Nature Conservation Policy in the Municipality

Examining the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget

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Summary

Municipalities play an important role in addressing nature deterioration in the Netherlands. On the one hand, municipalities have various legal obligations with regard to nature conservation. For example, municipalities are responsible for controlling whether initiators who apply for a permit (omgevingsvergunning) complied with the laws and regulations concerning the protection of nature. On the other hand, municipalities also have responsibilities that are not mandatory by law. For example, municipalities often contribute to conserving or enhancing landscapes or urban green that are not under legal obligation and can design their own policy to organize these activities. However, Dutch municipalities often differ in their nature conservation policy: some municipalities decide to adopt and implement certain policies that others still lack. The available literature on the subject of municipal nature conservation policy focusses mainly on assessing the nature conservation policy of municipalities, rather than examining the factors that can explain the differences between municipalities. Therefore, this thesis analyses the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget with the aim to identify and gain understanding of the factors, processes and dynamics that influence municipal nature conservation policy. In analysing the relationships, this thesis focusses on policy agenda setting and adoption, which are two stages of policy making. The theoretical framework for this thesis consists of three different parts. First, the five stages of the policy cycle are explained: (1) agenda setting, (2) formulation, (3) adoption, (4) implementation and (5) evaluation. Second, the stages of policy agenda setting and adoption are put into the context of municipalities to examine how these processes are executed in municipalities. Finally, the theoretical framework is concluded by examining the processes and dynamics that may contribute to shaping the relationships between the factors.

In order to analyse the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget, a Pearson correlation test and a hierarchical, multiple regression test was executed. Municipal websites and documents were mainly used to collect the required data. To examine the processes and dynamics that shape the relationships between the factors, interviews with five different municipalities were conducted, the municipalities being: Barneveld, (ex-) Ede, Wageningen, West Maas en Waal and Zaltbommel. Four of the interviews were conducted with civil servants who work on nature conservation or related themes and one interview was conducted with an alderman of the municipality of Wageningen. Before interpreting the results, the interviews were coded to organize the findings.

The findings of this the research show that, of the three factors, the size of the municipal budget is the most important for municipal nature conservation policy. Municipalities that have high budgets are more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation and adopt nature conservation policies. This size of the municipal budget also has the highest relative influence on the adoption of nature conservation policies. The interviews showed different processes that shape these relationships. First, municipalities in difficult financial situations are more likely to cut the budget of nature conservation because of the low priority it has. On the other hand, municipalities with healthy financial situations give more attention to themes with a lower priority. Second, municipalities with high budgets have a higher capacity than municipalities with a low budget. A high capacity, which means that the municipality employs multiple experienced civil servants with high expertise, enables the municipal council to adopt certain nature conservation policies that municipalities with a low capacity are unable to adopt. The (lack of) capacity was mentioned most often in the interviews and really is a determinant in nature conservation policy.

The urbanity of the municipality is, of the three factors, the second most important factor in municipal nature conservation policy. No significant relationship with nature conservation agenda setting was found. On the other hand, it was found that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. The relative influence of this factor on municipal nature conservation policy could not be reliably assessed. Several processes were found that shape the found relationship. First, as opposed to municipalities with a low urbanity, municipalities with a high urbanity often own and manage nature areas within their border, making them more likely to adopt certain nature conservation policies required to manage and protect the nature areas. Second, there were some indications that the attitude of citizens in municipalities with a high urbanity may be more positive towards nature conservation than in municipalities with a low urbanity. A positive attitude not only pressurizes the municipal council to conserve and enhance nature within the municipality but also affects the composition of the municipal council. As a result, the composition of the municipal council is likely to reflect the positive attitude. Third, the urbanity of the municipality strongly overlaps with the size of the municipal budget, possibly because a higher population and a more left-oriented municipal council results in higher tax incomes.

The distribution of seats of the municipal council is, of the three factors, the least important factor for municipal nature conservation policy. No significant relationship with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting was found. On the other hand, a positive influence on municipal nature conservation policy adoption was found, implicating that right-oriented councils are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies.

However, this positive influence is negated because municipalities with a right-oriented council generally have lower budgets. The processes and dynamics that were found correspond but also contradict the (lack of) found relationships. First, apart from some differences in emphasis, there are no apparent differences between left- and right-oriented parties in the processes of municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. Second, the distribution of seats seems to influence municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption via the election of aldermen. A municipal council that is left-oriented is likely to deliver multiple aldermen from parties that are left-oriented. There are some indications that aldermen from left-oriented parties contribute more to nature conservation than their right-oriented counterparts.

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Gemeente Putten nodigt ondernemers uit om te leren over natuur. (2019). De Puttenaer | Nieuws uit de regio Putten. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from https://www.deputtenaer.nl/lokaal/overig/308028/gemeente-putten-nodigt-ondernemers-uit-om-te-leren-over-natuur-671856

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Nature Deterioration

The global deterioration of nature has been linked to human action for a long time. Since the 1970s, the deterioration of the natural world as a result of human action has shown unprecedented proportions. In order to keep pace with the increasing global demand for commodities obtained from nature, such as food and energy, their production and flow has been maximized. Now, nature, which can be seen as the fabric of life, is struggling to persist. Threatened species population sizes and the completeness of ecosystems, among others, are declining. As a consequence, nature's ability to provide humans with important benefits has been limited (Díaz et al., 2019). These so-called 'ecosystem services' are "the conditions and processes through which natural ecosystems, and the species that make them up, sustain and fulfil human life" (Daily et al., 1997, p. 3). Examples of ecosystem services are the production and availability of ecosystem goods, such as natural fibre and pharmaceuticals (Daily et al., 1997). However, many of these ecosystem services are in decline. For example, according to Fischer et al. (2018), due to intensive agricultural practices, regulating services, such as soil formation, pollination and water quality regulation have been declining in Europe over the past decades.

1.2 Government Involvement

Nature deterioration has also been a problem in the Netherlands. An increasing amount of urban nature, in a broad sense, has been disappearing because of the building of new residential and industrial areas. Another factor contributing to nature degradation is the tiling of many of the citizens' gardens (van Hattum et al., 2017). Recent efforts by the Dutch government to address this problem on a national level include the Government Nature Vision (Rijksnatuurvisie) and the Nature Conservation Act (Wet Natuurbescherming). The Government Nature Vision was set up in 2014 to give direction to Dutch nature conservation policy in the upcoming decade. The vision describes that nature belongs amidst society and not only in the already protected nature areas. Additionally, it describes a changing role for society where civilians, businesses, municipalities and organizations receive more opportunities to protect nature (*Beleid*, n.d.). The Nature Conservation Act entered into force in 2017 and replaced three different laws: the Forest Act (Boswet), Flora and Fauna Act (Flora- en Faunawet) and the Nature Conservation Act (Natuurbeschermingwet). The Nature Conservation Act includes many rules and regulations. For example, it obligates all layers of government to act according to the European Bird Directive (Europese Vogelrichtlijn) and the Habitat Directive (Habitatrichtlijn) (*Wet natuurbescherming*, n.d.-a; *Wet natuurbescherming*, n.d.-b).

Efforts to counteract nature deterioration in the Netherlands are also being made on a local level and municipalities play an important role in this process. On the one hand, municipalities have various legal tasks concerning nature conservation. For example, municipalities are responsible for the control of initiators who apply for a permit (omgevingsvergunning). Their task is to ensure that the initiators complied with the laws and regulations concerning protected nature areas (natuurgebieden) and species (Broekmeyer & Sanders, 2016). On the other hand, municipalities also have tasks that are not mandatory by law. For example, municipalities can contribute to conserving or enhancing landscapes or urban green in the municipality that are not under legal obligation (Aalbers & Boonstra, 2004).

Municipalities have the opportunity to design and implement their own nature conservation policy to conserve and enhance nature in the municipality. However, municipalities often differ in their nature conservation policy. Stofmeel (2019), who assessed municipalities in Zuid-Holland on their nature conservation policy, identified many differences between municipalities. Some municipalities were found to put much effort into nature conservation, whereas others were relatively dormant. Additionally, the research conducted by Pruijssers & Ekkel (2016), which, among others, examines the nature conservation policy of Dutch municipalities, also shows considerable differences between municipalities. For example, differences could be seen in the municipalities' ambitions. Some municipalities expressed great ambitions with regard to nature or biodiversity, whereas others lacked such ambitions. Differences between municipalities were also apparent in the number of policy plans in which a municipality lays out her policy and plans to conserve and enhance nature within the municipality. Some municipalities only had a few policy plans, whereas others had a considerably higher number of policy plans.

The evident differences between municipalities raises an important question: what factors can explain the differences between municipalities? In the research of Stofmeel (2019), differences between municipalities existed because of the composition: bigger, urban municipalities contributed more to nature conservation than smaller, rural municipalities. However, other reasons which are relatively unexplored in literature could also explain the differences between municipalities. For example, the distribution of seats of the municipal council may affect municipal nature conservation policy. The municipal council is the most important governing body inside a municipality and its members make all the important municipal decisions, including those concerning nature conservation policy (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2018). Additionally, the size of the municipal budget may influence municipal nature conservation policy. Municipalities are allowed to manage their own financial resources and thus have to decide on how to allocate the budget between different sectors (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2020).

Little research can be found on whether and how the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget influence municipal nature conservation policy in the Netherlands. Most of the publications on municipal nature conservation policy in the Netherlands, such as Stofmeel (2019), Pruijssers & Ekkel (2016) and van Beek & Sikkink (2015) focus more on assessing the nature conservation policy, rather than examining the factors that may explain the differences between municipalities.

1.3 Research Aim

Analysing the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget could potentially identify important factors, processes and dynamics that influence municipal nature conservation policy. Therefore, I will further explore municipal nature conservation policy in the Netherlands with the aim to identify and gain understanding of the factors, processes and dynamics that influence municipal nature conservation.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the aim of this thesis, a main research question and four sub-questions were set up.

The main research question this thesis tries to answer is:

"What are the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget?"

This main research question was divided into the following sub-research questions:

(1) What are the relationships between the urbanity of the municipality and municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption?

(2) What are the relationships between the distribution of seats of the municipal council and municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption?

(3) What are the relationships between the size of the municipal budget and municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption?

(4) What are the underlying processes and dynamics that shape the relationships between the three factors and municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption?

1.5 Research Scope

In analysing the relationships between nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget, this thesis will focus on the processes of policy agenda setting and adoption, which are two stages of policy making that will be elaborated in the next chapter. I chose to limit the scope of the research by choosing these two stages, instead of the whole policy cycle, because of time limitations. Another reason for choosing agenda setting and adoption is that, as opposed to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, they are relatively easy to research. By researching policy agenda setting and adoption, I can examine whether municipalities are currently aware of the importance of nature conservation and whether they also put effort into conserving or enhancing nature within the municipality.

This research is restricted to the province of Gelderland. I chose Gelderland, instead of municipalities from different provinces, because all municipalities in Gelderland are affected by the same provincial nature conservation policy, ruling out a potential external factor. Additionally, my choice fell on Gelderland because of my personal interest in researching familiar municipalities close to my residence.

I will start this thesis by providing a conceptual framework, which organizes different theories, concepts and models that contribute to demarcating the research and answering the research questions. Thereafter, I will explain what methods were used to collect and analyse the data and discuss any reliability or validity issues. Furthermore, I will provide the results from the statistical analysis and the conducted interviews. Finally, I will discuss some important results and draw a conclusion.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

This chapter provides a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for answering the research questions and demarcating the research. First, the model of the policy cycle is explained. Second, the stages of policy agenda setting and adoption are elaborated upon and put into the context of municipalities. Finally, the last section focusses on the processes and dynamics that may shape the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget.

