

Sociocracy in a Municipal Council - The New Political Culture in Utrechtse-Heuvelrug (NL)

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1. Introduction

The Dutch municipality of Utrechtse-Heuvelrug (NL) has undergone a remarkable transformation. It all started when five autonomous villages merged into one new municipality in 2006. At the time, the new council was undergoing serious infighting and people's trust in politics was at an all-time low. In 2012 a group of citizens stepped forward and, together with the mayor and the head of the office, advised on a new way of cooperating in the council. The aim was to create a new vibrant political culture within the council itself and to enable citizens to participate in a meaningful way to achieve better results for the whole community. Therefore, the local council implemented and adapted some basic elements of the Sociocratic Circle Organisation Method (SCM) under the name BOB. Ten years and three elections later, these elements are still in use and no longer questioned, as the positive impact on all political activity is evident.

This article describes the four phases of the implementation, the three sociocratic elements and their adaptation to local politics, the citizen participation and the effects of this transformation. It is based on an analysis of the diverse, online accessible protocols, documents and recordings of council meetings (2024) as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with the mayor (2018, 2020 and 2024), the head of office (2023) and five council members from different parties (2024). First results show that the level of trust and

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willingness to cooperate is very high among the elected members of the council. The Council is characterised by respectful interaction and the involvement of all elected representatives, regardless of party strength, leads to a plurality of opinions and widely accepted results. Citizen opinion has not yet been surveyed, but the available data shows greater satisfaction with political decisions, a growing trust in elected representatives and a rising willingness to get involved in politics, as well as an increase in voter turnout since its introduction. This outstanding transformation of a political body with the sociocratic model of decision making has aroused interest in the Netherlands and abroad.

2. Local Politics Transformed by Citizens

[Utrechtse-Heuvelrug](#) (U-H) is a Dutch municipality of 50,000 inhabitants east of Utrecht. It consists of seven villages, with Doorn (pop. 10,000) at the centre, set in rolling, lush green countryside. It is a traditional excursion and holiday destination with large historic estates and a national park. The economy is mainly based on the service sector, the level of education is high and over 90% of the citizens have Dutch citizenship.

Municipal structure in the Netherlands

Gemeenteraad U-H (local council): 29 elected representatives from currently 8 parties (election every four years), council meetings are held twice a week on fixed days to discuss predetermined topics (social issues, transport, etc.). All dates, minutes and documents are available on the official website. Meetings are recorded and broadcasted (up to 200 viewers per meeting).

Griffie (office): is the civil service of the Gemeenteraad (Dualisation of Municipal Administration Act), it is the counterpart to the administration and consists of the Griffier and 4 employees, the Griffier is a civil servant, he is a direct support to the council and can rely on the support of the administration, he advises council and committee members and is the point of contact for residents.

College van burgemeester en wethouders (municipal executive committee): has municipal executive administrative and executive tasks and manages the affairs of the community, it consists of four aldermen (wethouders) who are no members of the council, elected by the local council and responsible for defined areas of responsibility (culture, social issues ...), the mayor and a secretary. The administration with 400 employees is subordinate to the college.

Burgemeester (mayor): is not part of the council, is nominated every 6 years from several candidates by the members of the municipal council and appointed by the Crown (Minister of the Interior), he chairs the municipal council meetings and has the right to vote there.

The municipality was created in 2006 through the fusion of five former autonomous communities. At the same time the state transferred three large blocks of social services to the municipalities. As a result, they are responsible for youth welfare, long-term care and employment support for the disabled (Vermeulen 2015). This required the reorganisation and harmonisation of the polity (structure) politics (processes) and policy (subjects). A general uncertainty caused by this reorganisation accumulated in a heated public debate about the necessity and costs of a new multifunctional town hall. Despite a letter of protest signed by 5,000 citizens and a great deal of public attention for it, the majority of the new local council decided to build the town hall. This led to hardened fronts between politicians, a growing gap between local council decisions and their perception by citizens and the press and mistrust among the population towards the council.

In 2012, at the height of the conflict, the mayor of U-H invited citizens to a Town Hall meeting to discuss solutions to improve the situation. This gave rise to a group of 15 citizens who became the "Bridge Builders" (bruggenbouwers). Supported by experts in public communication and sociocracy, the Bridge Builders first analysed the needs of all stakeholders (citizens, administrative staff, councillors). It quickly became obvious that there were a number of misunderstandings and miscommunications between all participants and that everyone was stuck in existing structures, habits and behavioural patterns (Romme et al 2018).

