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## **WORKING PAPER**

**Why do some party leaders in Flemish municipal councils get more acquainted with New Public Management principles than others ?  
An investigation into the impact of their individual characteristics.**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the scarce literature on politicians' individual characteristics as determinants of their acquaintanceship with New Public Management (NPM) concepts and tools. It focuses on party leaders as the leaders of the political groups consisting of members of the same party in the municipal council. Our sample covers 363 party leaders in Flemish municipalities. Using survey data, we combine individual factors in a regression analysis to reveal which personal characteristics mediate their processes of getting acquainted with NPM principles. Party leaders' acquaintanceship with 5 concrete NPM concepts is used as a dependent variable. The results reveal that political experience, being majority leader, combination of political mandates at a higher political level and financial expertise have a positive effect on acquaintanceship with NPM. Economic education, gender, profession, age or size have no significant effect.

**KEY WORDS:** local government reform, NPM, party leaders.

## Introduction

Although there are signs that the heyday of New Public Management (NPM) may have passed, local governments keep on being reformed according to the NPM doctrine (Gruening 2001, Hasque 2007, Wollmann 2012). NPM not solely reshapes the bureaucratic administration, political institutions and ways of organizing politics and public decision- and policymaking are affected as well (Hansen 2001, Tiili 2007). NPM aims to make the responsible political leaders much more businesslike, i.e. market-, performance-, cost-, efficiency-, output- and audit- oriented (Bochel & Bochel 2010, Diefenbach 2009, Pina et al. 2009, Wolmann 2012). Political involvement is actually regarded as a crucial explanatory variable for the success of deploying public sector reform (Van Dooren 2005). Research so far often focused on executive politicians applying a qualitative approach. This study particularly focuses on party leaders in the council. The elected representatives on the same political list generally form together the same political group in the council, led by the party leader. In Flanders the term '*fractieleider*' is used.

This study firstly introduces an 'NPM acquaintanceship score'. We define acquaintanceship as 'being familiar with'. Pollitt (2002) divided the adoption of NPM in four different stages: discourse, decision-making, real organizational practice and results on public organizations. This study is situated in the third phase as our focus on acquaintanceship measures the extent of internalization in politicians' mindset. Current acquaintanceship is also a good indicator for future implementation as it precedes later choices (March & Olson 1984). Party leaders well acquainted with NPM instruments are more convinced of the usefulness and relevance of the NPM inspired reforms (Anessi-Pessina et al. 2008). Although concepts and tools are only means to achieve ends, i.e. the modernization of local government; by focusing on politicians' acquaintanceship with specific instruments we assess if the first essential step for implementation is fulfilled. Secondly, a regression analysis is performed on the dependent variable, the NPM acquaintanceship score, to determine whether individual characteristics affect the process of assimilation. March and Olson's (2011) framework of 'constitutions', 'interests' and 'power' and the

results of previous studies about implementation of specific NPM instruments are used to identify relevant personal characteristics.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section starts with an elaboration of the political interest hypothesis and the impediments for politicians' adoption of the NPM idea. The following section sets a state of the art on current research and defines the contribution of this study. Next the research question and tested variables are defined. As fourth part the empirical setting of Flemish councils is specified. Subsequently, the data collection and methodology are described. The last section contains the analyses and the results to conclude with the discussion and issues for future research.

### **Politicians' problematic adoption of NPM**

Already in the early days of the reforms, scholars were quite critical about NPM's real outcomes in contrast to its original claims and objectives, especially regarding the adoption of the NPM doctrines by politicians (Diefenbach 2009, Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000, Tiili 2007, Lowndes & Wilson 2003, Anessi-Pessina et al. 2008). To successfully put the NPM idea into practice, strong support, attention and commitment from politicians is crucial (Lapsley & Pallot 2000, Schedler 2003, Bochel & Bochel 2010, Anessi-Pessina et al. 2008). However, it seems that reforms did not always obtain the expected political support at the operational level (Lapsley 2000, Tiili 2007). Lack of political involvement is generally perceived as one of the main reasons for disappointing effects of NPM reforms.

Theoretically, it comes as no surprise that politicians do not follow the rational NPM-like managerial model (Tiili 2007). *Firstly*, NPM is in essence a very rational theory, whereas politicians are bounded by their own 'political' rationality, focusing on the short term and being reelected (van Dooren 2005, Tiili 2007, Liguori et al. 2009). This bounded rationality creates a contradiction between the 'logic of politics' and the 'rational NPM' thinking. *Secondly*, NPM's concept of rationality is grounded in economics. This 'rational economic logic' is not well matched with 'political logic' focused on the efforts needed to attract voters in elections (ter Bogt 2004, Yetano 2009, Liguori et al. 2009). *Thirdly*, the inherent democratic dimension of the role and skills of elected politicians is not easily combined with the propagated idea of rational and efficient decision-making (Hansen 2001, Tiili 2007). Some authors identify the lack of understanding for political processes and political decision-making as the most fundamental obstacle for adoption of the NPM principles by politicians. The sometimes irrational nature of political decision-making and its sensitivity to external pressure are criticized as inefficient from the rational and efficiency driven NPM viewpoint. However, politicians are the elected representatives of the plurality of opinions and interests of the citizens (Hansen 2001). Their role is to comprehend a subject matter from different points of view, to consider it, to compromise conflicting interests and judge what is most reasonable and appropriate in a given situation (Hansen 2001, Tiili 2007). *Fourthly*, the changed relation between politics and administration also requires more businesslike knowledge, qualifications and strategic focus from politicians (Tiili 2007, Steyvers et al. 2010). NPM advocates a clear distinction between politics and administration. Civil servants are encouraged to work as public managers separate from and equal to politicians. Politicians are expected to formulate strategic goals and to control their implementation (Steyvers et al. 2006, 2010). Indeed, to control the actions of civil servants, politicians need sufficient

knowledge of instruments and tools for modern local government management (Steyvers et al. 2010). However, they experience difficulties in developing a strategic and controlling focus (Liguori 2010, Tiili 2007).

