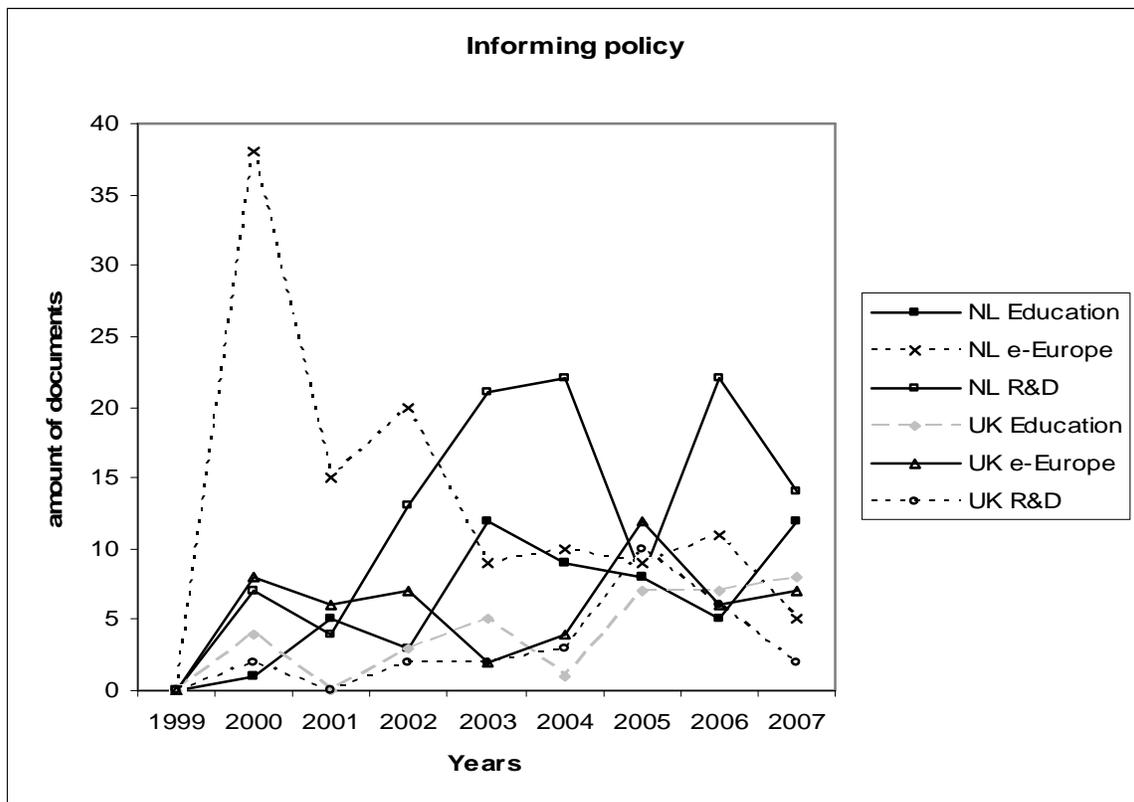


Figure 3: Information provided by the Dutch and British governments on policies the OMC is touching upon.

The information provided by the British government to the House of Commons and House of Lords on the three OMCs follows a similar pattern as for the Netherlands, with a decrease in reporting on internet policies and the OMC (except for 2005) after the internet-bubble bursted, and an increasing trend in reporting for the OMC R&D and OMC education. The peak in reporting in the case of the OMC R&D can be explained by more attention for the inclusion of R&D issues in the revised Lisbon strategy. The 2005-peak in reporting for the OMC e-Europe – the largest contrast with the Dutch case – can be explained by the importance the UK government attached to reaching agreement on the new e-Europe Action Plan.

When we look at the differences between the British and Dutch case, a similar pattern can be observed as for the ‘informing infrastructure’ category. The Dutch government provides more information on the policies the OMC is touching upon to the Upper and Lower House when compared with the British government.

Shaming

The most striking findings on the shaming of Dutch policies with information from the OMC arena, are the high peaks for the OMC R&D in 2004 and 2006. These peaks can be explained by attention given by parliamentarians for the relative underperformance of Dutch R&D policies with regard to private investments in R&D, especially in the case of small- and medium sized enterprises. Also the OMC education has two ‘shaming-peaks’ – in 2003 and 2007 – both related with the high percentage of drop-outs in the Dutch school system. The shaming on Dutch internet policies remains very low through time.