2.1 The Policy Cycle

According to Birkland (2001, p. 132) public policies are "government statements of what it intends to do or not to do, including law, regulation, ruling, decision or order". They are designed for "achieving defined goals and present solutions to societal problems" (Knill & Tosun, 2008, p. 1). Thus, in the context of municipal nature conservation, public policies are the 'statements' by municipalities that are designed to address the problem of nature deterioration. The policy cycle is a broadly used framework in political science that models the design of such public policies. It structures all the policy-related literature and divides policy making into five different stages: agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation. This five-stage model is a simplification of reality. In the real world, these stages may overlap and actors may be working on different stages simultaneously. However, the policy cycle provides a heuristic approach to policy making in order to clearly illustrate its different processes (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

2.1.1 Policy Agenda Setting

The first stage of the policy cycle is agenda setting. In this stage, societal problems or issues are identified and put on the public agenda to be addressed by a government institution. Many societal problems exist in this world but only a few get the required attention by government officials (Knill & Tosun, 2008). Agenda setting can be seen as a process in which problems, policies and politics interact with each other. Although these aspects are autonomous and have their own regulations and processes, they sometimes converge, causing policy to form or change (Kingdon, 1995). Agenda setting can vary in different settings. The rules and regulations of agenda setting can differ between parliaments in different countries (Knill & Tosun, 2008). Agenda setting is seen as an important and necessary stage because problems that are included in the public agenda are given priority as opposed to problems that are not (Shepsle & Weingast, 1987).

Cobb & Elder (1972) describes two types of public agendas: the systemic and institutional agenda. The systemic agenda, also known as the discussion agenda, includes all societal problems that require public attention or awareness. On the other hand, the institutional agenda, also known as the action agenda, is more specific and includes all the problems that require action. Different factors can influence the public agenda, such as cultural, political and social factors (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

There are different actors capable of influencing the public agenda: (1) public officials, (2) bureaucrats, (3) (mass) media and (4) interest groups (Gerston, 2004). First, public officials, who are elected by the public, are the most influential agenda setters (e.g., the president or the parliament). They have the capability to raise awareness on a problem and they can even design policies themselves. Second, bureaucrats can affect agenda setting in different ways. Bureaucrats are able to influence the organization of a public agenda and, in certain circumstances, are able to serve as a stand-in to function as an agenda setter themselves (Knill & Tosun, 2008). Third, the role of the (mass) media is important in agenda setting. Media are capable of raising awareness and attention on societal problems. However, not all issues raised by the media make it to the public agenda and thus not all problems become political (McCombs, 2004). Finally, interest groups are known to be an important actor in agenda setting. Interest groups try to raise awareness on different societal problems. However, whether the identified problem makes it to the public agenda depends on those in positions of power who are able to realize it (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

2.1.2 Policy Formulation

The second stage of the policy cycle is policy formulation. During this stage, the societal problem is transformed into a governmental plan of action. It is the process of defining, discussing, accepting or rejecting different policies. The policy objectives, tools and instruments are elaborated and discussed and the best approaches are identified (Knill & Tosun, 2008). Policy formulation occurs in many types of organizations: interest groups offices, legislative committees and policy-making organizations (Dye, 2005). Policy formulation resembles policy adoption but whereas formulation is generally seen as the process of identifying alternative policies or actions, adoption is seen as the process of the legal acceptance of that policy (Fischer & Miller, 2006). Additionally, whereas policy adoption lies in the hands of government institutions, policy formulation often involves other actors, such as interest groups. Interest groups play an important role in policy formulation because they collaborate with government officials to design policy outlines (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

2.1.3 Policy Adoption

Policy adoption is the third stage of the policy cycle and it involves the adoption of a policy by a government institution. This stage often involves bargaining and compromising between political parties (Hayes, 2001). There are different factors that influence policy adoption. First, for the adoption of a policy a political majority can be required, which may hamper the process. Political parties need to discuss the policy while considering different public opinions, norms and values before adoption can take place. Possibly the most important consideration may be party affiliation or party loyalty (Bowler et al., 1999). Party affiliation is therefore an important indicator for the success rate of policy adoption. Second, the expected costs and benefits of adopting a policy is an important factor (Knill & Tosun, 2008). According to Weingast et al. (1981), in the context of constituency politics, a member of a parliament is likely to vote for the adoption of a policy when the benefits for that constituency are higher than the costs. Fischer & Miller (2006) confirms the importance of this factor by explaining that the process of policy adoption is affected by considerations about the scarcity of financial resources. Third, the division of competencies between actors involved in policy adoption influences the process. For example, in the context of tax policy in Germany, the Federal Government is dependent on the verdict of the Federal Parliament and of the Federal Council when trying to adopt a policy (Fischer & Miller, 2006). Finally, the type of state organization affects the speed, success and nature of the adoption process. For example, decision making may be hampered in divided governments because collaboration between political parties is lacking. Additionally, political systems in which legislature is divided into two chambers (bicameral) may also impede the adoption process. For example, Germany's political bicameral system hampers the policy-making process because veto players are able to give the final consent (Knill & Tosun, 2008; Tsebelis & Money 1997).

2.1.4 Policy Implementation

The fourth stage of the policy cycle is implementation and it involves putting the policy into practice. This stage is crucial because agenda setting, formulation and adoption has no significance if implementation is lacking afterwards. The success of a policy depends on how it is implemented (Knill & Tosun, 2008). According to Gerston (2004), implementation is successful if it involves a main actor who: (1) possesses enough resources, (2) is capable of translating policy objectives into policy guidelines and (3) is accountable for its own actions. Additionally, the type of implementation is also important for its success. Implementation can be executed horizontally or vertically. Horizontal implementation involves the implementation by one executive body in which the amount of involved actors is low. Then, implementation can often be executed smoothly. On the other hand, vertical implementation involves the interaction of multiple levels of government on a national and regional level, which may cause difficulties during implementation (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

Policy implementation is not an automatic result of policy adoption. There can be a gap between new policies and their implementation. Therefore, research is often executed to examine the gap between policy design and its outcomes (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

2.1.5 Policy Evaluation

Policy evaluation is the fifth and final stage of the policy cycle. After the adoption and implementation of the policy, evaluation is required to review whether the policy objectives and goals have been achieved (Knill & Tosun, 2008). Evaluation is often executed by experts who possess the required knowledge about the policy processes and objectives (Gerston, 2004). Policy evaluation produces a feedback loop in which possible improvements and mistakes are identified after which the policy-making process will commence again. Policy evaluation is thus able to reframe societal problems that have been addressed by the government (Knill & Tosun, 2008).

Munger (2000) describes five different types of evaluation. First, in purely formal evaluations, routine tasks are monitored and evaluated. Second, client satisfaction evaluation involves evaluating the performance of primary functions. Third, in outcome evaluation the set of policy outcomes and objectives are reviewed. Fourth, cost-benefit evaluation involves the comparison of the costs and benefits of a policy. Finally, the evaluation of long-term consequences involves monitoring whether the problem at stake has been altered. In summary, policies can be evaluated for their efficiency, which involves assessing whether the resource investment also produced the desired results, and their effectivity, which involves assessing whether the policy objectives and goals have been achieved.

2.2 Municipal Policy Agenda Setting and Adoption

2.2.1 Municipal Policy Agenda Setting

Agenda setting also occurs at the municipal level and multiple publications contribute to explaining how this process is executed in Dutch municipalities. First, Breeman et al. (2015) analyses the allocation of attention to public policy issues in Dutch municipalities. Six different municipalities are analysed over a 25-year period. According to Breeman et al. (2015, p. 24), municipal agenda setting involves a "continuous process of reordering policy priorities according to perceptions of importance and urgency". The article describes agenda setting as the process of the allocation of attention to policy problems. The municipal agenda includes many societal problems that need governmental intervention. However, municipalities often lack the political resources, such as formal power, and thus need to be selective. Breeman et al. (2015) found that the municipal agenda varies throughout the years because of the emergence of important events. For example, the attention to the economy on the municipal agenda increased in 2010 because of the adoption of state budgetary austerity policies.

Municipalities in the Netherlands have their own democratic legitimacy and are able to set their own local policy agenda. Within these municipalities, political parties organize themselves in a coalition with one or more political parties. The process of agenda setting involves the negotiation between the coalition to set up an executive coalition agreement. This agreement is set up by the parties that form the municipal council and includes the agenda for the next 4-year term, serving as a policy starting point. Thus, municipal executive coalitions play an important role in the allocation of attention to different societal problems that need policy intervention (Breeman et al. 2015).

Municipalities possess a certain degree of autonomy to operate outside of state government control. This degree of autonomy depends on the policy domain the municipality is operating in. There are some areas where municipalities have a high degree of autonomy, such as public order and housing. Other domains force municipalities to share responsibilities with the state government, such as labour and education. There are also domains where municipalities have no control at all, such as nuclear arms and human rights (Breeman et al., 2015; Derksen & Schaap, 2010; Fleurke & Willemse, 2006). Breeman et al. (2015) found that the municipal agenda differed from the state agenda in policy domains where municipalities enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and had no formal jurisdiction. On the other hand, the agendas corresponded on topics that involved the cooperation between the state government and municipalities.

Second, van Ostaaijen (2010) provides an analytical framework for explaining the conditions needed for the building of vital coalitions and agenda setting in (local) governments. In his elaboration of agenda setting, he focusses on two important aspects: coalition building and issue framing. According to van Ostaaijen (2010, p. 127), agenda setting is generally defined as "an ongoing competition between issue proponents for the attention of media professionals, the public and policy elites". So-called policy entrepreneurs, individuals who develop different strategies for influencing the policy agenda, have an important role in agenda setting. They use the following strategies to influence the policy agenda: (1) identifying problems, (2) choosing what issues should be focussed on, depending on the target group, (3) networking in policy circles to develop useful arguments and (4) building coalitions to get supporters (Kingdon, 1995; Mintrom, 1997).

Probably the most effective strategy of setting the agenda is issue construction, which starts with the identification of the problem. This process involves connecting a subject to an important societal issue. The situation is framed as a problem by emphasizing its most relevant aspects (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1995). Framing can be defined as "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing is deemed a powerful tool in agenda setting as it is used to shift the focus from one perspective to another, possibly resulting in increased attention (van Ostaaijen, 2010).

Coalition building is also an important aspect of agenda setting. Coalition building involves the self-organization of citizens, private and public actors to operate on behalf of a common societal concern or goal. In other words, an alliance between different stakeholders is formed to try to achieve a common goal. Coalitions contribute to innovative ideas on different subjects and are thus able to put pressure on policy agendas that contain these subjects. Coalition building contributes to receiving support for the problem and increases the chance that this problem will end up on the policy agenda (van Ostaaijen, 2010). Framing is also important for the building of coalitions. For example, framing can determine who should be included in the alliance and who should not be included. Framing can determine what relationships contribute positively to the coalition (Dewulf et al., 2009; Entman, 2003).

2.2.2 Municipal Policy Adoption

Policy adoption is also an important process at the municipal level. New policies can be adopted or rejected by the municipal council. Based on different theories and models, Feiock & West (1993) formulated seven different models for policy adoption, which explain the main incentives for a municipality to adopt a policy.