When studying politicians' acquaintanceship with NPM principles, the local level offers a particularly promising environment. Due to the closeness of local politicians to policymaking and -implementation and the fact that they have to implement the NPM reforms at the front (in contrast with for example national politicians working within a framework and from a certain distance), the adoption by local politicians of NPM reforms and the related instruments is particularly visible (Tiili 2007). Municipal politicians may even have more discretion in implementing new principles than national decision-makers (Guillamón et al. 2011). According to some authors (Bochel & Bochel 2010, Brugué & Vallès 2005) councilors can actually be considered as key political NPM protagonists within their municipality.

<b>A weak spot in research</b>
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One of the fundamental contradictions of NPM is its inherent focus on control and outcomes but little evaluation of the reform itself, especially regarding politicians (Olson et al. 1998, Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000). Although bounded rationality, competing logics, changed relations between politicians and administration and the intrinsically democratic character of political decision-making form considerable obstacles for the implementation of NPM reform in local government, it remains unclear exactly how much of the 'NPM story' has been incorporated in politicians' mindset (Schedler 2003, Askim 2007). Research disclosed far less knowledge about politicians' than about managers' experiences with NPM concepts and tools (Liguori 2009). In general, political scientists show a certain restraint to study the adoption by politicians of (modern) management concepts. They rather stress the role alterations of councilors as a result of NPM reforms of local government (Steyvers et al. 2006, Guérin & Kerrouche 2008, Verhelst et al. 2011). Relatedly, in public management research, politicians and certainly local councilors are only occasionally associated with the results of modernization reforms. However, studies of authors such as Askim (2007, 2008), ter Bogt, (2004), Melkers and Willoughby (2005), Lapsley and Pallot (2000), Liguori (2009) and van Helden and ter Bogt (2011), investigated politicians in relation to specific NPM instruments such as accrual accounting, performance and financial information and budgeting practices. The impact of politicians' personal characteristics on their internalization of these instruments is only investigated as a side issue. Although it is assumed that all politicians have incentives to get acquainted with the new NPM techniques and tools, they could be conditioned by certain individual factors. When it comes to performance information, Askim's (2009) research on the difference in councilors' use shows that individual distinctions explain certain variations among them.

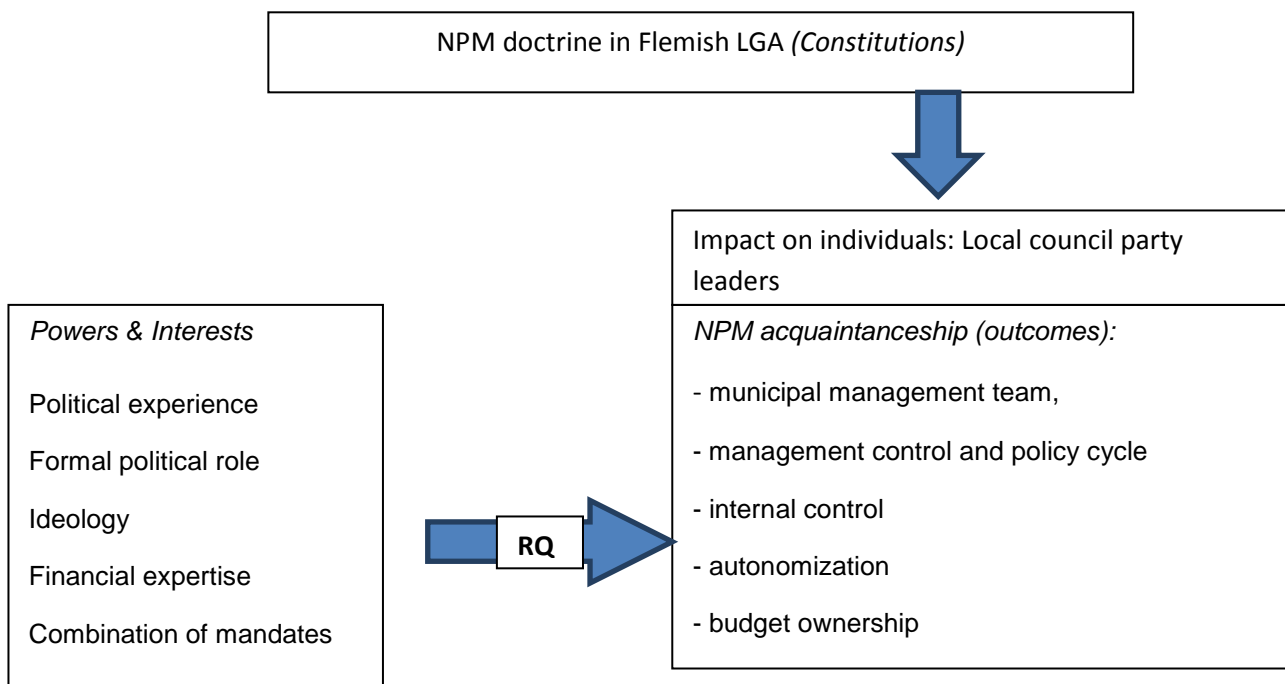
Concerning the available evidence, most information on politicians' adoption of the NPM idea stems from qualitative case studies (van Helden & Jansen 2003, Guérin & Kerrouche 2008, Verhelst et al. 2011). They have provided valuable insight and interesting hypotheses but little systematic quantifiable data (Askim 2007, Steyvers et al. 2006, Verhelst et al. 2011). To the best of our knowledge only few studies examine systematically and in essence the incorporation of the NPM doctrine by councilors.

