

Nothing Better Than a Homemade Meal? Mixing representative, participatory and direct democratic ingredients at the local level in Europe

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Democracy: accepted in principle contested in practice

In most contemporary societies democracy has become the predominant political regime, both normatively as well as in practice. Although many countries at least formally accept the idea of a sovereign and politically equal citizenry, the debate regarding the way this governmental form should be organised dates back to its ancient roots. With democracy generally characterized as ‘rule by the people’, questions arise about the unity of the people and the way in which, and the extent to which, they should rule (Heywood, 2007). The way in which the people should be actively included in politics cuts across most of the latter issues. Though many agree that democracy not only refers to rule *for* the people but also *by* the people, opinions differ on the frequency, form and scope of citizen participation.

A classic continuum highlighting the contested nature of self-determination is the wide range of models existing between ideal types of representative and direct democracy. In its purest form the latter is sometimes characterized as ‘unmediated rule by the people’. This implies that all citizens can debate and directly decide all important policy alternatives (Budge, 2001: 224-225). Its representative counterpart is a more limited and indirect form of democracy. It is limited to a restricted and infrequent form of popular participation. In this model citizens transfer sovereignty to a representative. They select a class of politicians to whom the power to govern is delegated. Elections are the mechanism to achieve this and the primal device through which the representatives are held to account (Barber, 1996: 921-922). With the massification of popular self-government, representation has become the core mode of democracy. As in many spheres of modern society specialisation and a division of labour have also entered politics separating the governors from the governed (Clarke, 2001: 599-603). Often a highly developed party system and (politically embedded) civil society have provided mediation and linkage bridging the gap between citizens and politics.

While both types refer to fundamentally different choices regarding the arrangement of democracy, and representation seemed to have won the day over time, different practices intermingle and the dispute continues. No democracy is purely representative in its day-to-day working. Most include participatory elements going beyond the rather passive act of voting alone. Furthermore, even the

most inclusive and direct systems (e.g. Switzerland) need some form of political division of labour to prepare or to implement the rule of the people. Popular self-government should therefore be referred to as a balance between representation and direct rule rather than as an 'either/or' situation. Any contemporary democracy can thus be characterized as participatory, while the ratio between both ideal types accounts for the differences between them.

These equilibriums, however, tend to be fluid and temporary. The organisation of democracy is constantly being discussed and adapted to a changing society. Today, and as a result of factors that will be outlined below, the enhancement of the participatory elements in democracy is being more actual than ever. While such demands are not new, reasons and contexts differ, as do the forms which the drive for increased citizen participation takes. Some seem to place the role of the citizen in the output side of policy-making, redefining them as customers or consumers. Others carry popular inclusion beyond consultation: citizens as stakeholders should become active partners and co-producers in policy-making. The latter arrangements are often referred to as of the interactive policy-making type, or more broadly as a discursive or deliberative democracy (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004: 315-344). The extent to which the introduction of participatory elements actually leads to direct democracy accounts for the variation in the perspective to which the title of this chapter alludes. Adding participatory ingredients may just season or spice-up a bit the classic representative democracy or it may lead to a more hybrid democratic stew. In any case both perspectives (output as well as input-oriented) would hand traditional representative institutions over to unmediated popular rule, albeit to different extents. In parallel with the privatization of public services in New Public Management, democracy is then outsourced or contracted out to its source, the sovereign citizen. Alternatively, the citizen is increasingly 'drawn back' into politics by supplementing the representational process with more participatory mechanisms.

While nearly all levels are affected by these debates, we intend to focus on a level that is often characterized as both the cradle and the laboratory of democracy, that of local government. Beginning with the allegation that local government has a democratic surplus due to its closeness to citizens, we examine the challenges facing contemporary local democracy. With representative democracy as a starting point we analyse the reasons for its progress towards its more participatory counterpart. We also focus on the appearance of this (re)new(ed) local democracy and try to distinguish some trends from a comparative perspective. We end this chapter by drawing some conclusions essential to the assessment of participatory and direct democracy at the local level.

Local government: cradle *and* laboratory of democracy

Democracy is one of the traditional surpluses with which local government is often identified. The local level is said to provide a unique environment for citizen participation serving both internal and external ends. Internally, local democracy creates opportunities to influence decisions affecting the day-to-day life of the citizens that have a direct and highly visible effect upon them (Beetham, 1996: 36-40). This means that at both a substantial and symbolic level, local government institutions are more accessible and easier to engage with (Sharpe, 1970).

J.S. Mill (1948: 278-290) clarifies the external function of local democracy. The local level serves a 'higher cause' by providing a political apprenticeship for participation in general. Citizens become acquainted locally through public debate and experience its possibilities and limitations. This is expected to provide the leverage for involvement and participation in the broader governmental framework. Politicians also have an opportunity to learn the ropes of political business at the local level. This participatory potential is born out of a perceived feeling of identity, and hence solidarity, with a local community. It is here that the gap between the governors and the governed is at its narrowest. This level, lying closest to the citizen, thus provides more opportunities for achieving a democratic-inclusive ideal than does its central counterpart (Stoker, 1996: 6-14).