The first identified model is the need/responsive policy making model. This model explains that local governments will adopt a new policy in order to achieve policy objectives that were set before. Thus, the so-called 'objective conditions' may force local governments to act and may also activate citizens to pressurize policy makers.

The second model is the diffusion-of-innovation model. This model explains that local (progressive) governments will adopt new policies as a response to other governmental institutions. In this context, local governments can be either leaders, which adopt new policies, or laggards, which still lack those policies. Gray (1973) explains that, in the context of state politics, innovative states will be the first to adopt a policy regardless of the policy theme or time period. According to Bowman and Kearney (1986), learning from each other is very common among states and mainly among those that have the same characteristics.

The third model is the political institutions models. This model explains that local governments will adopt policies as the result of electoral competition. According to Mitchell & Feiock (1988), electoral competition may result in a higher level of government activity. Perhaps more importantly, this model also stresses the importance of the form of government, representation systems and policy leadership. The form of government may be relevant for policy decision-making. For example, the council-manager form of government is often seen as a professional and efficient system. Therefore, this form of government is associated with a high level of support for the adoption of new policies. The representation of a population may also influence policy adoption. Representation can either be at-large or by district. Representation at-large has been linked to the domination of the public agenda by the business sector, influencing subsequent policy adoption. The presence of a strong executive leader positively affects policy adoption. However, strong leadership may be lacking in a city-manager form of government. On the contrary, a strong, elected mayor may be better capable of gaining support for the adoption of new policies.

The fourth model is the federalism model. This model explains the hierarchical relationships between government institutions that may influence policy adoption. Chubb (1985) describes a principal-agent relationship in which the state (principal) monitors, evaluates and generally influences the local governments (agent). For example, local governments may adopt a policy because of efforts from the national government. The government may have set certain objectives and preferences and may provide local governments with financial resources and technical assistance to meet these requirements.

The fifth model is the economic model. This model explains that communities with higher financial resources will contribute more to policy development and adoption than communities with lower financial resources. Policy adoption sometimes requires the use of high amounts of financial resources: capital investments and start-up costs are not uncommon with policy adoption. Fiscal capacity has proven to be the best predictor of policy activity by states (Dye, 1966; 1979).

The sixth model is the interest group influence model. Interest groups have been known to be an important factor in policy making. Interest groups are able to expand public programs and influence the public agenda. At the local level, interest groups can influence policy choices and the presence of many large, organized interest groups that support a certain policy will increase the chance of the adoption of that policy.

Finally, the seventh model is the administrative capacity model. This model explains that the administrative capacity of government institutions, such as knowledge, skills and expertise, influences policy adoption. The adoption of policies requires a certain level of administrative capacity and therefore it determines whether the adoption of policies is feasible.

2.3 Factor Processes and Dynamics

2.3.1 The Urbanity of the Municipality

In this thesis, the urbanity of the municipality refers to the extent to which a municipality is urban, measured by the addresses per square kilometre (omgevingsaddressendichtheid). Rural-urban variations may influence nature conservation policy in different ways and several publications contribute to explaining these effects. First, Stofmeel (2019) found differences in nature conservation policy among municipalities in Zuid-Holland. She found that the bigger, urban municipalities contributed more to nature conservation than the smaller, rural municipalities. Additionally, municipalities with relatively much nature within the municipality gave less priority to conserving it than the municipalities with little nature. Mostly the urban municipalities employed an ecologist and adopted their own specific nature conservation policy plan (natuurbeleidsplan). Stofmeel (2019) explains that a reason for the differences between rural and urban municipalities could possibly be that smaller, rural municipalities often possess less capacity and resources to invest in nature conservation. She also found that the increasing housing pressure creates a challenge for both rural and urban municipalities. However, urban municipalities faced the biggest challenge to combine housing with nature and biodiversity because of the lack of space for urban nature. The challenge for rural municipalities lies in promoting nature-inclusive land use in agricultural areas.

Second, Verburg et al. (2009) also stresses the differences in financial capacities between rural and urban municipalities. This publication explains that municipalities are able to receive a subsidy under the Catalogus Groenblauwe Diensten (CGGD) to implement measures concerning nature conservation. However, municipalities have to co-finance 50% of the total costs. As a result, for smaller municipalities with relatively few inhabitants and big rural areas this can be a big financial burden. On the other hand, bigger municipalities with relatively many inhabitants and small rural areas may not have this experience (Dirkx & van den Bosch, 2009).

Finally, Foster & McBeth (1996) found that, although government officials from urban areas are generally more educated, have a higher income and are younger than those from rural areas, urban-based policy makers are equally environmentally concerned as their rural counterparts. Thus, there does not necessarily have to be a difference between the environmental awareness among rural and urban policy makers. However, rural-based government officials were found to be more aware of the importance of the environmental quality for the lives of their residents. Therefore, rural government officials may be more likely to advocate for nature conservation, possibly resulting in a higher municipal contribution to nature conservation.

2.3.2 The Distribution of Seats of the Municipal Council

In this thesis, the distribution of seats of the municipal council refers to the number of seats each party receives after the elections to assign a councillor to. This thesis focusses on whether the distribution of seats can be characterized by either being left-, centre- or right-oriented. Relatively little literature on the processes and dynamics behind the distribution of seats of the municipal council in nature conservation policy can be found. Therefore, this section will mainly focus on other areas of policy, rather than nature conservation policy. First, Imbeau et al. (2001) summarizes and assesses the available literature on the relationship between left-right party composition and policy outputs. According to this article, two different 'schools of thought' hypothesize differently with regard to this relationship. On the one hand, the 'convergence school' argues that policy outputs do not differ between industrialized societies in the twentieth century. Such societies face the same kind of problems and design the same solutions to solve them. Thus, this school of thought believes that political, institutional and cultural differences do not influence policy outputs. On the other hand, the 'politics matter school' argues that politics, or party ideology, do influence policy outputs. This school of thought believes there is a relationship between partisan variables and policy outputs. Imbeau et al. (2001) explains that the results from literature on the relationship between party ideology and policy outputs differ between and within policy domains. The article's main conclusion is that, based on their analysis, there is a correlation between the party composition and policy outputs that does not significantly differ from zero. In other words, they did not find any evidence of the influence of party ideology on policy outputs. Based on this finding and factor alone, we may expect municipalities with a left-oriented municipal council to equally contribute to nature conservation as municipalities with a right-oriented council.

Second, Allers et al. (2001) analyses the influence of partisan politics on the municipal tax burden in the Netherlands. The article explains that left-oriented parties are believed to be more in favour of an active state than right-oriented parties. Therefore, we may possibly expect left-oriented councils to be more 'active' in nature conservation than right-oriented councils.

Finally, Blom-Hansen et al. (2006) investigates the impact of party ideology on local revenue policies in Denmark and Norway. According to this article, it seems reasonable to expect an impact of party ideology on public policy. Equivalent to Allers et al. (2001), they also argue that left-oriented parties and governments are more favourable towards government intervention. Therefore, left-oriented municipal councils may require more financial resources than right-oriented councils, resulting in higher taxes. Additionally, Blom-Hansen et al. (2006) found that left-oriented councils are less fragmented than right-oriented councils.

Fragmentation may lead to the attenuation of the impact of party ideology on the policy. Thus, nature conservation policies designed by left-oriented councils may be more likely to reflect the party ideology than those designed by right-oriented councils.

2.3.3 The Size of the Municipal Budget

In this thesis, the size of the municipal budget refers to the available municipal financial resources to allocate over different sectors (i.e., the total of income for the municipality). The size of the municipal budget varies among municipalities and municipalities do not allocate a fixed percentage of the budget to nature conservation. Instead, municipalities prioritize certain sectors, which then receive a certain share of the budget. Several publications contribute to explaining the processes and dynamics behind municipal budgetary choices (i.e., possible explanations for municipal decisions with regard to nature conservation). First, in an empirical research in Spanish municipalities, Dorta-Velázquez et al. (2010) found that municipal budget allocation does not follow a random path of behaviour. Instead, there are different factors that influence and help explain municipal budget allocation. Three different models for budget allocation are provided: the anarchy model, incrementalism model and rational model. The anarchy model views organizations, such as municipalities, as "social spaces where multiple rationalities converge and mingle, where the solutions that emerge and the decisions that are taken do not correspond to a clearly defined intentionality" (Dorta-Velázquez et al., 2010, p. 26). Problems are solved by opportunistic people expressing their interest. When new problems are identified, fresh solutions are immediately searched for. In this model, the budget changes rapidly and radically and long-term planning is impossible. The allocation of the budget can be regarded as random and may move in any direction without having a coherent explanation. Thus, we may expect municipalities in the anarchy model to more or less randomly allocate the budget over the different sectors and to fluctuate in their budget allocation over the years.

The incrementalism model explains that budget managers use past experiences, policies and programs to serve as a basis for their budget decisions. The budget will be only incrementally increased or decreased. Budget managers will use 'rule of the thumb' methods to respond to complex decision making concerning the allocation of the budget. In this model, the budget changes slowly and incrementally (Dye, 2005). Therefore, we may expect municipalities in the incrementalism model to have a somewhat steady allocation of the budget over the years. It will be difficult for municipalities to respond to new developments because they will not radically change the budget (i.e., a radical change in investment in nature conservation is unlikely).

The rational model is the third and final model and it explains that budget goals are clearly determined beforehand. All the different options are considered and the information required to determine the best option is available. Calculations will be executed to determine the optimal alternative. The municipality has to justify its decisions by determining its goals for the future and the policies that will achieve the goal. It will then have to evaluate whether these policies succeeded or failed in achieving the goals. Public accounting information is often analysed to support the decisions of (re)allocating the budget. Thus, we may expect municipalities in the rational model to have a budget allocation that fluctuates with (nature) demands. Certain developments may radically change the budget for nature conservation.

Second, Geertsema (2011) tried to find evidence of the presence of Political Budget Cycles (PBC's) in Dutch local governments. He found that municipal expenditure is higher in election years and lower in pre-election years because politicians want to create fiscal room for fiscal policies in the election years. Therefore, we may expect lower municipal expenses on nature conservation in pre-election years and higher expenses in election years. Furthermore, he found that municipalities governed by left-oriented politicians are more likely to show PBC behaviour in both pre-election and election years than municipalities governed by right-oriented politicians. Therefore, we may expect left-oriented municipalities to have higher spending on nature conservation in pre-election and election years than right-oriented municipalities.

Finally, Allers et al. (2001) found that the municipal tax burden increases with fifty cents for every additional one thousand citizens. Thus, we may expect urban municipalities with relatively many citizens to have a higher budget than rural municipalities. This article's most important conclusion is that partisan politics do matter for the municipal tax burden. Municipalities with a council dominated by left-oriented parties had a higher tax burden than those with a council dominated by right-oriented parties. Thus, we may expect the municipal budget to be higher in municipalities with councils dominated by left-oriented parties.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology that was used for this thesis. First, the methodological approach is explained. Second, the methods used for the collection and analysis of the data are provided. Finally, any validity and reliability issues or considerations are discussed.

3.1 Methodological Approach

This thesis uses a combination of a correlational, quantitative and an exploratory, qualitative approach. It contains quantitative elements in analysing the relationship between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget. The analysis does not include the incorporation of extraneous factors but rather focusses only on those mentioned above. This thesis contains qualitative elements in examining the processes and dynamics that shape the relationships between the factors. It is mainly exploratory as the aim is to identify and gain understanding of the factors, processes and dynamics that influence municipal nature conservation policy in the Netherlands, rather than to provide conclusive results.