Because it is assumed that their process of familiarization is more visible, studies often focus on mayors and aldermen, paying less attention to 'ordinary' councilors. As far as we could ascertain no previous investigations regard the party leaders as a separate and distinct class of politicians, although they make up a specific group among the 'ordinary' councilors (Askim 2007, Bochel & Bochel 2010). Their status provides opportunities for strong minded individuals to exploit their role if they choose so (Bochel & Bochel 2010). The position of the majority leader is often conceived as a steppingstone to an executive mandate as a member of the college of mayor and aldermen. Their closeness to the executive leaders and the internal organization of the municipality means that these party leaders could be more familiar with the principles of modernization in local government. However, this could also hold for opposition leaders. Opposition leaders play a crucial role in critically controlling the implementation of local policy. Because of their controlling task, they could show particular attention for the NPM instruments associated with effective and efficient organization of the municipality. By focusing on party leaders in the councils this study investigates to what extent the NPM discourse is absorbed by a very relevant group of non-executive politicians from both opposition and majority.

### **New institutional Theory and Research Question**

According to neo-institutional literature political action cannot be explained in terms of rationality and choice (March & Olson 1984). Political outcomes of reforms are best understood as the consequences of behavior at the individual level. This implies a micro institutional approach starting from the individual as a basic unit of analysis to explain and predict results of local government reform (Lowndes & Wilson 2003). Individual characteristics empower and constrain actors differently (March & Olson 2005). This makes them more or less capable of acting accordingly to prescriptive rules of the NPM reform. Historically, there has been emphasis on the fact that political behavior was embedded in an institutional structure of rules, norms, expectations and traditions that severely limited the free play of individual will and action (March & Olson 1984). However, recent modern political theory incorporated by new institutionalism, makes political outcomes a function of three primary factors: the distribution of preferences (*interests*) among political actors, the distribution of resources (*powers*) and the constraints imposed by the rules of the game (*constitutions*) (March & Olson 1984). The individual characteristics under study are all attributable to groups of 'power' and 'interest'. The 'constitution' is largely normative, homogeneous and constant, shaped by the Flemish legislation (Local Government Act (LGA)). Scheme 1 illustrates how these three principles are translated into our research design. Lowndes & Wilson (2003) consider new institutionalism as a 'moving spirit', less as a theory and more as a conceptual framework. For our research intentions it is very usable because of the questions it provokes and insights it yields in relation to processes of local government reform. Party leaders are players in the 'reform game', which individual characteristics favor change and which makes them resistant to change? In our analysis we focus on controversial characteristics, still under debate in literature.

### Scheme 1: Research Design



*RQ Do individual characteristics associated with the concepts of 'power' and 'interests' such as party leaders' political experience, formal political role, party ideology, financial expertise or political mandates affect their acquaintanceship with NPM principles ?*

The first characteristic deals with *political experience*. The effect of experience is unclear according to new institutional theory. In general councilors are longer involved in local politics (Guérin & Kerrouche 2008). Some argue that highly experienced politicians have good abilities to interpret information and make use of new instruments because they can more easily assimilate new information (Askim 2009). Due to their superior information knowledge of their polity's history they can more efficiently interpret information. Experienced politicians also focus more on their controlling and policy making role, for which they are supposed to make more intensive use of NPM instruments (Reynaert et al. 2010). However, established politicians could see new instruments as a threat to their built-up power positions (Steyvers et al. 2010). Melkers & Willoughby (2005) and Askim (2009) found that in the specific case of application and search for performance information, use decreased with experience. Inexperienced counterparts were more receptive for modernization than political veterans. De Groot et al. (2010) confirm this contradiction, more experienced members tend to be more open-minded, but they also rely more on routine and familiar information sources.

The second factor considers the *formal political role* of party leaders. Belonging to majority or opposition influences their identity associated with different roles in the council. Different access to information and a divergent role focus explain why belonging to opposition or majority influences their NPM acquaintanceship (Ezzamel et al. 2005). Party leaders of the majority have better access to exclusive

inside information, because they are closer to the executive (Ezzamel et al. 2005, Askim 2009). However, the 'logic of the majority' states that these party leaders of the majority will focus more on policy-making and representation and less on control. Controlling the majority is mainly the task of the opposition (Verhelst et al. 2011). Opposition leaders in the council are supposed to be better acquainted with NPM instruments because they are more focused on the efficient and effective organization of the municipality. The first comprehensive, preliminary evaluation of the Flemish Local Government Act revealed significant differences between majority and opposition showing more intensive use of new instruments by opposition members (Olislagers et al. 2009).

The third characteristic discusses the impact of *ideology*. In Flemish local politics, party discipline is very important and even very strong for councilors of the majority. Traditionally left parties are associated with a larger public sector and a less businesslike attitude, opposed to rightist parties advocating more privatization and economic efficiency in the public sector. Moreover, certain parties are clearly linked to certain professions. Among rightist parties self-employed and councilors with a background as business person are better represented (Reynaert 2012). Civil servants are more present in leftist social-democratic parties. Liberal professions occur most in nationalist, regionalist or ethnic parties. This implies that indirectly, by attracting more business oriented professions, right parties could be more in favor of NPM. However, this supposition is nuanced by data about recruitment patterns. A clear distinction between left parties associated with an intellectual and public sector profile opposed to right parties with businesslike and market-oriented economic characteristics is not confirmed (Reynaert 2012). Moreover, a meta analysis of the role of ideology in explaining privatization, very much supported by NPM, brings only little empirical support for an effect of right wing governments (Bel et al. 2007). Also Hood (1995) already rejected the ideology hypothesis for fostering NPM at macro- country level. We operationalize this variable by using the study of Devos *et al.* (2006) who asked politicians to rate themselves along a left-right scale. This is more precise and nuanced than simply categorizing parties into left and right and enables us to score the many coalition agreements in Flemish municipalities.