The high shaming of Dutch policies through the OMC education and OMC R&D is related with two factors. First, Dutch policies are poorly performing on some benchmarks and indicators included in the OMC education and OMC R&D. This results in critical assessments of Dutch policies in Joint Reports of the Commission and the Council, which are repeated in the NAPs and National Reform Programmes drawn up by the Dutch government. Two reasons can be identified for why also government is referring to the bad performance of policies for which it is responsible. First, it is the duty of the government to inform the parliament of important EU developments and the influence on the national policy-making process, even if it weakens the position of the government vis-à-vis parliament. Second, the negative messages on the Dutch policies voiced in the OMC arena and reported to parliament are used by the government to legitimize new policies that are under way or are initiated by the incumbent government.

A second reason for the high shaming scores in the OMC education and OMC R&D is related with the institutional design of both OMCs – a point closely related to the argument made by Benz and underlying the second hypothesis. The difference between on the one hand the OMC R&D and OMC education and the OMC e-Europe on the other is that the former two OMCs have few, but simple and focused benchmarks. The presence of this type of benchmark increases the amount of information that is easy to interpret, and can directly be used by parliamentarians to ask questions about the underperformance of Dutch policies.

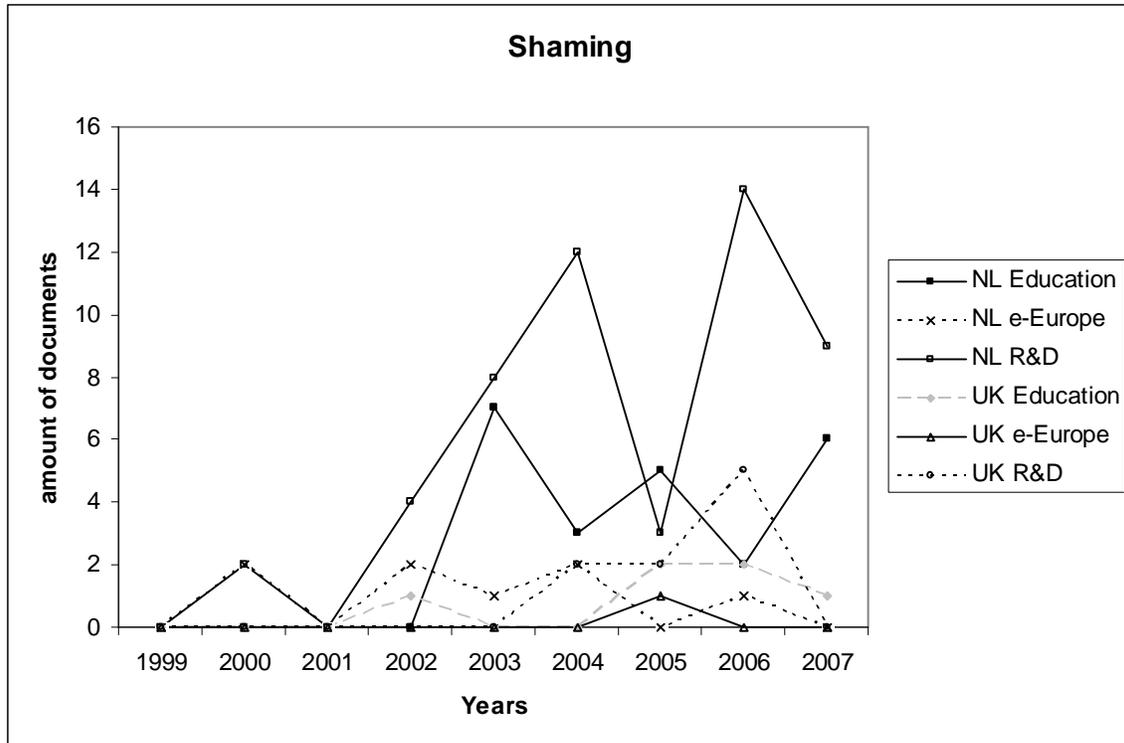


Figure 4: Amount of references in parliamentary documents to OMC information used to criticize national policies of the incumbent government.

