

VU Research Portal

The structure of citizen opposition

de Brauw, C.C.

2014

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

de Brauw, C. C. (2014). *The structure of citizen opposition: Empirical explorations of societal discourses in the field of agricultural biotechnology, animal governance and land-use-policies*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Nikki Vermeulen, Ridderprint B.V.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Summary

This thesis addresses the subject of citizen-opposition to decisions of a governmental authority. Citizens can oppose all sorts of decisions made by their (democratically elected) government bodies. Land-use planning is one of the policy-terrains in which virtually every decision seems to lead to citizen opposition, but examples on other subjects are also abundant. Citizens can use different means to express their discontent, such as demonstrations, petitions or legal procedures and can target national policies or local initiatives. This thesis aims to deepen the understanding of how these citizens' protests come into being and how these processes develop.

The way in which citizen responses to (policy) decisions are perceived, depends on the role they are considered to have in (policy) decision-making. This role and the relationship between citizens and their government are not straightforward. Inclusive forms of policymaking (governance) are becoming more and more popular. Important reasons for this popularity are that the problems policymakers have to deal with are becoming increasingly complex and scientific knowledge can no longer provide certainty. Against this background, it has been argued that deliberative forms of policymaking – in which policy is considered a 'learning strategy' - are the only feasible strategy. Citizen involvement is considered necessary, not only for the legitimacy of the policy, but also to structure the problem and the interests involved. Whereas their participation is thus increasingly encouraged in (interactive) policymaking, the influence that citizens seek through active opposition is criticized. Opposition to local initiatives, commonly referred to 'Not-In-My-BackYard' (Nimby) protests, are generally perceived as a negative phenomenon. Angry citizens are perceived as 'bad' citizens, who place their own interest above that of others or society at large. In this thesis, we studied whether citizen opposition responses contain elements that can enhance deliberative governance.

In the course of four projects, performed at the Athena Institute, we focussed on different aspects of citizen opposition to governmental decision making or policies. This thesis presents the findings of these projects. It takes a constructive perspective on citizen opposition, viewing it as a phenomenon that can provide a positive contribution to policymaking.

The objective of this thesis is twofold:

- 1) To gain deeper a understanding of citizen opposition responses and the mechanisms that drive them and
- 2) To propose a theoretical model that can help foresee issues that are likely to become the object of citizen opposition and respond in ways that reinforce the positive aspects of the phenomenon.

The main question of this thesis is:

What characteristic mechanisms can be distinguished in citizen opposition and how can these insights help policymakers to foresee such responses and respond to them in a way that minimizes the negative effects of a conflict and enhances the process of policymaking through genuine deliberation?

The **first chapter**, the introduction, gives a theoretical background on the process of policymaking and the developments that have taken place in Dutch society that influence the role citizens have in the policy-making process. It also contains the demarcations of the thesis and clarifies some of the assumptions and perspectives chosen. As one of these perspectives, we look at citizen opposition responses as a *process* that develops over time and under the influence of different driving factors. We follow Hajer (2003a) and Verhoeven (2009) who framed citizen opposition as a process of different *stages*, and we wonder how citizens move from one stage to another.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part (chapters 2 and 3) focuses on theoretical aspects of citizen opposition and the development of models to analyse different forms that it can take. The second part (chapters 4 and 5) contains a detailed discussion of the structure of citizen opposition and presents the results of empirical studies on the role of (non)-content related factors. The third part of the thesis (chapters 6 and 7) is dedicated to methods for foreseeing societal conflict. Chapter 6 presents (the development of) a model to predict future issues of citizen opposition or societal debate as a means to improve constructive deliberation. Chapter 7 shows the results of one of the first experiments performed with the model.

In order to gain insights into the variety of citizen opposition responses and the mechanism that fuel such responses, a literature study was done on one of the most well known forms of citizen opposition to local initiatives, the Not in My BackYard (hereafter: Nimby) response. **Chapter 2** presents the results of this literature study and answers the question: *What types of responses can be identified in the Nimby-literature and what factors and mechanisms are found to be influential for such responses?* Nimby literature was chosen because it reflects a type of citizen opposition that is common, well documented and incorporates most vividly the uneasy societal perspective that exists on citizen opposition. The aim of the literature study was to understand what we are really talking about when speaking of citizen opposition and to develop a theoretical model that would allow for systematic research on not only Nimby responses, but on citizen opposition in general.