The fourth characteristic presumes that *professional use of financial information* yields a positive effect on acquaintanceship with NPM principles. In the NPM efficiency logic, politicians should be able to respond to, interpret, comply with, or challenge financial information (Guthrie et al. 1999). Due to the generally limited economic training of politicians, the specific professional expertise of party leaders might be relevant to strengthen their position in the council (Brusca 1997). The use of financial information for professional reasons could also point at a more businesslike attitude and a certain predisposition for control and monitoring instruments. It is thus expected to exert a positive effect on the acquaintanceship with the NPM principles.

The fifth hypothesis postulates that *combination of different political mandates* enhances acquaintanceship with NPM principles. Candidates for elections are being mobilized more often and they increasingly hold multiple political offices at different levels (Weekers et al. 2007). Politicians combining different mandates are better informed. Due to their broader network within and outside the political body, they are assumed to interpret unfamiliar information more easily or work with new instruments (Askim 2008, 2009). As other governmental levels are also subject to NPM reforms, they

might have a superior knowledge of NPM related tools. However, some majority leaders combine their council leadership with a local executive mandate, either as a mayor or aldermen. Although this study explicitly focuses on non-executive council politicians, we included them in the analysis, because of the relevancy of their network and their role as faction leader. However, in our setting, combination of mandates at local level is strictly limited to a position as mayor or aldermen, excluding all other local mandates – often held by faction leaders in Flanders - in autonomous municipal organizations such as social centres for welfare, the fire brigade, inter-municipal housing companies or the police force.

In order to complete the analysis the *control variables gender, economic education, profession, size and age* are added to our analysis.

*Gender* is related to political activity. Men have a higher level of political engagement (Guillamón et al. 2011). According to Hofstede (1998), masculinity is associated with ego and goal centeredness, performance, competitiveness, efficiency, emphasis on visible achievements and material success. Femininity is related with social goals, consensus seeking, stress on equality, solidarity, negotiation, more deliberate styles of decision-making and social interaction (Hofstede 1998, Fox & Schuhmann 1999). Although the findings relate to national cultures and our study focuses on interpersonal differences, these studies assume men to be more in favor of NPM than women. However, Steyvers et al. (2010) argue that due to their deliberative and interactive decision-making styles female city managers are more open to modernization and innovation.

Existing research is also inconclusive about the impact of *education* (Askim 2009). People with advanced degrees and training are supposed to handle formal, numerical or technical information more easily (Askim 2009). A specific *economic training* stimulates financial, analytical and strategic skills, very relevant for the adoption of NPM ideas. Although most councilors are highly educated, party leaders with an education in economics could also better recognize the advantages of businesslike instruments and tools (Guérin & Kerrouche 2008). Besides, Reynaert et al. (2010) found that higher educated councilors focused more on policy and control (associated with NPM) and valued less representation. This was confirmed in the preliminary evaluation of the Flemish Local Government Act (LGA) by Olislagers et al. (2009); the higher educated councilors used significantly more new instruments introduced by the reform. However, in the specific case the NPM tool of performance information, Askim (2009) found that the best educated councilors were the least inclined to use it. *Age* is introduced to control for experience (Askim 2009).

Concerning *professional activities*; self-employed and party leaders working in political cabinets employees or full time politicians could be more open to the businesslike NPM ideas. To conclude, party leaders' acquaintanceship can also depend on factors associated with the organization within which the person works. *Polity size* is one such factor (Askim 2009). A larger municipality means a wider control span implying more service users, more activities, more employees, more professionalization and more attention for NPM implementation. The smaller the municipal scale, the lower the average use of NPM instruments (van Helden & Jansen 2003). Table 1 brings an overview of all the variables in the model.