In 2013, the Bridge Builders proposed a process to the local council to strengthen trust within the council and to regain trust from the citizens. It follows the principles of the Sociocratic Circle organisation Method (SCM) (Boeke, Kees 1945, Endenburg 1992, Strauch et al 2018, 2022), which has proven itself for years as a cross-hierarchical, informed decision-making process in organisations (Romme et al 2018). The three cornerstones of the proposal to transform U-H's politics were the joint legislative programme of all parties, joint agenda setting and the implementation of an adapted form of sociocratic consent decision making in the council under the name of BOB. In order to give the council the opportunity to gain its own experience with the proposed method, the Bridge Builders offered to moderate the meeting to decide on the proposal with the help of an experienced expert from the Sociocratic Centre of the Netherlands (SCN). At the end of this meetings, all members of the council made the joint decision to launch a pilot project based on the recommended approach for the next 10 months (Romme et al 2018).

The aims of this transformation have always been, and still are today, to create a new political culture in the local council with a good cooperation between the elected representatives and to effectively involve citizens in decision-making.

The four phases of political transformation in U-H

1. Bridge Builders' proposal to change local council's political action by adapting three sociocratic elements under the name BOB (2012 and 2013)
2. Implementation of BOB and new formats of citizens' consultation (2013)
3. Adoption by the Mayor and Griffie leading the process with gradual changes and adjustments (2014)
4. Consolidation of BOB with joint legislative programme of all parties and joint agenda setting (since 2014)

3. Three Sociocratic Elements in a Municipal Council

First of all, a sociocratic approach requires a common goal (Strauch 2022). To this end, after the 2014, 2018 and 2022 elections all parties jointly decided on the legislative programme ([Raadsprogramma](#)) and budget for the next four years by consent. The policy is based on the programmes of the parties and their promise to their voters. The election of the four aldermen of the municipal council for the College (office that supports the council) is also decided by consent. This first element is important for all following steps.

The **second** sociocratic element is the process of [informed decision-making by consent](#). In U-H it was adapted under the name BOB. This method consists of the three consecutive steps (Strauch 2022), image-forming (Beeldvorming), opinion-forming (Ordeelsvorming) and decision-making (Besluitvorming). Since 2014, around 50% of the decisions in the local council of U-H have gone through these three steps. The topics are derived from the legislative programme, the common aim. They are introduced to an agenda setting committee by a councillor. Here representatives of all parties decide via consent if, how and when a topic will be on the agenda of one of the different regular council meetings. Official meetings are held twice a week serving different aspects of the common policy and are attended by the relevant councillors. Each agenda for every council meeting is announced on the official website with all available information.

The Three Steps of BOB

The first step of BOB, **picture forming**, involves politicians (elected council and other party members), citizens and administration. Council members invite citizens to gather information on a topic or a proposed resolution from the legislative programme

The meeting is led by alternating members of the council. Moderation is not sociocratic but organised via a list of speakers . Citizens can provide information and express their opinions, politicians are asked to hold their opinion back until the next step. If the chair concludes that the picture forming is complete, the topic moves on to the next step, opinion forming. If there is no convergence of ideas, he or another council member can initiate a new meeting and propose the collection of more information. These specific meetings can take place in the townhall or any place that supports fact finding. Since 2020, the first year of the pandemic, they often take place online. Therefore, more people can be involved as meetings take place in the evenings and U-H being a large, low density municipality. How many citizens take part in the picture forming depends on how much interest the topic generates. If none of them joins, politicians take it as a sign that the relevant documents showed a clear picture and that citizens trust them to progress with the process. After fact finding is completed, usually two weeks pass before the next step, opinion forming amongst political representatives, starts. This leaves enough time to process the information and obtain more if needed.

The second step, **opinion forming**, also takes place as part of the regular municipal council meetings. These meetings are open to the public and anyone can attend. This time only council members have the right to speak, but anyone can attend live or online and follow the whole process. These meetings are chaired by rotating council members and the type of moderation depends on their skills and abilities. The idea is to use rounds to secure everyone his or her fair share and time.

The third step, **decision making**, takes place in one of the official council meetings amongst the 29 elected representatives in presence at the town hall or online. There is at least one week between the opinion being formed and the decision being taken. Most of the decisions are taken by consent, which means there are no objections to the now clear and thoroughly discussed proposal. The mayor, chair of the meeting, asks not for approval or rejection like in the majority decisions but whether any of the councillors has an objection to the proposal. If no one comes forward with an argument that shows that the proposal counteracts the common goal, the decision is made. Thanks to the previous steps this is more of a formal step and at some meetings 20 and more decisions can be made that way in one evening. Typical majority decisions are still taken on bigger, sometimes ideological issues. Because the council decides by consent on most of the issues there is plenty of room for disagreement on the issues that divide the political parties. As with all other Council

meetings, they are open to the public, broadcast live and fully documented on the Council's website.