3.2 Data Collection

Different data collection methods were used in this thesis and both primary and secondary data were collected for analysis. The next sections will explain in detail how these data collection methods were carried out.

3.2.1 Literature Review

First, a literature review was executed to examine relevant (municipal) policy-related theories, concepts and frameworks for writing the introduction and the conceptual framework. Additionally, a document analysis, in which mostly government websites and documents were examined, was executed to complement the literature review.

3.2.2 Document Analysis

Second, a document analysis was executed to find statistical data to assess the following five variables: the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council, size of the municipal budget and nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption.

For the urbanity of the municipality, data from the CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) was used. This government institution provides statistical data for the urbanity of Dutch municipalities on a scale from one to five. The density of addresses (omgevingsaddressendichtheid) is used as an indicator.

For the distribution of seats of the municipal council, the results from the Dutch municipal election in 2018 were examined to identify the parties and the corresponding number of seats in all municipal councils from municipalities in Gelderland. Each party was given a score ranging from 0 to 100 where a score of 0 indicates a left-oriented municipal council and 100 indicates a right-oriented council. The municipal councils often consisted of both national and local parties. National party scores were based on the scores provided by Voorn (2021). This publication administered left-right scores from 0 to 100 to all national parties based on criteria and results provided by Kieskompas. Local party scores were individually assessed by examining the local party's programs and action points. Three main criteria were used to determine the scores: (1) whether the party favours an intervening or dormant government, (2) whether or not the party puts effort into supporting the weakest in society and (3) whether or not the party shows to be environmentally aware and aims to solve environmental problems. Additionally, other indications, such as the party's name and website description were used to assess the scores. Due to time constraints, local parties were excluded from the analysis if their share of seats accounted for less than 10% of the total number of seats. After all the scores were determined, party scores were multiplied by their corresponding number of seats and divided by the total number of seats, resulting in a score from 0 to 100.

For the municipal budget, the government website Findo was used, which contains data on the yearly income and expenses of Dutch municipalities. For every municipality, the annual accounts of 2018, 2019 and 2020 were examined and the total municipal incomes of those years were added up to serve as a measurement for the municipal budget.

For nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption, all 51 municipalities in Gelderland were tested on four different criteria for each policy stage. For each criteria, municipalities were given a certain amount of points, which finally resulted in two separate scores for policy agenda setting and adoption. Appendix A provides an overview of the different criteria and the distribution of points. Municipal and organization websites and documents were used to find the data. If some information was still missing, the municipality was contacted via mail or phone to ask for the required information.

3.2.3 Interviews

Finally, five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify the underlying processes and dynamics that shape the relationships between the factors. This type of interview was chosen to be able to have a one-on-one conversation with the respondent and to not be bound to a structured list of questions that may result in missing some interesting insights. *Table 1* shows the different municipalities and interviewees the interviews were conducted with. The municipalities were chosen because of their variation in urbanity, distribution of seats and budget.

Municipality	Function	Interviewee
Barneveld	Anonymous	Anonymous
West Maas en Waal	Project Leader Green	Hessel van Kessel
Zaltbommel	Developer Water & Climate Adaptation, Nature & Landscape	Martine Kriesch
Wageningen	Alderman finance, economy, participation and green	Maud Hulshof
(ex-) Ede	Ex-municipal council member for the CDA and current member of the Provincial Council Gelderland for the CDA	Bert Komdeur

Table 1: Interview details

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Statistical Tests

Two different statistical tests were executed to analyse the collected data. First, a Pearson correlation test was executed to identify significant correlations between the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council, size of the municipal budget and nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. Second, to examine the relative influence of the factors, a hierarchical, multiple regression test was executed. Both tests were executed in SPSS.

3.3.2 Interview Coding

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and the automatic transcribe function was used. First, all the transcripts were read through thoroughly. Then, all the relevant transcripts were translated into simple codes. The following codes were used to categorize the transcripts: urbanity, distribution of seats, budget, agenda setting and adoption.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

There are multiple validity and reliability issues or considerations that need to be discussed with regard to the methodology. First, the personal assessment of the left-right scale of local parties limits the validity of the distribution of seats of the municipal council. Although the final scores for this factor correspond to the expectations, political parties vary in their views on many different themes, which makes it difficult to assess whether a political party is left- or right-oriented. In order to accurately assess the left-right scale, the use of many criteria is required. However, due to time constraints, only three main criteria were used to assess the left-right scale.

Second, the use of municipal website information for collecting the data limits the validity of municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting. It is possible that some information about nature conservation cannot be found because of other reasons than the lack of attention to this theme. For example, municipal websites are often unorganized and difficult to navigate, which may result in missing important data. Therefore, to increase the validity, municipalities were able to score double the points with the fourth criterium. This fourth criterium examines the coalition agreement, which measures policy agenda setting more accurately than the municipal websites.

Third, the use of only four criteria for each policy stage limits the content validity of policy agenda setting and adoption. Content validity looks at whether the instrument (the criteria) covers the whole spectrum of the variable it was designed to measure (Heale & Twycross, 2015). There are aspects of policy agenda setting and adoption that are not captured in the used criteria, limiting the content validity.

Fourth, the reliability of the methods for assessing policy agenda setting and adoption is limited, meaning that the results are unlikely to be reproduced. Municipalities are constantly developing, which means that municipalities may adopt new nature conservation policies or update their website, possibly resulting in different results.

Finally, researcher subjectivity has potentially influenced the validity of the interviews. According to Garcia & Queck (1997), researchers who use qualitative methods, allow and acknowledge the subjectivity of their research in which the researcher remains in the centre. However, to increase the validity of the interviews, all conclusions that were drawn from the transcripts were sent to the interviewee to be checked for inconsistencies and wrong interpretations.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of this research. The results from the Pearson correlation test, multiple regression test and the conducted interviews are presented and discussed.

4.1 Statistical Analysis

4.1.1 Pearson Correlation Test

A Pearson correlation test was executed in SPSS to examine the relationships between the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council, size of the municipal budget and municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. *Table 2* shows the output of this bivariate, Pearson correlation test. In this table, the following five variables are presented: **Urbanity**, **Budget**, **Distribution of Seats**, **Agenda Setting Score** and **Adoption Score**. The table shows the correlations between all of these different variables. In other words, it shows whether a statistically significant mutual connection or linear relationship between two variables exists. Please note that from now on, the word 'significance' or 'significant' refers to 'statistical significance', rather than 'importance'. Different terms or abbreviations can be seen in *Table 2*, which are briefly explained below:

- **Pearson Correlation**: A correlation coefficient that measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables, ranging from -1 to +1. A negative correlation coefficient indicates that one variable decreases as the other increases. The higher the absolute value of the coefficient, the stronger the relationship between the variables. The coefficient can thus be seen as the degree to which a movement of two variables is associated.
- **Sig. (2-tailed)**: A two-tailed p-value that indicates whether the correlation is significant. The correlation is significant if the p-value is lower than 0.01 or 0.05, indicated with respectively one or two asterisks. When a correlation is significant, it is likely that the correlation is found as a result of the factor of interest, rather than as a result of chance.

From *Table 2*, several relevant results can be derived. First, the table shows that **Urbanity** is not significantly correlated to **Agenda Setting Score** (Sig. 2-tailed = .369 > .05). Thus, there is no proof of a linear relationship between these variables. On the other hand, **Urbanity** is significantly correlated with **Adoption Score** (Sig. 2-tailed = .009 < .01). The Pearson correlation coefficient is .364, which indicates a considerably strong and positive correlation. Furthermore, **Urbanity** is significantly, negatively and considerable strongly correlated to **Distribution of Seats**. Finally, **Urbanity** is significantly, positively and strongly correlated to **Budget**.

		Urbanity	Distribution of Seats	Budget	Agenda Setting Score	Adoption Score
Urbanity	Pearson Correlation	-	-	-	-	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	-	-	-	-
Distribution of Seats	Pearson Correlation	-.400**	-	-	-	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	-	-	-	-
Budget	Pearson Correlation	.601**	-.290*	-	-	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.039	-	-	-
Agenda Setting Score	Pearson Correlation	.128	.081	.319*	-	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.369	.574	.022	-	-
Adoption Score	Pearson Correlation	.364**	.131	.475**	.619**	-
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.360	<.001	<.001	-

Table 2: Correlations between the variables

Second, **Budget** is significantly correlated with both **Agenda Setting Score** (Sig. 2-tailed = .022 < .05) and **Adoption Score** (Sig. 2-tailed = .001 < .01). The correlation coefficients are respectively .319 and .475, which indicate a considerably strong and positive correlation. Furthermore, **Budget** is significantly, negatively and considerable strongly correlated with **Distribution of Seats**.

Third, no significant correlations between **Distribution of Seats**, **Agenda Setting Score** and **Adoption Score** were found (Sig. 2-tailed > 0.05). Therefore, there is no proof of a linear relationship between these variables.

Finally, *Table 2* shows a significant, positive and strong correlation between **Agenda Setting Score** and **Adoption Score**.

4.1.2 Multiple Regression Test

To examine the relative influence of the factors, a hierarchical, multiple regression test was executed in SPSS to test the relationships between the independent variables: **Urbanity, Budget** and **Distribution of Seats** and the dependent variables: **Agenda Setting Score** and **Adoption Score**. The multiple regression test was executed twice, once for each dependent variable. Before the multiple regression test, six different assumptions were tested to verify whether the data was valid for executing a multiple regression test.

First, a multiple regression test was executed to examine the relationships between the independent variables: **Urbanity**, **Budget**, **Distribution of Seats** and the dependent variable: **Agenda Setting Score**. The following assumptions were tested and met: (1) there is a linear relationship between the variables, (2) the expected mean error of the regression model is zero, (3) the variance of the errors is constant (homoskedasticity), (4) there is independence of data, (5) there is normality of the residuals and (6) there is no multicollinearity. *Table 3* shows the results from the executed test. In this table, different terms and abbreviations are presented, which are briefly explained below:

- **Adjusted R-Squared**: Shows how accurate the linear model is. It is the percentage of variance for the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable(s).
- **Adjusted R-Squared Change**: Shows how the adjusted R-squared changes when a new independent variable is added to the model.
- **Sig. F Change**: A p-value that indicates whether the adjusted R-squared change is significant. This is the case when the p-value is lower than 0.05.
- **Model Sig.**: A p-value that indicates whether the model reliably predicts the dependent variable. This is the case if the p-value is lower than 0.05.
- **Individual Sig.**: A p-value that indicates whether the individual contribution to the model of an independent variable is significant.
- **Standardized Beta Coefficient**: This standardized coefficient compares the strength of the positive or negative effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable. The higher the absolute value of the coefficient, the stronger the effect.

As can be seen in the table below, in the first model, only **Distribution of Seats** is used as an independent variable to predict **Agenda Setting Score**. Here, the adjusted R-squared is zero, which means that **Distribution of Seats** does not explain any variance of **Agenda Setting Score**. In the second model, **Urbanity** is added to the model. Now, the adjusted R-squared is still zero, which indicates that **Urbanity** and **Distribution of Seats** do not explain any variance of **Agenda Setting Score**.