In the British case shaming is almost absent in the case of the OMC e-Europe, but more prominent in the OMC education and, especially, the OMC R&D. In the case of the OMC education use was made of the benchmark on foreign languages to critically assess the situation in the UK and propose solutions for the underperformance of British education policies. In the case of the OMC R&D attention was paid in 2006 to the underinvestment in R&D in the UK. However, even the shaming in the OMC R&D remains limited to a maximum of 5 references a year.

When the two parliamentary systems are compared, one directly notes similarities in the low shaming in the case of the OMC e-Europe, and the considerable higher shaming scores for the OMC education and OMC R&D. Apart from similarities across OMCs between the British and Dutch parliaments, there are also differences in

parliamentary involvement between the two member states. Dutch parliamentarians make more use of information from the OMC arena to critically assess the performance of national R&D and education policies than the British parliamentarians do. This is mirrored in substantially higher shaming scores for the Netherlands in the case of the OMC R&D and OMC education.

Faming

The scores for faming are lower than the shaming scores for both parliaments under study. This is related with the fact that faming is exercised by the government only, whereas shaming is exercised by both the government and parliament. For the Netherlands, only in the case of the OMC R&D faming peaks of above 5 documents a year can be observed. The Commission and member states identified several Dutch R&D policies as best practices, which increased faming considerably. The Dutch government was eager to emphasize the high productivity of Dutch science and technology, the outstanding quality of Dutch knowledge-intensive services, and the appropriate policy mix in the Netherlands to increase R&D investments. The success of the Dutch innovation platform – one of the priorities of Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende – was also mentioned by the government.

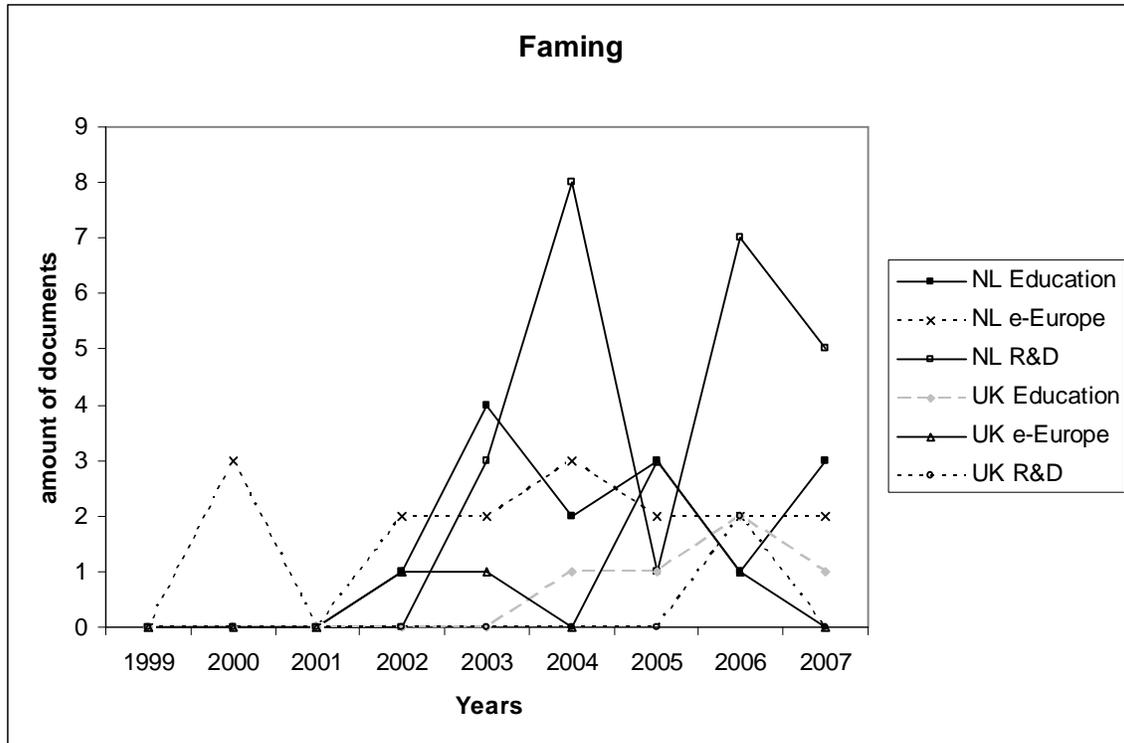


Figure 5: Amount of references in parliamentary documents to OMC information used to emphasize the good performance of national policies of the incumbent government.