Table 1: variables in the model



<i>Variable</i>	<i>References</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Expected sign</i>
<b>DEPENDENT VARIABLE</b>				
<b>NPM_acquaintance ship_score</b>	Hood (1995) Leroy (2011) Anessi-Pessina, Nasi & Steccolini (2008) Askim (2007 & 2008)	NPM acquaintanceship score party leaders (see table 2 in appendix)	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	
<b>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES</b>				
<b>Experience (<i>exp</i>)</b>	Guérin & Kerrouche (2008) De Groot et al. (2010) Melkers & Willoughby (2005) Steyvers et al. (2010) Askim (2009) Reynaert et al. (2010)	Years in council	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	Cannot be signed a priori
<b>Formal political role (<i>role</i>)</b>	Olislagers et al. (2009) Askim (2009) Ezzamel et al. (2005) Verhelst et al. (2011)	Dummy for opposition (0) or majority (1)	Flemish Home Office, database local mandates (2012)	Cannot be signed a priori
<b>Ideology (<i>ideology</i>)</b>	Reynaert (2012), Bel et al. (2007), Hood (1995)	Positions of political parties on a left-right scale with 0 representing extreme left and 10 representing extreme right, from viewpoint of politicians Ecologists 2.40 Socialists 3.35 Nationalists 7.05 Christian Democrats 5.78 Liberals 6.49 Extreme Right 9.19	Source: Devos et al. (2006)	Cannot be signed a priori
<b>Financial expertise (<i>fin.expert</i>)</b>	Brusca (1997) Guthrie, et al. (1999)	Dummy for professional use of financial information (1) vs not (0)	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	Positive for prof. use
<b>Combination of political mandates (<i>mandates</i>)</b>	Weekers et al. (2007) Askim (2008, 2009)	Dummy for combination of international, national, regional, or provincial or local executive political mandates (mayor or aldermen) (1) vs only local political mandate (0)	Belgian Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees (12 August 2011)	Positive
<b>CONTROL VARIABLES</b>				
<b>Gender (<i>gender</i>)</b>	Fox & Schuhmann (1999), Steyvers et al. (2010), Guillamón et al. (2011), Hofstede (1998)	Dummy for male (0) or female (1)	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	
<b>Economic education(<i>edu</i>)</b>	Guérin & Kerrouche (2008) Reynaert et al. (2010), Olislagers et al. (2009) Askim (2009)	Dummy for economic education (economics, applied economics, commercial school, tax, banking, marketing, commercial science, management or insurance, ...) (1) vs not (0)	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	
<b>Size (<i>pop</i>), (<i>councilors</i>)</b>	Askim (2009) Van Helden & Jansen (2003)	population in municipality 2011)  Number of councilors	Belgian Federal Public Service Economy 2011  Flemish Home Office, database local mandates (2012)	
<b>Profession (<i>prof</i>)</b>	Reynaert (2012)	Full time politician, self- employed and cabinets employees (1) vs other (civil servants, teachers, non actives, labourers, office workers (0)	Survey council party leaders (N= 363)	

Age (age)	Askim (2009)	Age	Survey council party leaders (N=363)	
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## Flemish councils

Flanders counts 7464 local councilors scattered over 308 municipalities, varying from very small villages to large cities. The municipal council holds a threefold structure with a council, an executive and a mayor and counts between 7 and 55 members. Most Flemish councilors have ordinary jobs and are only part-time involved in politics. Multiple office holding is a frequent phenomenon in Belgian politics. From the 124 members of the Flemish regional parliament, 107 combined a local mandate, of which 50% members of council (Weekers et al. 2007). The College of Mayor and Aldermen consists of 2 to 10 members elected by and among the council members, mostly as a result of a coalition agreement. They are in charge of day-to-day management and are presided by the mayor who actually is the real leader at local level (Goeminne et al. 2008, Valcke 2009).

The Flemish setting is particularly conducive to study party leaders' acquaintanceship with NPM, as Flemish municipalities have undergone a major change in various aspects of their organization (Windels 2006). Fitting in with the rise of NPM, the Local Government Act (LGA) of 2006 (in Dutch "Gemeentedecreet") focused on a more businesslike and professionalized management of local government. The reform introduced new policy instruments with regard to financial management, control, audit, human resources and result oriented policy planning and evaluation. In that sense the Flemish local government act clearly propagates the NPM doctrine of rational and logically acting politicians. Because the Flemish Local Government Act is essentially mandatory, the constitutional context in which local council party leaders operate is largely homogeneous. Flemish municipalities share common political and institutional systems, experience the same economic shocks, employ similar budgetary processes and have identical electoral rules.

## Data and method

Data are derived from an online survey conducted between December 2011 and February 2012 among municipal council party leaders. The questionnaire asked two types of questions, one type related to biographical data from the respondents, the other type asked to rate their acquaintanceship with a selection of 5 instruments. They are introduced by the Flemish LGA and represent NPM principles in Flemish councils. The first is budget ownership (art. 158 Flemish LGA), the second internal control (art. 99 Flemish LGA), the third managementteam (art. 95 Flemish LGA), the fourth management control and policy cycle, "BBC<sup>2</sup>" (title IV Flemish LGA and specific BBC Order of Flemish Government), the fifth autonomization (art. 231-245 Flemish LGA). Besides official documents such as the Act itself and the explanatory statement, expert interviews were used to select the 5 elements.

Respondents were asked to rate the instruments using a five point scale varying from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much) acquainted. They could indicate if they did not know, or did not wish to answer.

<sup>2</sup> "Beheers- en Beleidsproces"

The survey was pretested in a small pilot study with field experts. We send questionnaires to 529 party leaders in 123 different municipal councils, selected by stratified random sampling. After one round of follow-up we obtained 363 complete responses (response rate 68%, with a mean of 2,95 responses for each council).

The respondents fit into the so called '3M' profile of councilors: male, middle-aged and middle class, high in professional status and well educated (Reynaert 2012), for full description see table 1 in appendix. The average party leader is approximately 50 years old, higher educated and has been member of the council for two terms. Respondents come from a range of parties and majority and opposition are almost equally represented. Although our sample is considered representative for the population of Flemish party leaders, one the main limitations of survey research is the self reported nature of the information (Askim 2007, 2009, ter Bogt 2004). However, various precautions were taken to enhance the data's validity. The formulation of questions was very clear referring to generally known, identifiable, familiar and applied concepts. The questionnaire was also pretested with field experts to avoid any possible indistinctness. Moreover, we did not detect elements pointing at a self selection or non-response bias. We may assume that the non-respondents resemble the late respondents and no significant differences were detected between late and early respondents (T- test 0,7, p.0,47).