Finally, in the last model, **Budget** is added to the model. The adjusted R-squared now shows a significant increase of .080 (Sig. F Change = .025 < .05), indicating that **Budget** contributes to explaining 8% of the variance of **Agenda Setting Score**. Furthermore, all three models do not reliably predict **Agenda Setting Score** (Model Sig. > .05), although the third moves towards a significant model. Moreover, all independent variables, apart from **Budget**, are individually nonsignificant (Individual Sig. > .05). Because all three models and most of the individual independent variables are nonsignificant, the models are unreliable and cannot be used to examine the relative influence of the independent variables. Thus, although the standardized beta coefficients are presented in **Table 3**, they are unreliable and are therefore not taken into account.

Model	Independent Variables	Adjusted R-Squared (change)	Sig. F Change	Model Sig.	Individual Sig.	Standardized Beta Coefficient
1	Distribution of Seats	0	.574	.574	.574	.081
2	Distribution of Seats	0	.222	.403	.315	.157
	Urbanity				.222	.191
3	Distribution of Seats	.080	.025	.075	.230	.180
	Urbanity				.844	-.035
	Budget				.025	.393

Table 3: Results from the hierarchical, multiple regression test with the dependent variable 'Agenda Setting Score'

Second, a multiple regression test was executed to examine the relationships between the independent variables: **Urbanity**, **Budget**, **Distribution of Seats** and the dependent variable: **Adoption Score.** All of the six assumptions that were mentioned before were tested and met, apart from the assumption of homoskedasticity. Therefore, a weighted regression was executed because this type of regression does not require the data to be homoscedastic. **Table 4** shows the results from the weighted multiple regression test. The table shows the results for three different models. In the first model, only **Distribution of Seats** is used as an independent variable to predict **Adoption Score**. In the second model, **Urbanity** is added. Finally, in the third model, **Budget** is added.

In the first model, the adjusted R-squared is .041, which means that **Distribution of Seats** explains only 4,1% of the variance of **Adoption Score.** The adjusted R-squared shows a significant increase in the second and third model (Sig. F Change < 0.05), indicating that adding **Urbanity** and **Budget** improves the accuracy of the model. Whereas **Urbanity** explains 9.1% of the variance of **Adoption Score**, for **Budget** this percentage is 9.9%. Furthermore, the table shows that only the second and third model reliably predict **Adoption Score** (Model Sig. < 0.05). Because the third model has the highest adjusted R-squared and therefore is the most accurate model, it is used to examine the relative influence of the individual variables by looking at the standardized beta coefficients. According to this analysis, **Budget** has the strongest positive impact on **Adoption Score** (B = .356). Then, **Distribution of Seats** has the strongest positive influence (B = .314). The variable with the lowest positive impact is **Urbanity** (B = .143). However, **Urbanity** can be seen to be nonsignificant in model three (Individual Sig. > 0.05). Therefore, its standardized beta coefficient cannot be reliably assessed.

Model	Independent Variables	Adjusted R-Squared	Adjusted R-Squared Change	Sig. F Change	Model Sig.	Individual Sig.	Standardized Beta Coefficient
1	Distribution of Seats	.041	.041	.083	.083	.083	.245
2	Distribution of Seats	.116	.091	.028	.020	.018	.342
	Urbanity					.028	.317
3	Distribution of Seats	.202	.099	.016	.003	.023	.314
	Urbanity					.345	.143
	Budget					.016	.356

Table 4: Results from the weighted, hierarchical, multiple regression test with the dependent variable 'Adoption Score'

4.1.3 Interpretation

It is important to interpret the results from the Pearson correlation and multiple regression tests in order to understand their importance for municipal nature conservation policy in the Netherlands. First, with regard to the size of the municipal budget, significant, positive correlations with both municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption were found, implicating that municipalities with high budgets are more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation and adopt nature conservation policies. Additionally, both multiple regression test showed relatively high increases in adjusted R-squared values when budget was added to the models, indicating the importance of this factor. Furthermore, the size of the municipal budget has the highest relative influence on municipal nature conservation policy adoption. Moreover, the significant, negative correlation between the size of the municipal budget and the distribution of seats of the municipal council implicates that municipalities with councils that are left-oriented are more likely to have high budgets. The reason may possibly be that left-oriented parties favour higher municipal taxes than right-oriented parties, resulting in higher municipal budgets.

Second, with regard to the urbanity of the municipality, a significant correlation with municipal nature conservation policy adoption was found, implicating that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. However, no significant correlation with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting was found, implicating that the variables move in unrelated directions. Additionally, the weighted, multiple regression test showed a high increase in the adjusted R-squared when the urbanity of the municipality was added, indicating the importance of this factor for municipal nature conservation policy adoption. Furthermore, because of the variable being individually nonsignificant, the relative influence on municipal nature conservation policy adoption cannot be reliably assessed and interpreted. Moreover, the significant, positive correlation with the size of the municipal budget implicates that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to have a high budget. This is an unsurprising result because the urbanity of the municipality is measured by the density of addresses (omgevingsaddressendichtheid). A higher density of addresses generally means a higher population and thus higher municipal tax incomes. Thus, the size of the municipal budget and the urbanity of the municipality show some strong overlap.

Third, with regard to the distribution of seats of the municipal council, no significant correlations with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption were found, implicating that the variables move in unrelated directions. Additionally, both multiple regression test showed low adjusted R-squared values, indicating the low importance of this factor.

However, surprisingly, the standardized beta coefficient showed a strong positive effect on municipal nature conservation policy adoption, which implicates that municipalities with right-oriented municipal councils are more likely to adopt conservation policies. This surprising result will be discussed later in this thesis. Moreover, a significant, negative correlation with the urbanity of the municipality was found, which implicates that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to have a council that is left-oriented.

Finally, both multiple regression tests showed relatively low adjusted R-squared values. This implicates the presence of many other factors that play a role in and affect municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption.

4.2 Interviews

4.2.1 The Urbanity of the Municipality

The interviews were conducted with municipalities that varied in the level of urbanity. Whereas the municipality of Barneveld, West Maas en Waal and Zaltbommel have a relatively low urbanity, the municipality of Ede and Wageningen have a relatively high urbanity. First, surprisingly, the municipalities with a low urbanity reported the absence of nature areas (natuurgebieden) that are owned and managed by the municipality. For example, West Maas en Waal (2022) explained that the nature property of the municipality of West Maas en Waal is limited to some small areas with coppice (hakhout), poplars (populieren) and osiers (grienden). Additionally, Barneveld (2022) reported that the municipality does not officially own and manage nature areas within their borders. Big shares of land within municipalities with a low urbanity are taken up by agricultural land. The nature areas that do lie within the municipality are usually under the management of organizations, such as Staatsbosbeheer, Natuurmonumenten or the province. A municipality has no responsibility in managing these nature areas. Rather, it takes on the role of interlocutor to identify opportunities for collaboration with these organizations. Because their responsibilities in the nature areas are limited, municipalities with a low urbanity shift their focus towards the maintenance of green, public parks and verges within their urban and outlying areas (buitengebieden). Furthermore, in the rural areas the focus lies on finding opportunities to promote nature-inclusive agriculture in which there is a constant interaction between the farmers and the municipality (Barneveld, 2022; West Maas en Waal, 2022; Zaltbommel, 2022).

On the contrary, the municipalities with a high urbanity often do own and manage nature areas within their borders. These municipalities, such as the municipality of Ede, often have an expansive urban centre complemented by one or more nature areas. In these municipalities, the focus lies on both the urban centre and the nature areas because the municipality has responsibilities in both areas (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022). Therefore, municipalities with a high urbanity often have relatively many nature conservation responsibilities or tasks. As a result, the municipalities spend more time and resources in nature conservation and are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies required to manage and protect the nature areas (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022; Wageningen, 2022). On the other hand, municipalities with a low urbanity have relatively few responsibilities or tasks when it comes to nature conservation. As a result, they are not required to adopt certain nature conservation policies. As an illustration, West Maas en Waal (2022) explained that the municipality currently does not yet have their own nature conservation policy.

Second, the interviews also produced some interesting results that may indicate attitudinal differences between citizens in municipalities with a low and high urbanity. According to Barneveld (2022), there are "differences in culture" that are caused by the history of origin of the municipality. There are municipalities that have a strong agricultural background, such as the municipality of Barneveld, as opposed to municipalities that have a strong background of urban trade, such as the municipality of Amersfoort. Barneveld (2022) experienced attitudinal differences between citizens in the municipality of Barneveld and Amersfoort. Although an attitudinal shift among the citizens in the municipality of Barneveld can be seen where more citizens are increasingly aware of environmental concerns, such as bee mortality, the citizen attitudes in the municipality of Amersfoort seem to have a longer history of being environmentally friendly. Additionally, Zaltbommel (2022) explains that the municipalities part of the 'Rivierenland', which are all municipalities with a relatively low urbanity, have an 'identity' or attitude that focusses more on agriculture and less on nature (conservation). Citizen attitudes affect municipal nature conservation policy in different ways. First, the attitude affects the voting behaviour during elections for a new municipal council (Barneveld, 2022). As a result, the composition of the municipal council is likely to reflect the positive attitude. Second, a positive citizen attitude towards nature conservation 'pressurizes' the municipal council to conserve and enhance nature within the municipality. Because of the pressure from citizens and interest groups, the municipal council is 'forced' to contribute to nature conservation in the municipality (Wageningen, 2022).

4.2.2 The Distribution of Seats of the Municipal Council

First, one interviewee reported that she experienced the greener, left-oriented parties to put nature conservation themes onto the municipal agenda more often. In other words, these parties were seen to put more effort into finding and submitting new nature conservation themes to the municipal council (Zaltbommel, 2022). On the other hand, the other interviewees did not report to have seen apparent differences between left- and right-oriented parties in the process of policy agenda setting (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022; Wageningen, 2022; West Maas en Waal, 2022).

Second, all of the interviewees reported they have not really experienced the impact of the distribution of seats on municipal nature conservation policy adoption (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022; Zaltbommel, 2022; Wageningen, 2022; West Maas en Waal, 2022). The respondents explained they do not see apparent differences between left- or right-oriented parties when it comes to their attitude towards nature conservation. Although there are some differences in emphasis, parties from the whole political spectrum are aware of the importance of nature conservation in the municipality. As a result, left- and right-oriented parties are generally equally supportive towards the adoption of nature conservation policies (Barneveld, 2022; Zaltbommel, 2022; West Maas en Waal, 2022).

Even the heavily right-oriented parties, such as the SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij), generally are supportive towards nature conservation policies and even come up with initiatives themselves. The main reason for this is that the heavily right-oriented parties often have a great sense of stewardship (rentmeesterschap), which means that they value a 'healthy' planet in the present and future because they want their children to be able to thrive on this earth (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022; Zaltbommel, 2022). Furthermore, according to Wageningen (2022), for political parties it is 'cheaper' to address nature deterioration right now rather than being confronted with enormous costs in the future.