First, we deduced from the literature that it contains no clear consensus on what type of opposition the acronym Nimby stands for. Authors seem to disagree on several aspects of the phenomenon, making it difficult to do structured research on this form of citizen opposition. To encourage a more constructive approach to Nimby and a more academic use of the concept, we suggested a working definition of Nimby. In addition, we formulated a quadrant model, in which different citizen responses

(accept – oppose) are set out against the distance to proposed developments (nearby – far away). This model illustrates the dynamic character of the Nimby position: the combination of acceptance of a development when it takes place far away and rejection of the same development when it is planned nearby. We also designed a local response model, in which different citizen-reactions to a development are presented as a process of four stages: (1) a general attitude or feeling (= implicit position) towards a facility or development; (2) a trigger event; (3) reflection on the position towards the specific facility in the community; (4) the expression of a positive or negative position by overt (opposition) behaviour. The central perspective adopted in the local response model is that of a *dilemma*; the re-evaluation, made in stage 3, is caused by a dilemma between different interests at different levels. In the realm of ethics, a dilemma is described as a conflict between two legitimate ‘goods’. In this case, the dilemma exists between the general public good (democratic decisions, betterment of society or the environment) versus one’s own good (privacy, acquired privileges, quality of life and the right to protect one’s own interests). In other words, Nimby refers to a dilemma between an individual (‘me’) - and a collective (‘we’) perspective on advantages and disadvantages in the broadest sense. The final part of chapter 2 addresses factors that influence the ‘me’ and ‘us’ perspective of the dilemma and thereby enhance or reduce opposition.

We applied these models in the first empirical study, that focused on the (possible) reaction of the inhabitants of Dutch rural communities to commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops (GM crops) in their vicinity. **Chapter 3** presents the findings of this case study, for which we formulated a second sub-question: *What position do rural communities in the Netherlands take with regard to the potential cultivation of GM crops, how do these responses differ from the national debate and can factors be identified that help explain these differences?* This case study was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality and the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment jointly. In view of the fact that the debate on genetic modification (GM) is known to be persistent and polarized, the ministries felt a need for more insight into the position of non-farming inhabitants of rural communities (‘the neighbours’) in this debate. When the European Union allowed the commercial cultivation of several GM crops, it was expected that Dutch farmers would apply the technology. This gave relevance to the debate on the (dis)advantages of the technology as seen by those directly confronted with this cultivation: the inhabitants of rural communities.

15 focus-groups were held to debate on this technology with citizens of four rural communities. Communities were selected in which test-field with GM crops had been situated. Citizens were invited by way of an open invitation and were uninformed about the technology they would discuss prior to the focus group. With the exception of one community, two sessions were held with each group of citizens. The first session consisted of an open discussion on any relevant and important developments in the community as seen by the participants. The second session was completely dedicated to GM crop cultivation. The arguments used by citizens in both of these meetings were compared with known ‘me’ and ‘we’ arguments from the national debate on the technology.

GM was found to be of no special importance in most communities. The topic of GM was mentioned spontaneously in only one community. In all other groups, GM was not mentioned and – when introduced - given very little priority compared to other issues. Although test-fields had been located in all of the communities, most citizens were unaware and unfamiliar with the technology. When pushed to discuss the idea, all groups put forward positive and negative arguments and most of these arguments resembled the arguments in the general ‘we’ discussion. None of the communities took a Nimby position towards GM crops. Groups who did oppose the cultivation of GM crops in their community seemed to disagree with the technology in general, not its local application as is the case with a ‘Not in any backyard’ (Niaby) position. Interestingly, we found that some citizens used an argumentation resembling a ‘reverse Nimby’: acceptance of the application nearby, but no specific interest, or a negative perception of the technology in general. These citizens stated that they would rather have the application of the technology take place within their community than somewhere else, as they could then have some influence on the way it was done.

Although participants were explicitly asked to discuss the local *cultivation* of GM crops, many of the arguments in all of the discussions revolved around the introduction of GM products in the *food* chain, i.e. GM foods and the consequences for human health. In fact, the objection to the cultivation of GM crops often seemed to be based on a dislike of GM foods.

As for relevant factors that explain the differences in the national and local debates, we found support for the idea that social cohesion in rural communities seems to diminish the chance of active local protest against GM cultivation of crops. Social cohesion makes it more difficult to express opposition behaviour: standing up against the development implies confronting members of the community. Another factor that diminishes the incentive to start local opposition seems to be procedural: inhabitants see little point in opposing cultivation in their own community, when this has no effect on farmers in neighbouring communities. Local opposition therefore comes down to a symbolic act: voicing an opinion more than blocking the development.