Both ends are rooted in liberal-democratic thinking¹. Alternative perspectives identify additional arguments in support of (strong) local democracy. While the classic Marxian view often sees the local level as the grass-roots counterpart of an oppressive state apparatus focussed on capital accumulation, a structuralist interpretation of the orthodoxy leaves room for non-dominant classes and corrections towards their needs precisely at that level. While production-related functions remain anchored at the national level, the theory of the dual state identifies more open and democratic consumption-related counterparts at the local level (Pickvance and Preteceille, 1991: 7-10).

Emphasising man as a social being living in a community, the need for a strong development of the latter is stressed by communitarian theory (Walzer, 1990). Communitarians oppose the highly utilitarian and individual thinking of neo-liberalism, asserting that the presumed relational basis of society should be enhanced where it was originally embedded most firmly, the local level. Although it can be criticized for its static and homogenous notion of community (Frazer, 1996: 93-100), communitarian theory fields powerful arguments for local participatory democracy. Only by frequent

¹ Also advocating local government as a pluralist counterbalance to central domination and the optimum channel for the efficient delivery of public services.

and intensive debate in their home environment can citizens express their presupposed social nature.

Feminists also see advantages in local democracy. Whereas the argument for women having a historical affinity with local politics is somewhat far-fetched (easier access to the local level is partly due to the restricted range of its power and its identification with 'soft' and more 'feminine' work, and thus is a 'harmless playground' for female participation), more substantial grounds for such advantages exist. Local democracy is said to provide leverage towards a gender-neutral society. To achieve the latter political agendas should change by including formerly unincorporated needs in a participatory manner. These agendas should become 'more feminine' to the extent that the 'personal is the political'². Local democracy is unique in including these matters arising from everyday life because of its location-specific nature and its involvement in the daily life of citizens (Clarke, Staeheli and Brunell, 1995).

Finally, as decentralisation is a prerequisite for a sustainable relationship between with the people and their environment, green theory stresses the need for a strong local level. The latter should function as a basic democracy free of hierarchies and power concentrations. Mutual dependencies go beyond a mere representative system and found self-governing communities with direct and active popular participation (Ward, 1996).

Despite the range of the above perceptions, and the fact that they are highly debatable, all at least theoretically connect democracy with the local level. It may therefore not be surprising that another central feature of the level which is allegedly closest to the citizen intersects with these perceived advantages of local democracy. The local level is often used as a laboratory and testing ground for reframing and/or reforming policy and politics (Pilet et al., 2005: 620). Problems, challenges and opportunities quite often appear first at the local level and hence are tackled at that level. When reform is sought, in many cases the local level is the identified arena. Both history and contemporary developments show that it is often where the attempt to renew democracy is observed.

Renewing local democracy before the 1990s: between expression and exit

In many respects similar democratic trends have been observed at both local and central levels. For example, the massification of democratic politics interacting with the development of the welfare

² And thus politicizing and making public questions that were often kept in the private sphere and 'reserved' for women.

state, increased local government workload both directly and indirectly. As a result local democracy also moved toward the representational model. An electoral chain of command (Dearlove, 1973: 25-46) prevailed in which the council occupied a key position. As representatives of the people councillors translated input into authoritative decisions guiding and controlling the actions of executive leaders and administrators. This model could be seen as the representational translation of the layman rule ideal, in which people are ruled by their equals (Mouritzen and Svava, 2001: 51-52). In principle any citizen may thus function as an elected official. Of course, in a representative democracy a strict application of rule by the amateur politician is more problematic. Electoral practice gives birth to (semi-)professional groups (parties and interest groups) and individuals (candidates) striving to gain power. Nevertheless, despite a considerable range of relationships with the other core members of local government (political leaders and administrators who increasingly became dominant) nearly all local systems incorporated some kind of lay rule and the closeness of local politics strengthened the idea of approachability and accessibility of the council and its members.

This supremacy of the part of the council was increasingly questioned, on the one hand because of considerations regarding its empirical validity (e.g. the community power debate) and on the other because of more theoretical arguments for rethinking the relationship between the governed and the governors. From the 1960s onwards attempts were made to introduce more participatory elements into local democracy to voice citizen demands which were being strengthened by the crumbling of traditional and hierarchical social relationships. It was at this time that advisory boards and hearings came to the surface. Edelenbos and Monikhof, however, (1998: 16-18) argue that politics was still the motor. While citizens were no longer willing to be mere political subjects, and traditional bureaucratic barriers were shrinking, their inclusion in decision-making was limited to 'consultation' and 'giving advice', not necessarily followed by politicians. To put it another way, political leaders may hear many, but they still listen to few and decide alone.