The three steps of BOB decision-making in the U-H Council

1. **Beeldvorming** (image formation or information meeting)
every week as part of the official, public municipal council meetings, all attendees have the right to speak
2. **Ordeelsvorming** (opinion-forming or order-forming)
every week as part of the official, public municipal council meetings, only members of the municipal council have the right to speak
3. **Besluitvorming** (official resolution or decision meeting)
every fortnight as part of the official, public municipal council meetings, only members of the municipal council have the right to speak

The third sociocratic element is the participation of all stakeholders in decision making. Translated into the political sphere, this means that citizens need to be involved at the right stage of the process, as politicians are responsible for legislation. BOB involves citizens at the level of information and consultation (Arnstein 1969). They can participate in picture forming (see second step of BOB) and influence agenda-setting through some official formats. Other forms of participation are not provided for and do not seem to be missed. Trust in politicians in U-H is high, and when citizens really feel ignored or that too little attention is being paid to an important issue, they contact their politicians or form a new party and stand for election.

4. Strengthening Citizen Participation alongside the BOB

The Bridge Builders, and later the mayor and the head of department, have so far anchored four elements of public consultation in municipal polity: participation in the official picture forming meetings, information evenings, Open Agenda and Open Microphone.

In a [sociocratic organisation](#), all people affected by decisions have the right to be involved in the organisation's decision-making processes (Strauch 2022). This is organised through a double linked circle structure. Every member of the organisation can be part of a circle or team. All circles are interconnected, creating direct participation in one's own circle and indirect participation in all circles (Strauch 2022). In the political context of a representative democracy, it is the elected representatives who decide. Citizens can decide who these representatives are by voting. In BOB, decisions are still made by elected politicians. But in addition to political elections, citizens can at least participate in the decision-making process

at an early stage. They can contribute their information, views and concerns during the formal picture forming process, way before policy decisions are made by the Council. This is where they are heard, as Councillors host these meetings and are required to attend. It is a top-down approach, with politicians (the Agenda Commission) proposing the topic and the proposals to be discussed. Some politicians suggest involving citizens even earlier and giving them a greater say in setting the agenda.

In addition to the key participatory element of the fact-finding phase, citizens can participate in three other more common formats that contribute to agenda setting.

Four formats for citizen participation on the level of information and consultation

1. Contributing information and opinions to the **picture forming process** (BOB) (Information and Consultation)
2. **Information evenings** on specific subjects held at various venues and hosted by the local Council, all participants have the right to speak at these informal meetings (Information)
3. **Open Agenda**, less formal, event-driven, held in different locations and at the invitation of the Council, all participants have the right to speak (Consultation)
4. **Open Microphone** is a timeframe in some council meetings that citizens can use to raise a concern, every week as part of the council meetings, right to speak after registration (Consultation)

Information evenings are ad hoc informal meetings, hosted by the council to inform council members about a topic the council is due to decide about. Citizens also can bring up a topic by submitting it to a council member. Formally, the college decides on the relevance of the topic and how to organise an information evening. Depending on the topic, these evenings are held in the town hall, at another location or online.

The **Open Agenda** format is even less formal. They take place in thematic order and are shorter in duration than the information evenings. The topics are placed on the agenda by a member of the municipal council.

The **Open Microphone** is a format within the official municipal council meetings. It ensures that topics that are not on the agenda or in the legislative programme are also discussed. Once a month, citizens, representatives of organisations or companies can raise an issue that is of concern to them directly and without a filter. They can draw the attention of council and committee members to new or urgent topics and express their opinion on them. The

topic must be registered one day in advance via the website. The municipal council then decides whether the matter is a political issue or will be passed on to the administration.

All these forms of citizen participation belong to the level of information and consultation according to Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969). Although it is not yet participation in the sense of being involved in decision making, it allows people to contribute information and opinions on local policy and helps politicians to get information they do not know but need to make good decisions. The formats are clear, and it is obvious to all involved that this is not co-determination, but a necessary precursor.