Faming of national policies through information gathered from the OMC arena is low in the British case. The only remarkable finding for the UK is the relatively high amount of faming by the British government to its own internet policies. This emphasis can be explained by the fact that the UK Council presidency in 2005 made the agreement of the e-Europe Action Plan one of its priorities. However, just as we saw earlier in the case of the other three categories of involvement of parliaments, the scores on the faming category for the British case are substantially lower than for the Dutch case.

Conclusion

The empirical results show that there is a good fit between the policy developments on the EU level with regard to the OMC and its output, and the reporting by the Dutch and British government to the Upper and Lower Houses. The fit is slightly better in the Dutch case, with a low amount of reporting by the British government on the institutional design of the OMC R&D in a phase of rapid infrastructural developments at the EU level. Moreover, parliaments are not hindered by their governments in using information from the OMC arena. In the Dutch case the government even plays a pro-active role and informs the parliament regularly on the positive *and* negative messages on the Dutch policies voiced in the OMC arena. This allows parliamentarians to use information from the OMC arena to criticize government. Hence, this study does not provide empirical support for the first hypothesis, which predicted that members of parliament are unable and unwilling to scrutinize OMCs.

Second, the data on the OMC R&D and OMC education show that a combination of bad performing national policies and few but simple and focused benchmarks generates information that can directly be used by parliamentarians as point of departure to address policy problems at the national level. This ensured a stronger involvement of the Dutch and British parliament in these two OMCs across the four categories. However, the variation in shaming scores between OMCs was less in the case of the British House of Lords and House of Commons. The low scores for the OMC e-Europe indicate that the infrastructure of an OMC should be developed above a certain threshold in order to generate enough information on national policies so that it can come through in parliament. This provides empirical support for the second hypothesis.

As expected on the basis of the third hypothesis, a government in a consensus democracy has a more cooperative attitude towards parliament and, hence, is providing information on the institutional design of the OMC, the policies on which the OMC is adopted, and the positive/negative messages from the OMC on national policies. In the British case the information provided by the government to the House of Commons and House of Lords is considerably less, which lowers the possibility for British parliamentarians to use information from the OMC arena to critically assess the performance of national policies.

Fourth, both in the case of the UK and the Netherlands, the discussions in which information was used from the OMC arena took place in EU affairs committees. The stronger involvement of the Dutch parliament in the three OMCs when compared to the British parliament is in line with the difference in strength of EU affairs committees of these parliaments reported on in the literature. Although it is not possible on the basis of the data to assess whether there is a causal link, the patterns in involvement are fully in line with the fourth hypothesis.

This study has several limitations. First, this study only measured the messages on national policies that can be identified in Joint Reports and NAPs. It may be possible that issues were discussed in dense peer learning networks at the EU level and were blocked by the Dutch and British governments from coming through in the national parliament. This study did not measure this type of blocking power of governments. Second, the scores for shaming and faming in parliamentary documents reach a maximum of 14 documents a year. Hence, the impact of faming and shaming on the Dutch and British policy making process should not be exaggerated. However, especially in the Dutch case

parliamentarians are actively using information from the Joint Reports and NAPs to critically assess the performance of policies initiated by the incumbent government. In a way, the OMC R&D and OMC education empowered Dutch parliamentarians by increasing the information necessary to hold the government to account for the performance of their policies.

Although this study looked at the variation in parliamentary involvement across two member states and three OMCs, there are several variables and cases not included in this study. An example of a country-specific variable that can be expected to influence the degree of interest of national parliaments in OMCs, is the competence allocation between national and sub-national state authorities in federal states. Several German Länder have offices in Brussels to follow policy developments at the EU level, which prevents the German federal government to control the flow of information from the OMC arena to the national/Länder parliaments (Büchs and Friedrich 2005: 279-280; Kröger 2007: 573). Moreover, OMCs are also adopted on policy fields that are not related with the knowledge-based society theme. Next to older OMCs such as the OMC employment, OMC social inclusion and OMC pensions, there are also OMCs currently in development at the EU level, such as the OMC health care, and OMC culture. Future studies will be able to include the latter two OMCs to show whether parliaments learned from scrutinising the OMCs on the social and knowledge-based society fields in the last 8-9 years and became better equipped to take a more pro-active approach.

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