### **Construction the NPM acquaintanceship score**

To measure party leaders' familiarity with NPM instruments, we construct an "NPM acquaintanceship score" composed of the ratings of their familiarity with five applied concepts: municipal management team, management control and policy cycle, internal control, autonomization and budget ownership. They reflect the implementation of NPM in Flemish municipalities (Leroy 2011). Each concept is measured with a single item. Each item is also given equal weight in the coefficient because there's no evidence of one being more important or dominant than another. Moreover, they measure quite different concepts. Although this might be regarded as a limitation, it is a well-considered trade-off to maximize the response rate by keeping the questionnaire brief. Even if the instruments were developed in the Flemish case, they are generic concepts representing the NPM modernization of local government, applied in various European countries (Hood 1991, 1995). Gruening (2001) and Diefenbach (2009), both critical judges of NPM, consider them as basic assumptions, core elements and undisputed characteristics of NPM. Three of the five elements relate to financial, more internally oriented accounting tools because financial management is considered as the technical lifeblood of NPM. Without 'financial' management reforms, NPM would be far less significant (Guthrie et al.1998).

#### **1. Budget ownership**

Devolvement, decentralization or delegation of budgets is a key item of New Public Financial Management (Guthrie et al. 1998). Budget ownership is an expression of visible hands-on management and contract management bringing more discretionary power to management and a clear assignment of responsibilities to civil servants (Hood 1991, 1995). It is also a manifestation of the separation of politics and administration, enhancing civil servants' freedom to manage. It symbolizes internal autonomization

(Gruening 2001). According to Diefenbach (2009) empowerment and subsidiarity of staff are expected to develop businesslike, entrepreneurial attitudes. Finally, it could also speed up decision-making processes (Diefenbach 2009).

## **2. Management control and policy cycle**

New management control and policy cycles represents improved financial reporting and management systems based on private sector accounting norms (Hood 1991, 1995, Guthrie et al. 1998, Gruening 2001). It involves the promotion of accrual based financial statements and relies on professional accounting standards (Guthrie et al. 1998). The Flemish version on this initiative, 'BBC' integrates both financial and management accounting systems. It links the budget to the reporting of results in financial and non-financial terms. This initiative also symbolizes a shift in the focus of management systems and management effort from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes (Pollitt 2002).

## **3. Internal control**

The third principle expresses the creation of internal and external public sector audits (Hood 1991, 1995, Guthrie et al. 1998, Pollitt 2002). In order to hold politicians and managers accountable for performance and results, one needs adequate internal control systems to monitor the activities and to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivered services (Guthrie et al. 1998, Gruening 2001). Stress on results rather than procedures, clear statements of goals and a 'hard look' at objectives form the basic assumptions of these new internal control systems.

The fourth and fifth components refer to more general managerial, externally oriented principles.

## **4. Municipal management team**

The municipal management team represents the establishment of a management culture with stress on private sector styles and management practice (Hood 1991, 1995, Diefenbach 2009). Management is considered as a separate and distinct organizational function, creating new managerial posts (Diefenbach 2009). It follows the commercially minded, market oriented management practice where managers receive the freedom to manage (Guthrie et al. 1998, Gruening 2001).

## **5. Autonomization**

The fifth principle points at a preference for more specialized, 'lean', 'flat' and autonomous organizational forms rather than large, multi-purpose, hierarchical bureaucracies (Pollitt 2002). Autonomization typifies the creation of separate quasi autonomous units around products or service delivery. It symbolizes the shift to disaggregation of units in the public sector, promoting decentralization (Gruening 2001, Diefenbach 2009, Hood 1991, 1995). Decentralization is supposed to lessen hierarchy generating more flexible structures and faster decision-making (Gruening 2001).

<b>Results and discussion</b>
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In table 2 in the appendix, we present details of party leaders' responses for each of the five survey items under study. The questions are formulated as follows: *"to what extent are you acquainted with the principle of (e.g.) budget ownership in cities and municipalities?"*. Responses fall into 5 categories (1= very little acquainted, 2 = little acquainted, 3 = neutral, nor little nor well acquainted, 4= well acquainted, 5= very well acquainted). Cronbach's Alpha's value (0,77) demonstrates that the five elements comprise together a good construct, NPM acquaintanceship. Scores between political parties are not significantly different (Anova, F 0.73, p. 0,66).

On average party leaders evaluate their NPM acquaintanceship as 'nor good nor bad' (value 3), although the five different concepts are assessed differently. Party leaders indicate to be more familiar with the external and more general management principles, but less with the rather internal financial management instruments. Only the difference between autonomization and management team is not statistically significant (T test: 0,4, p. 0,68). These ratings are somewhat more pessimistic than the first preliminary evaluation of the Flemish LGA by Olislagers et al. (2009) where 62% of the councilors said to attach 'a lot' and 'very much' importance to the report by the municipal secretary about internal control; the same holds for budget ownership with 56% for 'a lot' and 'very much' importance. However, the preliminary evaluation by Olislagers et al. (2009) did not address party leaders in particular.