5. Outcomes and Impact of BOB in U-H

BOB is a translation of the proven sociocratic decision-making process to the political sphere. In the local council of U-H sociocracy showed its potential to support a new culture of political discourse as it has in organisations for many years now (Strauch 2022, [SOFA](#)). The goal of transforming the political culture at all levels of the municipality and ensuring that politicians have a spirit of trust and cooperation with each other and with citizens, despite differences of opinion, has been achieved.

The new political culture causes a number of favourable outcomes for the target groups (politicians, administration and citizens). On the side of the politicians there is the advantage that the cooperative atmosphere and mutual respect in the council supports the realisation of solutions. By involving citizens in shaping the picture, councillors can see early on if there is strong opposition to an issue and if they missed important information. Since the introduction of the BOB, it has been possible to work without a majority coalition government or opposition and to make more than 50% of all decisions by consent. Sociocracy helps to avoid winning and losing, but to achieve goals together. Decision making became way more efficient, decisions are more fact-based and accepted by all councillors. As all parties are involved in a consensus decision, there is no majority coalition government or opposition in the traditional sense. It allows small parties to bring the issues important to their voters to a positive decision. Power plays between the parties have been reduced to a minimum. This has significantly strengthened the constructive forces, and the parties are now more focused on thematic issues. Although the joint definition of objectives (topics for the legislative period) excludes highly controversial topics, such as wind power, for one legislative period, the topics on which the parties can agree are dealt with swiftly and in consultation with the population. One of the effects of the common goal is that parties are forming around specific issues and, if they get enough votes, can actually push those issues over the next four years.

Adaptation of sociocratic principles to the political sphere – outcomes and impact			
SKM Principle	Activity	Outcomes for politicians and citizens	Impact on society
Common aim	Joint legislative program Joint agenda setting	No majority coalition government and no opposition Small parties can also succeed with their content Comprehensible policy	Wider consideration of voter will A more distinct profile of the different parties
Consent decision making (BOB)	Three consecutive steps with citizens' consultation	Decisions with input and acceptance from all parties Less power play	More feasible and stable solutions More cooperation bridging party boundaries More confidence in the soundness of decisions
Participation of all involved	Guaranteed consultation in the first step of picture forming Different formats of consultation in council meetings	Citizens participate where they consider it necessary careful use of personal resources	More confidence in the soundness of decisions Less public agitation over political decisions Better problem solving with new perspectives
Transparency	Online platform	All involved get all information online	Regained trust among all involved
Inclusiveness	SKM meeting structure and moderation	Every elected member has a say Citizens have a number of options for participation in the process (consultation)	More issue-orientated political parties Efficient use of citizens' resources
Diversity of thoughts	Consent decisions and consultation	Embracing a wide range of perspectives and differing views	Greater diversity of opinions and ideas in discourse

On the citizens' side, there are more opportunities to participate. They know how to get involved because the procedures are clear and easily accessible via the website. The fact that everyone knows that they can always have a say in the picture forming makes it easier for people to be part of the process. This is a responsible use of your time resources. All in all they seem to have regained trust in their elected representatives. In addition, it has become more attractive to stand for election with a substantive issue (such as animal

welfare), new parties are emerging because everyone can have a say, even if they represent a small minority

At this stage of the study the impact on society can be described by the emergence of new parties and a lack of protests and negative media reports on the decisions of the municipal council today.

The goals associated with the implementing SCM in the UH municipal council have all been achieved and sociocratic political decision making has proven its worth over three legislative periods. Now that politicians and citizens know the BOB well, the different local councillors I spoke to can no longer imagine any other form of political decision-making

We can conclude that translating SCM to the political context of a municipality has worked very well in the U-H. Many of the SCM principles can be adhered to and guide the process, even if the term sociocracy was deliberately avoided during implementation so as not to place too much focus on the method.

6. Outlook

The sociocratic BOB has proven itself over three legislative periods. Local politics in the municipality of Utrechtse-Heuvelrug today is characterised by a new culture of political discourse and no longer by coalition agreements and opposition, as is the case in many municipalities. The parties are more thematically oriented and citizens can exert more influence. Now that politicians and citizens are well acquainted with it, it seems normal to anybody and none of the politicians asked are willing to adhere to it through their voting behaviour and issue setting.

There are currently still members in each party from the early days in 2014, including the mayor and the head of office. This secured the continuation and further development of the new culture over the course of ten years. The next phase of the process will be to hand over the sociocratic decision making process and early consultation to the next generation of political representatives. This seems easy, as everyone seems content and can not imagine any other procedure.

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Further Information:

<https://www.heuvelrug.nl/gemeenteraad>

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