Finally, one other interesting insight the interviews produced is the important role aldermen play in municipal nature conservation policy. Aldermen can be seen as 'managers' who implement the policy that is adopted by the municipal council. They can also submit new initiatives or themes to the municipal council (Ede, 2022). Aldermen are elected by the municipal council and a municipality can have two to seven aldermen who each work on a specific theme, such as 'nature'. The alderman's task is to stand up for the interests of that specific theme (Ede, 2022; *Wethouder*, n.d.). According to Ede (2022), the distribution of seats of the municipal council influences the election of the aldermen. Parties that have a relatively high number of seats are able to leave their marks on the council and are likely to deliver one or more aldermen. Therefore, a council that is left-oriented is likely to deliver aldermen from parties that are left-oriented. There are some signs that an alderman from a left-oriented party contributes more to nature conservation policy than an alderman from a right-oriented party. For example, West Maas en Waal (2022) explained that he experienced both aldermen from the left-oriented (mixed) party 'PVDA/Groenlinks' and from the right-oriented party 'CDA'. He noticed that the aldermen from the 'PVDA/Groenlinks' invested more in 'green' (groen), which nature conservation is a part of, than the aldermen from the 'CDA'. He also explains that nature is the 'hobby horse' for the 'PVDA/Groenlinks' and that it is logical that they want to promote it in the municipality. Furthermore, according to Ede (2022), an alderman from a party with a 'nature profile', which are generally seen as left-oriented parties, is likely to put more effort into nature conservation. For example, they may put more effort into searching for and submitting nature conservation themes or initiatives to the municipal council (Ede, 2022; Wageningen, 2022).

4.2.3 The Size of the Municipal Budget

First, a municipality is organized in different departments that each have their own budgets. The different departments co-operate in drawing up these budgets by discussing the upcoming developments and their requirements. An example of such a development is the introduction of the Environment and Planning Act (Omgevingswet), which forces municipalities to put more effort into environmental planning and amend the budget to this development. Within the municipal departments, different themes exist that each have their own separate budget. For example, within the department of spatial development there may be the theme 'nature and landscape'. Budgets for these themes are drawn up by the civil servants who are working on that particular theme. They make a concept budget, which reflects the requirements for the developments in the upcoming year. The municipal council will then discuss whether they accept the concept budget or if amendments are required. Whether amendments are required depends on the priorities within the municipal council. The starting point for setting such priorities is the coalition agreement, which indicates what themes or sectors are deemed important by the municipal council for the upcoming four years (Barneveld, 2022). The respondent from the municipality of Barneveld has a yearly budget for projects that benefit biodiversity, climate adaptation, etc. However, when in need for extra budget for new projects or developments, they can apply for more budget to the municipal council. For example, the municipality of Barneveld has been working on a biodiversity plan that requires an increased budget. The municipal council has to decide whether such a biodiversity plan is worth the financial resources and time. The budget can also be increased when the responsible civil servant applies for a subsidy, such as the subsidies offered by the province of Gelderland. These subsidies can often double the yearly budget (Zaltbommel, 2022). The municipal council may also take the initiative themselves when they deem it necessary to give more attention to certain themes. For example, the municipal council may decide to increase the budget for planting trees when many trees have been cut the last few years (West Maas en Waal, 2022). On the other hand, other priorities can force a municipality to economize on nature conservation, possibly resulting in a decrease in the budget. For example, the worldwide pandemic forced municipal councils to economize on different themes (Barneveld, 2022). In summary, there exists a constant interaction between civil servants and the municipal council in which they discuss and determine the yearly budget for nature conservation. According to Barneveld (2022), "there is a constant policy cycle in which civil servants and the municipal council interact and consult with each other".

Second, if a municipal council decides to economize, nature conservation is often the first theme on which cuts are made. Thus, municipalities that have a difficult financial situation, i.e., municipalities in which financial resources are lacking, are more likely to cut the budget for nature conservation. For example, the municipality of Wageningen has had a difficult financial situation in the past, which forced them to choose between not being able to give citizens the (health) care they require or not being able to plant a certain number of trees. Unsurprisingly, the citizens and their health were given priority. On the other hand, if a municipality has a healthy financial situation, there is more room for themes with a lower priority, such as nature conservation (Zaltbommel, 2022). Every municipality does have a baseline level that the maintenance of municipal urban green and nature must meet. After all, the citizens of the municipality pay taxes with the expectation of proper maintenance of the spatial areas. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that a municipal council decides to fully economize on nature conservation. Another reason is that nature may be too deeply ingrained in the municipality. For example, the budget for nature conservation will never be fully cut in the municipality of Wageningen because there are too many citizens and interest groups that continue to insist on the protection and management of nature (Wageningen, 2022).

Finally, the size of the municipal budget also influences a municipalities' capacity, which can be seen as the available time, skills, expertise and money that is required to invest in nature conservation. The (lack of) capacity was mentioned most often by the interviewees as an important factor. Municipalities that have a high budget are able to employ several experienced civil servants who have specific expertise on nature conservation or other related themes. When the expertise cannot be found within the municipality, the hiring of external expertise is also an option (Barneveld, 2022; Ede, 2022; Zaltbommel, 2022). The municipality of Ede has an urban ecologist (stadsecoloog) and multiple civil servants who work specifically on nature and landscape (Ede, 2022). On the contrary, the municipality of Zaltbommel does not have an urban ecologist and there are less civil servants that have more responsibilities and tasks. The consequence is that they have to set priorities because they cannot do everything in the time they are given (Zaltbommel, 2022). Municipalities with a higher budget generally have a higher capacity, which means that they employ a higher number of experienced people with higher expertise. As a result, municipalities with high municipal budgets are more able to adopt policies that require a certain amount of time, money or expertise to implement than municipalities with a relatively low budget.

4.3 Synthesis

The elements from the statistical analysis and the interviews should be synthesized into a whole to examine their connection. First, with respect to the urbanity of the municipality, the significant, positive correlation with municipal nature conservation policy adoption implicates that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. Three different processes were identified that shape this relationship. Municipalities with a high urbanity often own and manage nature areas within the municipality. As a result, the municipalities have a relatively high number of nature conservation responsibilities and tasks. Therefore, they are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies required to manage and protect the nature areas. Furthermore, the attitude towards nature conservation of citizens in municipalities with a high urbanity may be more positive than those in municipalities with a low urbanity. A positive attitude not only pressurizes the municipal council to contribute to nature conservation but also results in a composition of the municipal council that is likely to reflect the positive attitude. Moreover, municipalities with a high urbanity, and a high density of addresses (omgevingsaddressendichtheid), generally have a higher population, resulting in higher tax incomes. The municipal budget is thus more likely to be higher in municipalities with a high urbanity, enabling a municipality to adopt costly policies. No significant correlation with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting was found. This is a surprising result because the Pearson correlation test shows a strong, significant and positive correlation between the processes of agenda setting and adoption, implicating that municipalities that adopt many nature conservation policies are more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation. Therefore, one would expect that municipalities with a high urbanity are also more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation. Chapter five of this thesis provides a short discussion on this surprising result.

Second, with respect to the distribution of seats of the municipal council, no significant correlations with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption were found. However, surprisingly, the multiple regression test did show a positive effect on policy adoption. The findings from the interviews mostly correspond with these relationships but also differ from them. The interviews suggested that left- and right-oriented parties are generally equally supportive towards nature conservation. This finding corresponds with the lack of significant correlations between the variables. On the other hand, the experiences of two interviewees may indicate that the distribution of seats of the municipal council influences municipal nature conservation policy adoption via the election of aldermen. Aldermen from green, left-oriented parties were reported by two interviewees to contribute more to nature conservation than those from right-oriented parties.

This finding suggests a negative effect on the adoption of nature conservation policies (i.e., municipalities with councils that are left-oriented are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies). However, the multiple regression test showed a positive effect. Thus, this result contradicts the result from the statistical analysis. Chapter five provides a discussion on this surprising result.

Finally, with respect to the size of the municipal budget, significant correlations with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption were found. This positive relationship was confirmed by the multiple regression test. These findings implicate that municipalities with high budgets are more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation and adopt nature conservation policies. Different processes were found that shape these relationships. Civil servants working on nature conservation or related themes receive a yearly budget, which is drawn up as a result of the consultation between the civil servant and the municipal council. The size of this budget depends on the priorities of the council and the current financial situation in the municipality. Municipalities in healthy financial situations are less likely to economize on nature conservation, which is often the first theme on which cuts are made. Furthermore, municipalities with high budgets generally have a higher capacity than municipalities with low budgets, which means that they employ a higher number of experienced civil servants with high expertise, enabling the municipality to adopt policies that require a high capacity. The (lack of) capacity was reported by all interviewees to be a very important factor. This may possibly explain why the multiple regression test shows that the size of the municipal budget has the highest relative influence on the adoption of nature conservation policy.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion on the limitations of this research, the most remarkable findings, the theory that has been used and the implications of this research for municipal nature conservation policy and further research on this subject.

5.1 Limitations

5.1.1 Internal Validity

The first limitation of this research is the conduction of the interviews via Microsoft Teams. My personal experience was that the unnatural way of communicating via technology, rather than having a physical conservation, sometimes made it difficult to understand and dig deeper into some answers the respondents provided. As a result, some important results may have potentially been missed or misinterpreted. However, after conducting the interviews, the flexibility of the interviewees allowed me to ask for and receive clarifications via written emails.

The second limitation of this research is the lack of literature on the subject of (Dutch) municipal nature conservation policy. As a result, it was difficult to write a theoretical framework with a focus on municipal nature conservation policy. Rather, the theoretical framework focusses mainly on other areas of policy, which limited the basis of understanding municipal nature conservation policy in its relevant context. A broader availability of literature might have contributed to understanding municipal nature conservation policy in other important ways.

The third limitation of this research was introduced briefly before but will be explained here again. In the statistical analysis, only four criteria were used to assess each policy stage, which limits the validity of the results from the statistical analysis. Although the identified relationships give a good impression of how the variables are related, the accuracy of the results from the statistical analyses is limited. Therefore, drawing conclusions from these results has to be done with caution.

The fourth limitation of this research is the methods used to assess the left-right scale of local parties. The use of only three criteria to assess the left-right scores for local parties, as opposed to the thirty criteria that were used to assess those of national parties, limits the validity of the results from the analysis of the relationship between nature conservation policy and the distribution of seats of the municipal council. Therefore, conclusions have to be drawn with caution.

5.1.2 External Validity

The fifth limitation of this research is using a regional focus. Municipalities in the province of Gelderland were researched, rather than a randomized sample of municipalities in the Netherlands. The main reason for this was that all municipalities in Gelderland are affected by the same provincial nature conservation policy, ruling out a potential external factor. However, the province of Gelderland does not have a municipality that consists of one big city, such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam or Den Haag. In these types of municipalities, the nature conservation challenges and policy may differ from what has been found in municipalities in Gelderland. All in all, the relationships, processes and dynamics that have been identified in the province of Gelderland are likely to be found in other provinces as well. Although there may be some small differences, Dutch municipalities generally have the same structure and organizational processes. The findings of this research are therefore likely to be generalisable to other provinces in the Netherlands.

The final limitation of this research is the relatively low number of interviews that were conducted. Due to time constraints, only five different municipalities could be interviewed. As a result, in some cases it was difficult to draw reliable conclusions from the interviews since some conclusions were only based on the findings from one municipality. The respondent from the municipality of Barneveld gave some interesting insights in attitudinal differences between the municipality of Barneveld and Amersfoort. It was difficult to generalize this finding to municipalities with a low and high urbanity because it could not be compared to other municipalities. Therefore, drawing conclusions from this finding has to be done with caution.