#### Discussion: The impact of individual characteristics

We perform the following regression model (superscripts for dummies dropped for convenience):

$$Y_{\text{score\_NPM\_acquaintanceship}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{exp} + \beta_2 \text{role} + \beta_3 \text{fin.expert} + \beta_4 \text{mandates} + \beta_5 \text{ideology} + \beta_6 \text{gender} + \beta_7 \text{edu} + \beta_8 \text{pop} + \beta_9 \text{councilors} + \beta_{10} \text{prof} + \beta_{11} \text{age} + \varepsilon$$

Table 2: regression results

Full model with control variables		Restricted model ( <i>control variables omitted</i> )	
(Constant)	10,487***	(Constant)	12,797***
	(4,04)		(15,52)
<b>Experience</b>	0,053*	<b>Experience</b>	0,05**
	(1,78)		(1,97)
<b>Formal political role</b>	0,896**	<b>Formal political role</b>	0,852**
	(2,05)		(1,99)
<b>Ideology</b>	0,08	<b>Ideology</b>	0,07
	(0,75)		(0,67)
<b>Financial expertise</b>	1,101**	<b>Financial expertise</b>	1,133***
	(2,45)		(2,64)
<b>Combination pol. mandates</b>	1,665**	<b>Combination pol. mandates</b>	1,523**
	(2,31)		(2,17)
<b>Economic education</b>	0,05	N= 296	
	(0,10)	R <sup>2</sup> 0,072	Adj. R <sup>2</sup> 0,056
<b>Gender</b>	-0,21	<b>Anova ( F 4,52 , p. 0,000)</b>	

	(-0,40)		
<b>Profession</b>	-0,44	<b>Maximum VIF: 1,05</b>	
	(-0,87)	Pearson Correlations: max. 0.19 (p. 0.00)	
<b>Age</b>	-0,01		
	(-0,34)		
<b>size (population)</b>	0,00		
	(-1,14)		
<b>Size (number councilors)</b>	0,15		
	(1,26)		
N= 296			
R <sup>2</sup> 0,081	Adj.R <sup>2</sup> 0,045		
<b>Anova( F 2,28, p. 0,01)</b>			
<b>Maximum VIF: 8,00</b>			
<b>T values OLS in parentheses * 10%, **5% , ***1% significance</b> Pearson Correlations: max. 0.26 (p. 0.00) Pearson Correlation between population & number councilors 0.9 (p. 0.000 ) and age & experience 0.4( p. 0.000), however control variables			

We start our discussion with the independent variables to determine the effect of the individual characteristics under study. Our data reveal a positive influence of experience on party leaders' NPM acquaintanceship (7% significance level). Long tenured party leaders are better acquainted with NPM concepts. This confirms the assumption that experience facilitates assimilation of new management principles. Political experience is not affected by the control variable age (Askim 2009).

Formal political position has a determinative effect on party leaders' acquaintanceship with NPM. Majority leaders are significantly better acquainted with applied NPM concepts in Flemish municipal councils than opposition leaders. Our findings indirectly support Askim's (2009) thesis that frontbench (defined as executive) politicians use the NPM driven performance information more than backbenchers. In our setting this means that due to their closeness with the better informed executive politicians, party leaders of the majority have a better knowledge of NPM principles. This reflects the supremacy of the executive college members on the councilors surrounding them (Reynaert et al. 2010). Due to their connections with the executive, they are more involved with the NPM idea of efficient and effective service delivery in the municipality. Their enhanced interest in instruments and tools for modern local management also stems from their focus on policy making (Reynaert et al. 2010).

The impact of ideology was already under debate in early research (Hood 1995) and is not confirmed by our statistical testing.

The financial expertise assumption is accepted. Party leaders using financial information for professional reasons are better positioned to be more acquainted with businesslike concepts and tools. Having some kind of financial expertise facilitates the acceptance of managerial instruments and tools. However, we should show some cautiousness in interpreting the results, the questionnaire asked about

the use of any type of financial information which clearly broadens our definition of financial expertise. There was no focus on accounting or financial management tools.

Party leaders combining a local mandate with political functions at higher levels are better acquainted with businesslike concepts and tools used in Flemish municipalities. They pick up knowledge and information from their work in other political assemblies. To conclude the analysis, none of the control variables, education, gender, profession or size has any significant effect. This implies that we can limit the analysis to the independent variables under study.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Following the institutional (March & Olson 1984, 2005) individual approach when studying political outcomes of modernization reforms, this article focuses particularly on party leaders in local councils as an undervalued but very relevant group of non- executive politicians. Because political involvement is considered crucial for successfully reforming local governments, reformers have attempted to sensitize local politicians for the NPM principles of rational and efficient management.

Our results point at a very moderate acquaintanceship with NPM principles. This is in line with findings of case study research and studies about use of specific NPM related instruments (ter Bogt 2004, Tiili 2007). The more managerial external principles are significantly more familiar, probably due to their visibility and comprehensibility. These results could also indicate that it takes time for party leaders to become acquainted with new concepts. Maybe only after a long period of exposure their importance and usefulness becomes evident. However, the supposition of a self-regulating effect over time is not very plausible. In a longitudinal analysis concerning the implementation of NPM attributed accounting reforms in municipalities Christiaens & Van Peteghem (2007) show that there is no evidence of a significant learning factor over time. After almost five years of experience most of the same implementation problems still occur (Christiaens & Van Peteghem 2007).

The key issue remains if party leaders really have the intrinsic incentive to get acquainted with NPM principles (Tiili 2007). Can the NPM translation in politicians' mindset actually be achieved in a pure form? The contradiction between the NPM and the political logic looks irreconcilable. NPM strongly advocates the definition of goals, which explains why they do not easily fit in politics: politics does not start from goals but from tangible issues (Tiili 2007). Most fundamentally, NPM reforms are not just a matter of instruments and tools. They involve values and changing the worldviews of people. This is very difficult to achieve (Gruening 2001). Moreover, quite often reforms lead to additional workload and there is evidence of rising levels of stress because of increasingly challenging working conditions (Gruening 2001). To get acquainted with NPM might be quite demanding for the already overloaded party leaders. Indeed, one could wonder if this limited acquaintanceship is problematic after all. As Pollitt (2002) suggests, limited affinity with NPM principles could also enable party leaders to cope with conflicting and ambiguous demands and to pursue political goals.