From the literature analysis performed in chapter 2, two factors were identified as important for citizen opposition responses: *information* on the projected policy, plan or project and the *decision-making process* through which a decision is made. These two factors were studied in chapters 4 and 5. **Chapter 4** addresses *sub-question 3*, which is: *How do citizens use information in their decision to accept or oppose the local cultivation of GM crops, and which factors can be identified that explain the decision-making?*

The role of information was investigated in the GM-project. Traditionally, information and knowledge are considered to increase the acceptance of a policy or development. Rational decision-making theories are based on the idea that information increases the understanding of a decision and thereby its acceptance. We combined Rogers’ (2003) model on innovation decision making with the concepts of ‘uncertain risk’ (van Asselt & Vos, 2008) and ‘information haze’ (Futrell, 2003) and hypothesised that decision-making processes in situations where available information is contradictory or incomplete will

differ from rational decision-making. The case of GM-crops provides a good example of an innovation that is associated with unknown risks and contradictory information. The data for this project were collected in a simulation that was carried out in the second round of focus groups of the GM-project. Participants were provided with information on GM-crop cultivation and were each asked to highlight the arguments that they considered relevant. Subsequently, participants had to decide unanimously on the question whether their community should become a GM-free zone.

Both the arguments highlighted in the texts and the arguments used in the debates were analysed. We concluded that citizens make little use of the information they have been provided with in formulating arguments for the group discussion. In all groups 'text arguments' were outnumbered by arguments from 'other sources'. Moreover, we noted that participants in all groups followed their emotional commitments, feelings, values and worldviews, instead of the information provided. We concluded that in a situation characterised by a multitude of contradictory arguments, uncertainties and the absence of a specific trustworthy source, citizens use their values as a compass to determine their perspective (and make a decision) on a new technology. Decision-making processes do not start with a blank sheet but are influenced by every individual's inherent value orientations. Early in a discussion, participants were already expressing emotional commitments reflecting these values. When they were asked to reflect on the simulation, values were also referred to as an explanation for the decision. These values were not only a dominant factor in the decision-making, they were also found to be resistant to arguments contradicting the specific worldview. Moreover, participating citizens agreed that they could not convince each other at the level of value-positions, leading many groups to decide by a majority of vote (instead of the unanimity we had asked for).

Chapter 5 zooms in on citizen participation in the policy-making process. Many studies included in the literature review of chapter 2 mentioned this factor as important for the development of citizen opposition. Chapter five presents the results of a case study on the Dutch rules for citizen participation in land-use decision-making. The sub-question formulated for that case-study was: *how do the (legal) possibilities for participation in policy decision-making and the way these are actually put into practice affect the response of citizens to the decisions that are reached and what recommendations can be made to improve policy-decision making in the proposed new law on spatial planning?*

The Dutch regulation on land-use decision-making was analysed and compared with criteria for 'successful' citizen participation that we distilled from social science literature. By supplementing the basic insights on the importance of citizen participation presented in the literature study in chapter 2 (Nimby literature) with specific social science studies on citizen participation, we came to three criteria for 'successful' citizen participation. First of all, authorities should take the procedure seriously: all participants should be clear on the objective of the participation and the role that citizens will have in it. Secondly, the authorities should take the actual input seriously: the involvement of citizens should start in an early stage and continue throughout the process. And finally, authorities should be serious about the role citizens play in decision making: a decision making procedure should be open to all

who feel the need to participate (inclusive) and some form of transition of power to citizens needs to take place.

A legal perspective was then taken, to analyse the rights and duties that citizens in the Netherlands currently have in governmental decision-making on land-use planning. From this analysis we concluded that – although several reforms have taken place to improve the decision-making procedure - inclusive, timely and influential citizen participation is currently not guaranteed. Most importantly, the current regulation of citizen participation excludes people who might reasonably want to be involved and it lacks some form of transition of power to participating citizens. It is up to the authorities to decide who is allowed to be involved in the procedure and what citizens may give an opinion on.

Focus groups with experienced citizens supplemented these insights with information on the way these laws were applied in their case. These group-interviews revealed that information meetings (during which the authorities presented a plan or project) often work as a trigger for opposition and at the same time as an encouragement for attending citizens to form an opinion on the subject at hand. Again, we found that citizens base that ‘opinion’ on their individual value-frame or worldview. The interviews also showed us that the concept of ‘transition of power’ need not be taken literally. Citizens are not necessarily striving for the actual power to decide. The power transfer that they want is far more the ability to influence the way a decision is reached and the ability to contribute to that process in terms of requesting certain aspects or consequences to be investigated or taken into account.