5.2 Remarkable Findings

First, the most remarkable finding was the positive relationship between the distribution of seats of the municipal council and municipal nature conservation policy adoption that the multiple regression produced. This finding implicates that right-oriented councils are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies and it differs from the general idea that left-oriented ideologies are more environmentally friendly than right-oriented ideologies. The strong sense of stewardship (rentmeesterschap) of right-oriented parties, which was reported by all interviewees, may possibly explain the positive relationship. According to the analysis, ceteris paribus, right-oriented councils are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. However, the Pearson correlation test showed that municipalities that have a right-oriented council generally have lower budgets, resulting in the inability to adopt costly policies. The size of the municipal budget is thus a complicating factor that negates the effect of the distribution of seats of the municipal council. This may possibly explain why the multiple regression test, as opposed to the Pearson correlation test, did show a significant (positive) relationship.

Second, it was surprising to find a significant correlation between the urbanity of the municipality and municipal nature conservation policy adoption, as opposed to a nonsignificant correlation with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting. This finding implicates that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies but are not more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation. One possible explanation could be that municipalities with a low urbanity are equally likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation but are unable to also adopt certain nature conservation policies. Indeed, the statistical data show that municipalities with a low urbanity often score higher or as high on agenda setting as municipalities with a high urbanity. Thus, municipalities with a low urbanity generally allocate an equal level of attention to nature conservation. However, they are unable to also devote to adopting nature conservation policies. This can be explained by the fact that municipalities with a low urbanity often lack the financial resources and capacity that municipalities with a high urbanity do possess.

5.3 Theory

The theory used for this thesis contributed to understanding municipal nature conservation policy in different ways before carrying out the research. More specifically, the theory contributed to identifying important factors, relationships, processes and dynamics that were likely to be found throughout the research. The different theories helped me get an overview of how certain variables in municipal nature conservation policy are connected. For example, theories on municipal budgets and the distribution of seats of the municipal council helped me understand that left-oriented parties favour higher taxes, resulting in higher budgets in municipalities with councils that are left-oriented. The theories on factors, relationships, processes and dynamics helped me with designing the questions for the interviews. They provided me with the ability to ask questions about specific (connections between) variables or processes. The publication Stofmeel (2019) should receive special recognition. This research helped me understand the differences in nature conservation policy between municipalities and why these differences may potentially exist. It showed the different elements in which municipalities can differ in their nature conservation policy, which contributed to designing my eight criteria that were used to assess nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. Additionally, this publication briefly mentioned the importance of the urbanity of the municipality, which resulted in my decision to research this factor.

The conceptual framework also consists of theories that have not been used in my research, which are mainly the theoretical models for policy adoption. Since this thesis merely focusses on only three different factors, the models were not really useful because they focus more on other potential factors (e.g., whether municipalities adopt nature conservation policies as a result of electoral competition). Additionally, as has been explained before in this thesis, I found and used mainly theories that do not focus on municipal nature conservation policy but rather focus on other areas of policy. It would have been useful to find more literature and theories on nature conservation policy specifically because theories from other areas of policy are more difficult to put into the context of nature conservation. As a result, you have to question and be careful about whether these theories can also be used to understand nature conservation policy. Furthermore, theories and literature on municipal nature conservation that are available focus mainly on assessing the nature conservation policy of municipalities, rather than examining the factors that influence it. A theoretical development in which important factors for municipal nature conservation policy are increasingly examined may contribute to better understanding municipal nature conservation policy.

5.4 Research Implications

First, the biggest barrier for municipal nature conservation is the lack of financial resources. The statistical analysis showed that the size of the municipal budget is the most important factor. Additionally, from the interviews it became clear that municipalities with lower budgets struggle with the lack of capacity. These municipalities lack the required level of manpower and expertise to adopt and implement certain nature conservation policies. Municipalities with lower budgets often do not employ an urban ecologist and employ only one or two civil servants who have many responsibilities. On the other hand, municipalities with higher budgets often do employ an urban ecologist and multiple civil servants with high expertise. Thus, an opportunity lies in the financial assistance towards Dutch municipalities. The provision of financial assistance by the provinces or by the central government may contribute to breaking down the financial barriers that obstruct municipalities in adopting and implementing nature conservation policies.

Second, another barrier for municipal nature conservation may be the citizen attitudes in municipalities with a strong agricultural background that are more focused on agriculture than on nature (conservation). The interviews showed that such an attitude can obstruct the municipal council in the adoption of nature conservation policies. Thus, an opportunity for municipalities lies in promoting attitudinal change among its citizens. A more positive citizen attitude towards nature conservation supports and pressurizes the municipal council to conserve and enhance nature within the municipality.

Finally, as has been explained before, the multiple regression tests showed a lot of 'noise', which implicates the presence of many other important variables that influence municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. For further research it would be interesting to identify these variables and compare their relative influence to the factors that this thesis focussed on.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The main research question this thesis tried to answer was: ***"What are the relationships between municipal nature conservation policy and the urbanity of the municipality, distribution of seats of the municipal council and the size of the municipal budget?"***.

First, of the three factors, the size of the municipal budget is concluded to be the most important factor for municipal nature conservation policy. Municipalities with high budgets are more likely to allocate their attention towards nature conservation and adopt nature conservation policies. The size of the municipal budget also has the highest relative influence on municipal nature conservation policy adoption. Different processes were identified that shape this relationship. The size of the municipal budget affects the budget that civil servants have at their disposal. The size of this budget depends on the priorities of the municipal council and the current financial situation of the municipality. Municipalities in difficult financial situations are more likely to cut the budget of nature conservation because of its low priority. On the other hand, in municipalities with healthy financial situations there is more room for themes with a lower priority. Furthermore, municipalities with a high budget have a higher capacity than municipalities with a low budget. A high capacity, which means that the municipality employs multiple experienced civil servants with high expertise, enables the municipal council to adopt certain nature conservation policies that municipalities with a low capacity are unable to adopt. Among all the identified processes underlying the factors, the (lack of) capacity is concluded to be the most important determinant and it may explain the highest relative influence of the size of the municipal budget on municipal nature conservation policy adoption.

Second, of the three factors, the urbanity of the municipality is concluded to be the second most important factor in municipal nature conservation policy. No significant relationship with municipal nature conservation agenda setting was found. On the other hand, it was found that municipalities with a high urbanity are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. The relative influence of this factor on municipal nature conservation policy adoption could not be reliably assessed. Several processes were found that shape the found relationship. As opposed to municipalities with a low urbanity, municipalities with a high urbanity often own and manage nature areas within their border. Therefore, they are more likely to adopt certain nature conservation policies required to manage and protect the nature areas. Furthermore, the attitude of citizens in municipalities with a high urbanity may be more positive towards nature conservation than in municipalities with a low urbanity. Municipalities with a low urbanity often have a strong agricultural background, possibly resulting in an attitude more focused on agriculture and less on nature (conservation).

A positive citizen attitude pressurizes the municipal council to protect and enhance nature within the municipality and it affects the voting behaviour during elections for a new municipal council. As a result, the composition of the municipal council is likely to reflect the positive attitude. Moreover, the urbanity of the municipality strongly overlaps with the size of the municipal budget. Municipalities with a high urbanity have higher budgets, possibly because of a more left-oriented municipal council and a higher population, resulting in a higher tax incomes.

Finally, of the three factors, the distribution of seats of the municipal council is concluded to be the least important factor for municipal nature conservation policy. No significant relationship with municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting was found. However, a positive influence on municipal nature conservation policy adoption was found, implicating that right-oriented councils are more likely to adopt nature conservation policies. As was discussed in chapter five, this positive influence is negated because municipalities with a right-oriented council generally have lower budgets. The processes and dynamics that were found correspond to and also contradict the (lack of) found relationships. Apart from some differences in emphasis, left- and right-oriented parties were seen to be equally supportive towards nature conservation policy. As a result, there are no apparent differences between left- and right-oriented parties in the processes of municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption. However, the distribution of seats of the municipal council seems to influence municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting and adoption via the election of aldermen. A municipal council that is left-oriented is likely to deliver multiple aldermen from parties that are left-oriented. There were some indications that aldermen from left-oriented parties contribute more to nature conservation than their right-oriented counterparts but more research is required to reliably conclude this.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Nature Conservation Policy Criteria

Table 5 on the next page shows the criteria and distribution of points that were used for assessing nature conservation policy agenda setting. Some remarks have to be made about the different criteria. First, since the first three criteria are based on the municipal websites, the available points were doubled for the fourth criterium. Municipal websites are relatively unreliable for assessing agenda setting because of multiple external variables. For example, poor website management may cause the website to not reflect the current developments in the municipality. The coalition agreement is a more reliable measurement for assessing the agenda-setting stage. Second, for assessing criterium four, the following criteria were used: (1) whether nature or biodiversity is specifically addressed as a separate theme, (2) whether nature or biodiversity is only briefly mentioned or extensively addressed and (3) whether specific future initiatives or plans with regard to nature or biodiversity are mentioned. Finally, for criteria three, news items from November 21st until December 20th were taken into account.

Table 6 on the next page shows the criteria and distribution of points that were used for assessing nature conservation policy adoption. For the first criterium, only landscape development plans and green policy plans from 2010 and onwards were taken into account. The reason for this choice is that such plans generally have a ten-year duration in which the plan is implemented.

Agenda Setting	
Criterium	Distribution of Points
The municipal website has a specific 'nature' or 'biodiversity' webpage that shows different policies, plans or tips to conserve, enhance or protect nature or biodiversity in the municipality	- The municipal website does not have such a webpage = 0 points - The municipal website does have a webpage that (i) pays only minor attention to nature or biodiversity or (ii) does not specifically address nature or biodiversity but also other themes = 0.5 points - The municipal website does have a webpage or a link to a separate website that pays considerable attention to specifically nature or biodiversity = 1 point
The number of clicks it takes from the home page of the municipal website to find weblinks, projects, news, etc. that are related to nature or biodiversity	- 0 clicks = 1 point - 1 click = 0.5 points - 2 clicks = 0 points
The number of news items the municipality posted on their website in the past month concerning policy, plans or tips to conserve, enhance or protect nature or biodiversity in the municipality	- 0 news items = 0 points - 1 news item = 0.25 points - 2 news items = 0.5 points - 3 news items = 0.75 points - 4 news items = 1 point
The municipal coalition agreement pays attention to nature or biodiversity	- The municipality does not pay attention to nature or biodiversity = 0 points - The municipality pays only minor attention to nature or biodiversity = 0.66 points - The municipality pays considerable attention to nature or biodiversity = 1.32 points - The municipality pays much attention to nature or biodiversity = 2 points

Table 5: Criteria used for assessing municipal nature conservation policy agenda setting

Adoption	
Criterium	Distribution of Points
The municipality has adopted a landscape development plan (landschapsontwikkelingsplan) for the outer areas and/or a green policy plan (groenbeleidsplan) for the inner areas of the municipality that explains their policy with regard to the conservation, enhancement and protection of nature or biodiversity	- The municipality has not adopted either of the plans = 0 points - The municipality has adopted one of the two plans = 0.5 points - The municipality has adopted both plans = 1 point
The municipality has adopted a biodiversity plan (biodiversiteitsplan) that specifically focusses on the conservation, enhancement and protection of biodiversity within the municipality	- The municipality has not adopted such a plan = 0 points - The municipality is currently working or finishing working on a biodiversity plan but it still needs to be adopted = 0.5 points - The municipality has adopted such a plan = 1 point
The number of subsidies the municipality offers that stimulate the protection, enhancement or conservation of nature or biodiversity	- 0 subsidies = 0 points - 1 subsidy = 0.25 points - 2 subsidies = 0.5 points - 3 subsidies = 0.75 points - 4 subsidies = 1 point
The municipality is a partner of IVN Natuureducatie in the following three projects: (i) Tiny Forests, (ii) Nederland Zoemt and (iii) Operatie Steenbreek	- The municipality is not a partner in any of the three projects = 0 points - The municipality is a partner in one of the three projects = 1/3 points - The municipality is a partner in two of the three projects = 2/3 points - The municipality is a partner in all of the three projects = 1 point

Table 6: Criteria used for assessing municipal nature conservation policy adoption

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- *Opnemen Video/Audio*

- *Intro Onderzoek*

- *Budget (Uitleg Factor)*

  1. Hoe wordt beslist welke sectoren een groter of kleiner deel van het budget toegewezen krijgen? In andere woorden, hoe worden prioriteiten gesteld?