This paper contributes to the evaluation of NPM reforms by refining the skepticism about politicians' adoption of NPM principles. Individual factors cause some party leaders to get more acquainted with NPM principles than others. This is relevant not only for theoretical reasons but also for the future of NPM reforms in local government. Sensitizing initiatives could be more differentiated as additional efforts seem necessary to make some groups of councilors such as opposition and less experienced members more susceptible to the modernization principles in municipalities. However, our results also confirm that the balance of power in the councils is of overriding importance. Powerful politicians are better acquainted with NPM, they are the ones combining mandates at higher political levels or belonging to the majority. This is yet another demonstration of the dominance of the executive over the council members. Knowledge strengthens power and professional and political experience generate a learning for some party leaders working with financial information or combining mandates.

The ideological thesis can be condemned once and for all. There is clearly no single accepted explanation why NPM ideas should coalesced or caught on in a certain political context (Hood 1995, Guthrie et al. 1998). It looks more as a rather general process of policy diffusion than a process in which policies vary with party incumbency (Hood 1995). Due to the predominance of coalition agreements in most Flemish municipalities (Goeminne et al. 2008) the distinction between left and right is probably less clear-cut and certainly of minor relevance.

Finally, results should always be interpreted with the appropriate reservation. This study is based on the self reported ratings of a specific group councilors. The model fit of the statistical analysis is indeed somewhat modest. Our analysis explains some variance in party leaders' acquaintanceship with NPM, but obviously much remains to be explicated. However, this could rather be considered a limitation than a shortcoming of this study. Our primary aim was to assess the impact of some controversial individual characteristics. The relatively low  $R^2$  could be attributed to the limited variance in the dependent variable (values between 5 and 25 ), but it shows that there are other factors affecting their acquaintanceship with NPM. We need to further improve our understanding of the processes that translate institutional NPM reform into political behavior. Detailed patterns of politicians' adoption processes still remain uncovered. Future research could certainly attempt to reveal their assimilation process more in detail. Besides, there are still a number of unanswered questions about the different factors that impinge upon party leaders under different conditions. Municipal councils operate within a highly rational model of managerial behavior, more research could be done on organization-level factors and social trends as suggested by the new institutional literature (March & Olson 2005).



# APPENDIX

**Table 1:**

Variables in the model: descriptive statistics					
<b>Dependent variable: Acquaintanceship_score</b>		<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
<b>N=</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15,01</b>	<b>3,78</b>
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>N = 363</b>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
<i>exp</i>		0,1	41	12,00	8,13
<i>role</i>	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
	opposition	202	55,5%		
	majority	161	44,2%		
	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
<i>fin.expert</i>	no	147	40,5%		
	yes	216	59,5%		
	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
<i>mandates</i>	none	326	89,6%		
	European parliament	1	0,3%		
	federal parliament	4	1,1%		
	senate	3	0,8%		
	Flemish parliament	3	0,8%		
	province	11	3,0%		
	local executive mandate	15	4,1%		
	<b>N= 319</b>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
<i>ideology</i>		2,4	9,19	5,76	2,06
<b>Control variables:</b>	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
<i>gender</i>	male	274	75,3%		
	female	89	24,5%		
	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
<i>edu</i>	no economic education	280	76,9%		
	economic education	83	22,8%		
		<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
<i>pop</i>	<b>N= 363</b>	2133	116741	19967,06	15403,12
<i>councilors</i>	<b>N= 363</b>	11	47	24,94	5,17
	<b>N= 363</b>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
<i>prof</i>	none	71	19,5%		
	Self-employed	76	20,9%		
	worker/labourer	13	3,6%		
	office worker/executive	108	29,7%		
	public servant/teacher	65	17,9%		
	full time politician	15	4,1%		
	party-cabinets employee	15	4,1%		

	N=	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>age</b>	363	27	78	50,76	10,97

**Table 2: The dependent variable NPM acquaintanceship score**

Components of the NPM acquaintanceship score			
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>TOTAL acquaintanceship_score</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>15,01</b>	<b>3,76</b>
<b>MEAN acquaintanceship_score</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0,76</b>
<b>Management team</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>3,28</b>	<b>1,03</b>
<i>Familiarity with working of management team in municipality</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
	very little	18	4,9%
	neutral, not little, not much	101	27,7%
	much	142	39,0%
	very much	32	8,8%
	Total	363	99,7%
<b>Internal control system</b>	<b>347</b>	<b>2,82</b>	<b>1,05</b>
<i>Familiarity with functioning of internal control system in municipality</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
	very little	35	9,6%
	neutral, not little, not much	105	28,8%
	much	86	23,6%
	very much	14	3,8%
	Total	347	95,3%
	I don't know	16	4,4%
<b>Management control (BBC in Dutch)</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>2,66</b>	<b>1,02</b>
<i>Familiarity with principles of new management control system for municipalities</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
	very little	51	14,0%
	little	106	29,1%
	much	72	19,8%
	very much	8	2,2%
	Total	357	98,1%
	I don't know	6	1,6%
<b>Budget ownership</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>2,98</b>	<b>1,03</b>
<i>Familiarity with principle of budget ownership in municipalities</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
	very little	23	6,3%
	neutral, not much not little	109	29,9%
	much	99	27,2%
	very much	21	5,8%
	Total	354	97,3%
	I don't know	9	2,5%

<b>Autonomization</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>3,25</b>	<b>1,06</b>
<i>Familiarity with concept of autonomization of activities and services in municipalities</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
	very little	19	5,2%
	little	70	19,2%
	neutral, not little not much	103	28,3%
	much	126	34,6%
	veru much	36	9,9%
	Total	354	97,3%
	I don't know	9	2,5%

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