Based on these findings and the analysis of the draft spatial planning act, we welcome the main change that is suggested in that law, i.e. expanding the application of an exploratory procedure to cover a wider range of decisions. The advantage of such an extended preparation phase is the inclusion of wider range of interests, including values, at an early stage of participation. Moreover, based on the idea that citizens have to be activated to participate in the process, we see the preparation phase as an important tool for early active engagement of citizens and as a stimulus for them to form an opinion. Activating citizens, without giving the impression that the decision has already been taken, requires a balance between raising a clearly defined issue and remaining flexible about possible approaches and solutions to that issue. In order to maximize the effect of an exploration phase, we recommend that it be developed further, for example by prescribing strictly separated information - and consultation meetings. That way, citizens can take the time to re-evaluate their position and form an idea on a plan, before they are asked for their opinion. Finally, in order to stimulate *power transfer*, we recommend to that an obligation for administrative bodies be added to the spatial planning act, to report to the citizens (one and all) how the input of citizens is handled and how it is weighed.

The third part of the thesis (chapters 6 and 7) presents the theoretical and explorative effort that was made to develop a systematic method to anticipate issues that are likely to become the subject of societal controversy or citizen opposition. In the course of two case-studies, both focusing on the relationship between animals and humans, we developed a method to foresee issues of future societal discourse. The development of this model is presented in **chapter 6**. **Chapter 7** describes the

first empirical attempts to anticipate societal discourses in the field of animal governance. For this part of the research, the following sub-questions were formulated:

Sub-question 5: On the question of animal testing: what theory-based research model can be proposed to foresee potential public controversies and provide an instrument to deal with these responses in a constructive way?

Sub-question 6: Making use of the model, what issues on the interaction between humans and animals can be predicted to become topics of future public controversies?

The model that was developed and applied in these final projects was based on the following assumptions: 1) although the future is uncertain, some developments in current society will have long term effects and thus contain predictive power and 2) citizen perceptions are energised by (clashing) values and worldviews, that can change over time. In order to foresee future issues of societal debate, insights are not only needed on the developments that are likely to take place in a specific policy domain or practice, but also on the way society perceives those developments. The model we developed was aimed to move beyond expert opinions or scenarios. Following Kingdon's (1995) stream-model, we assume that the future consists of a combination of developments at different levels in society. We used Geels' (2002) multi-level perspective to distil three levels of development: the landscape, regime and agora level. 'Landscape' refers to slow-moving changes in society, such as environmental and demographic developments that influence society at large structurally. 'Regime' refers to the dominant culture (way of thinking), structure (way of organising) and practice (way of doing) within a specific sector of society (e.g. academia, industry, government). In the agora level, we aimed to include the values and worldviews that are dominant in society. We framed these values as dilemmas, that can be classified into 'value-pairs' that consist of a value and counter-value. Working with these pairs of countervailing values helps to keep in mind that a currently dominant value can determine how society feels about an issue and can give an insight into what developments society is likely to oppose. Moreover, as values are likely to shift over time, working with value-pairs provides a way to monitor the direction these shifts will take. Relevant value-pairs were formulated with the aid of futurologists, trend-watchers, sociologists and other societal experts, who identified dominant trends in society. Together with the developments at regime- and landscape level, these value-pairs form the building blocks of the 'future discourse model'.

In the final project, we were able to test the future discourse model empirically and formulate likely issues of future discourses on animal governance. In the Netherlands, animal issues are frequently subject of social controversy, both in political debates and amongst citizens. Examples include the outbreaks of animal diseases, mass culling, religious slaughtering and starving 'wild' animals in nature parks. In a project commissioned in 2011 by the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, we investigated the shifting perceptions to contribute to the drafting of more adequate policies and legislation. A survey was conducted amongst a representative group of Dutch citizens to measure the acceptability of different animal practices and value-orientations, making use of case-appropriate value-pairs. In

addition, systematic predictions were made of future hot topics of societal debate on animal issues. We found that, anno 2011, Dutch citizens value animals mostly for relational aspects. Future societal debates are most likely to develop where animal-human interactions conflict with the value of animals as subjects, e.g. the governance of mass diseases, biodiversity and animal transportation and in conflicts between animal welfare standards and WTO regulations. We recommend that – more than is presently the case - dominant values in society be taken into account when formulating policies and regulations.

This thesis ends with some conclusions on the main question, some reflections on the meaning of the findings for governance as well as recommendations for further research in **chapter 8**. We conclude that two elements re-occurred in most of the case-studies. These are the importance of a trigger as the start for the (re-)evaluation of a position and the role that values and worldviews play in coming to a position. The combined results of the projects presented in this thesis led to a number of recommendations for deliberative governance.