  2. Zijn er belangrijke factoren of evenementen die invloed hebben op het deel van het budget dat naar natuurbehoud gaat? (Bijvoorbeeld: nationale of lokale programma's of subsidies).

  3. Verschilt het budget voor natuurbehoud ieder jaar of blijft dit vrijwel onveranderd?

  4. Als je kijkt naar de gemeente Barneveld, dan is het verschil in budget met grote, stedelijke gemeenten erg groot. Klopt mijn verwachting dat een gemeente met een relatief beperkt budget geforceerd wordt om prioriteiten te stellen waarbij bijvoorbeeld armoede en ouderenzorg een hogere prioriteit hebben dan natuurbehoud en daarom dus ook een groter deel van het budget krijgen? Stel: het budget van de gemeente Barneveld daalt aanzienlijk, zullen bepaalde sectoren dan minder geld toegewezen krijgen of wordt elke sector gelijk behandeld?

- *Zetelverdeling (Uitleg Factor)*

  5. Op welke manieren merkt u wel of niet dat de samenstelling van de gemeenteraad effect heeft op het natuurbeleid van de gemeente? Het beeld bestaat bijvoorbeeld dat linkse partijen natuurbehoud hoger op de prioriteitenlijst hebben staan dan rechtse partijen, herkent u dit beeld bij de gemeente?

- *Stedelijkheid (Uitleg Factor)*

  6. De gemeente Barneveld is een 'landbouw gemeente' (2/5 stedelijkheidsgraad). Wat voor uitdagingen m.b.t. natuurbehoud heeft de gemeente? Wat hebben die uitdagingen volgens u als gevolg voor het natuurbeleid?

- 7. Zou u zeggen dat de gemeente Barneveld veel of weinig beschikking heeft tot natuur waar ze haar invloed op kan uitoefenen? Welke gevolgen heeft dit voor het natuurbeleid?

- *Vorming Politieke Voorkeuren (Uitleg Factor)*

  8. Volgens mijn analyse heeft Barneveld een hoge score voor 'agenda setting'. Hoe en door wie worden belangrijke thema's op de gemeentelijke agenda gezet zodat ze door de gemeente worden behandeld? Hoe wordt beslist welke thema's belangrijk genoeg zijn om op de agenda te komen?

  9. Wat is de rol van belangengroepen in de gemeente Barneveld? Zijn er belangengroepen die invloed proberen uit te oefenen op de gemeente?

  10. Kiest een gemeente liever voor thema's of sectoren waar ze veel invloed op kan uitoefenen in plaats van sectoren waar ze nauwelijks controle over heeft?

- *Besluitvormingsfase (Uitleg Factor)*

  11. Kijkt de gemeente Barneveld naar het beleid van andere gemeentes en komt het dan wel eens voor dat de gemeente daardoor nieuw beleid aanneemt of haar beleid aanpast aan een andere gemeente?

  12. In hoeverre en op welke manieren beïnvloed de overheid of de provincie het natuurbeleid van de gemeente?

  13. Merkt u dat de gemeente Barneveld soms bepaalde kennis, expertise of skills mist die nodig zijn om een bepaald beleid aan te nemen of uit te voeren?

  14. Wat zijn voor de gemeente de hoofdredenen geweest om te starten met een punten systeem natuur-inclusief bouwen?

- *Afrondingsvragen*

  15. Ik heb gekeken naar het budget, samenstelling van de gemeenteraad en de stedelijkheid. Zijn er volgens u nog andere belangrijke factoren die van invloed zijn op het natuurbeleid van een gemeente?

  16. Mag ik dit interview gebruiken als rapportage in mijn scriptie?

  17. Mag ik uw naam gebruiken of blijft u liever anoniem?

  18. Heeft u er behoefte aan als ik al uw antwoorden op mijn vragen naar u toe stuur voordat ik ze in mijn scriptie verwerk?

  19. Heeft u er behoefte aan dat ik mijn scriptie naar u toe stuur wanneer ik deze af heb?

Appendix C: Statistical Data

Municipality	Urbanity	Budget (x1000)	Distribution of Seats	Agenda Setting Score	Adoption Score
Aalten	2	69502	49.1	4.5	0.75
Apeldoorn	4	668544	45.67	4.5	4
Arnhem	4	835934	43.16	4.75	1.91
Barneveld	2	200831	52.38	3.32	1.75
Berg en Dal	2	98301	44.61	3.57	1.08
Berkelland	2	135231	51.83	3.82	1.25
Beuningen	3	68240	42.82	1.66	0.83
Bronckhorst	1	84954	53.71	3.5	1.75
Brummen	2	54993	51.14	2.57	1
Buren	1	74289	45.67	2.75	1
Culemborg	3	88232	48.81	3.5	1.83
Doesburg	2	40492	45.62	0.5	0
Doetinchem	3	278235	47.43	1.91	0.5
Druten	2	54540	42.92	1.25	0
Duiven	3	66505	42.96	1.16	0.5
Ede	4	430757	55.45	4	3
Elburg	2	65440	54.94	1.25	0.5
Epe	2	97231	48.2	2.91	0.5
Ermelo	2	102747	53.53	2.57	2.08
Harderwijk	4	198012	52.63	1.41	0.91
Hattem	2	34261	52.22	1.66	1.25
Heerde	2	52976	53.43	3.5	1
Heumen	2	41103	48.28	2.66	0.75
Lingewaard	2	126768	43.79	1.32	0.58
Lochem	2	99814	54.26	4.5	1.5
Maasdriel	1	87902	53.86	2.82	0.83
Montferland	2	111199	53.57	2.82	0.75
Neder-Betuwe	1	63411	57.26	2.57	0.5
Nijkerk	3	120115	53.03	2.57	1.41
Nijmegen	4	901521	35.78	2.82	1.41
Nunspeet	2	75182	50.82	3.5	1.08
Oldebroek	2	93212	50.57	1.91	2.33
Oost Gelre	2	82445	55.83	2.57	0.5
Oude Ijsselstreek	2	113288	41.83	2.91	1.08
Overbetuwe	2	122582	48.58	1.75	0.75
Putten	2	67246	52.19	2.91	1.58
Renkum	2	93439	50.54	3.5	1.66
Rheden	3	125596	43.38	4	2
Rozendaal	2	7851	40	2.16	0
Scherpenzeel	2	27451	46.69	2.16	0
Tiel	3	143307	49.12	0.25	0.25
Voorst	2	75940	46.71	3.16	0.83

Wageningen	4	118322	41.94	4.25	1.83
West Betuwe	1	160924	54.25	2.82	0.5
West Maas en Waal	1	47919	43.36	2.82	1
Westervoort	3	41369	47.06	2.32	0.5
Wijchen	3	118044	43.3	3.07	1.5
Winterswijk	3	119134	50.4	3.75	2.16
Zaltbommel	2	116767	51.34	3.32	1.33
Zevenaar	3	157085	43.99	1.16	0.58
Zutphen	4	191684	40.3	3.32	0.5

Appendix D: SPSS Output

Pearson Correlation Output

Correlations

		Urbanity	Budget	Distribution of Seats	Agenda Setting Score Percentage	Adoption Score Percentage
Urbanity	Pearson Correlation	1	.601**	-.400**	.128	.364**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.004	.369	.009
	N	51	51	51	51	51
Budget	Pearson Correlation	.601**	1	-.290*	.319*	.475**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.039	.022	.000
	N	51	51	51	51	51
Distribution of Seats	Pearson Correlation	-.400**	-.290*	1	.081	.131
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.039		.574	.360
	N	51	51	51	51	51
Agenda Setting Score Percentage	Pearson Correlation	.128	.319*	.081	1	.619**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.369	.022	.574		.000
	N	51	51	51	51	51
Adoption Score Percentage	Pearson Correlation	.364**	.475**	.131	.619**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.000	.360	.000	
	N	51	51	51	51	51

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Multiple Regression Output (Agenda Setting)

Model Summary

					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.081a	.006	-.014	21.32792	.006	.320	1	49	.574
2	.193b	.037	-.003	21.21331	.031	1.531	1	48	.222
3	.368c	.135	.080	20.31669	.098	5.330	1	47	.025

a. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats

b. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity

c. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity, Budget

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	145.511	1	145.511	.320	.574[b]
	Residual	22289.129	49	454.880		
	Total	22434.640	50			
2	Regression	834.419	2	417.210	.927	.403[c]
	Residual	21600.221	48	450.005		
	Total	22434.640	50			
3	Regression	3034.544	3	1011.515	2.451	.075[d]
	Residual	19400.096	47	412.768		
	Total	22434.640	50			

a. Dependent Variable: Agenda Setting Score Percentage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats

c. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity

d. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity, Budget

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	38.305	29.668		1.291	.203
	Distribution of Seats	.345	.609	.081	.566	.574
2	(Constant)	11.410	36.651		.311	.757
	Distribution of Seats	.672	.661	.157	1.016	.315
	Urbanity	4.651	3.759	.191	1.237	.222
3	(Constant)	12.936	35.108		.368	.714
	Distribution of Seats	.771	.635	.180	1.215	.230
	Urbanity	-.857	4.319	-.035	-.198	.844
	Budget	4.606E-5	.000	.393	2.309	.025

a. Dependent Variable: Agenda Setting Score Percentage

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	,245[a]	,060	,041	1,33878	,060	3,136	1	49	,083
2	,389[b]	,151	,116	1,28546	,091	5,149	1	48	,028
3	,500[c]	,250	,202	1,22101	,099	6,202	1	47	,016

a. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats

b. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity

c. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity, Budget

ANOVA[a,b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5,620	1	5,620	3,136	,083[c]
	Residual	87,825	49	1,792		
	Total	93,445	50			
2	Regression	14,129	2	7,064	4,275	,020[d]
	Residual	79,316	48	1,652		
	Total	93,445	50			
3	Regression	23,374	3	7,791	5,226	,003[e]
	Residual	70,070	47	1,491		
	Total	93,445	50			

a. Dependent Variable: AdoptionScore

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by weight

c. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats

d. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity

e. Predictors: (Constant), Distribution of Seats, Urbanity, Budget

Coefficients[a,b]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-,658	,929		-,708	,483
	Distribution of Seats	,034	,019	,245	1,771	,083
2	(Constant)	-1,878	1,042		-1,802	,078
	Distribution of Seats	,047	,019	,342	2,447	,018
	Urbanity	,275	,121	,317	2,269	,028
3	(Constant)	-1,604	,996		-1,611	,114
	Distribution of Seats	,043	,018	,314	2,357	,023
	Urbanity	,124	,130	,143	,955	,345
	Budget	2,269E-6	,000	,356	2,490	,016

a. Dependent Variable: AdoptionScore

b. Weighted Least Squares Regression - Weighted by weight