First of all, our research indicates that information has a different effect for citizens in different stages of formation of a response position. The availability of reliable information seems most important for citizens who are aware and interested and in the process of position reflection (stage 3). We recommend governments to be aware of these differences in their communication with citizens and to adapt information to the way citizens go about looking for information. Instead of general information campaigns, that are likely to reach many citizens in stages 1 and 4, information might better correspond with citizens in stage 3 when it is easily found and provides an overview of the aspects involved in the decision.

In addition to informing citizens on (the benefits and disadvantages of different alternatives to) a plan or development, we found that information can also function as a trigger. This role of information is vital if citizens are to be able to make an informed contribution to the discussion on a development or plan. In order to improve deliberative governance, especially on topics with which citizens have had little experience, such as a new technology for example, we recommend governments to make use of this function of information to stimulate position reflection on a specific project or plan.

Secondly, considering our findings on the importance of values as driving forces in the development of opposition responses, we recommend that policymakers make a real effort to understand the driving values and the resulting convictions held by citizens that are affected by the decision and to address these fairly. Even if the arguments that citizens present to oppose a development are factually inaccurate, we strongly recommend that policymakers refrain from using this as a reason to reject the concerns. Instead, we recommend policymakers to confer with these citizens to make the underlying values explicit and relate them, whenever possible, to a value-pair. Governance should thus include an opening for value-related deliberation and arguments. Implementing this method will require training policy-makers, administrations, in short all those who will be involved in the debate with citizens over their concerns, in recognising, analysing, addressing and acknowledging values. In accordance with

the dilemma framing we used, we also suggest that effective and legitimate governance may benefit by moving away from a rationality–emotionality debate and towards acknowledging that different positions in a (value) dilemma can result in a different point of view on the same issue. When these different positions are no longer regarded as right or wrong, but as different ways to deal with a dilemma, opposing parties may have a new approach to each other, as well as to the issue at stake.

Besides establishing that values play an important role in position formulation, we also found that citizen-positions are dynamic. A trigger can give rise to reflection and re-evaluation of a position. Different contexts can also lead to adjusted positions on one and the same issue. Therefore, as a third recommendation, we suggest that governments should not treat citizens as if they are (and will remain) fixed in one way of thinking. This implies that citizens' positions should be investigated not only through one time consultation, but through repeated consultation over time. Moreover, we recommended governments to pay attention to the transitions that take place in citizens positions, when the context of the debate on an issue changes. The factors that play a role in these transitions provide insights into the factors that will dominate that debate and can thereby help foreseeing future conflicts.

Acknowledging that positions are dynamic has the added benefit that it provides a strategy out of conflict. Solving a conflict implies that one or both parties move their position towards the other (manoeuvre). Governments that aim at solving existing clashes are well advised to keep room for position-movement. Moreover, conditions will have to be provided under which manoeuvre can take place. Deliberative settings that provide the possibility to debate and reflect on positions can help to make the essential elements of the positions explicit. Insights into these essential elements also give insights into the space remaining for manoeuvre.

The further recommendation concerns the role that a trigger has in the process through which citizens develop a position on a specific issue. The fact that a trigger leads citizens to re-evaluation and that this re-evaluation is important for their understanding of the dilemma at stake, leads me to recommend that a period of time be reserved in the decision-making procedure for that specific purpose. This reflection-phase should – in our view - be added between the moment that citizens become aware of a situation (after a trigger) and the moment in which they are included in deliberation on that issue.

The final recommendation for deliberative governance focuses on the active creation of a trigger. Although this thesis stresses the importance of triggers for citizen opposition responses, we realize at the same time that it is difficult to foresee concrete triggers. However, in the case study on animal issues policies, we did find that the setting in which that research was performed was conducive to an open deliberation in a way that acknowledged the dilemmas in that field. An additional benefit of the open debate on potential issues for the future was that the participating parties seemed to be more aware of the issues at stake at the end of the debate. In most debates, issues were brought up by some participants that others had not (yet) realized or forgotten. Through discussing the issues, these debates functioned as a type of trigger in the sense that participants were stimulated to think actively

about potentially hot issues and the reasons/values underlying them. Increasing the awareness at an early stage, not only by informing but by requesting active deliberation, could potentially be a means to create the effect of a trigger, before one occurs.

This thesis ends with some suggestions for further research. These suggestions include further empirical testing of the models that we developed and in depth research on important factors and mechanism such as the role of triggers and platforms. With regard to triggers, we suggest research on actions or events that can work as such and ways in which citizens can be deliberately triggered over a subject. Looking beyond the scope of this thesis, we suggest that follow-up research could specifically focus on the role of policymakers and project developers/initiators, to find out whether the recommendations made in this thesis are feasible and the circumstances under which genuine deliberative decision-making are beneficial for these parties.