While the quest for a more efficient and effective local government did not actually lead to the demise of democratic renewal, such a renewal was nevertheless somewhat overshadowed during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Daemen and Schaap, 2000: 11-12). When markets, management by objectives, contracting out and privatization become the new buzzwords, the citizen is at best a customer or client of local government. Also, instead of voicing citizen demands into the existing system (in the more narrow client or customer conception) the exit option can be taken: meeting public needs is only marginally 'political' and local government should be concerned principally with delivering a limited number of basic services of technical nature (such as roads or

sewage). Of course, large differences exist between systems and communities in the extent to which these principles are actually put into practice. They refer, however, to dominant climates of opinion eroding the bedrock in redesigning governor-governed relationships.

Below we argue that the 1990s witnessed something of a synthesis of deepening democracy on the one hand and more efficiency on the other. When dissatisfaction with traditional voting roles grew, new answers take up a variety of old practices. As a result consumer-based orientations blended with participatory demands. Before going into the appearance of this contemporary 'hydra democracy' some of the reasons for democratic renewal should be outlined.

Renewing local democracy in the 1990s: responsiveness tackles representation

As was the case in previous decades local government in the 1990s was also faced attempts to optimise local democracy. The literature identifies a number of reasons for the latter (Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). Before taking up the important issue of (perceived) changes leading to actual reform the former is outlined below.

Though entangled in practice a distinction can be made between factors endogenous and exogenous to participation which are responsible for change. In the first case the nature of participation itself is in the process of transformation both at the individual and the organisational level. On the one hand, driven by forces such as increased education and individualisation, the number of 'critical citizens' grows (Norris, 1999). This group could be characterised as postmaterialist, valuing involvement in government as important to their personal development and crucial for politics. These people are no longer satisfied with a merely passive role linked with a concept of government as being more protective and providing basic services. On the other hand the mechanisms by which the citizen tries to influence government are changing. In addition to traditional and hierarchical forms of participation (voting, involvement in politicized civil society, party membership and/or activism) more informal and unconventional modes have gained ground (Topf, 1995: 52-91). While developments like this occur at all levels, they tend to generate most pressure locally given its previously identified participatory surplus.

In the second case change occurs in the broader governmental framework, thereby affecting participation. Contemporary local government is said to be moving towards local governance (John, 2001: 9-17; Kersting et al., 2009). The internationalisation of economies (and the subsequent stressing of *new localist* solutions and leads concerning economic development), an increased

demand from the private sector to be involved in public decisions, the Europeanization of public policies, new policy challenges and the move to a post-bureaucratic state all add up to the abovementioned change in political participation. As a result the appearance of the local level changes. Institutions multiply and are restructured, new networks (both horizontal and transnational) emerge and new policy initiatives are taken. These development imply that governing is becoming more complex and diffuse. Coordination and accountability dilemmas occur, putting strain on the legitimacy of the democratic system. While part of the solution is to make executive leadership more prominent (Reynaert et al., 2009), new control and accountability mechanisms strive to counter the failings of representative democracy in such an environment. Ways of involving the citizen and legitimating policy result in transformations.

With regard to reform one factor is of particular importance: the perception among key decision-makers that traditional participation is waning and/or deficient. Before planning reform and deciding upon the specific form it will take, elites must detect hints of change, identify them as problematic in respect of current practices and hence deduce a set of measures suitable to deal with the shortcomings. This seems to have happened during the 1990s. A significant part of the political elite saw local government as no longer legitimate and responsive to citizens. Falling electoral turnout, collapsing trust in government, shrinking political party membership or growing support for ideologically extreme parties, plus less traditional participation (Denters and Rose, 2005: 5-6), were seen as signs that confidence in politics was low. Many observers felt that the crisis had arisen from the fact that political parties had become alienated from society and cartelized too extensively with the state and each other (Lüther and Müller-Rommel, 2005). Whilst many countries thus adopted reforms aiming at bringing too 'remote democracy' closer a substantial part of the effort thrived on a particular antipartisan sentiment. We now examine the power of these reforms to transform society³.

On a general level it could be argued that the changes underpinning the trend towards enhanced and renewed responsiveness have affected nearly all of the classic conceptions of representation (Rao, 2000: 1-9). Since there is a growing number of (emancipated) citizens who express, at least to some extent, low levels of trust in politicians and more particularly in their parties, the trustee model of representation seems to have lost ground. The number of citizens who will accept a notion of democracy as defined as government *for* the people in which 'enlightened' politicians act

³ While some arise from bottom-up and local initiatives, others are more central and top-down. In the latter case the participatory nature of local government interacts with its laboratory function (implicitly) involving the level closest to the citizen in curing the democratic weaknesses of other governmental levels as well.

independently in what they judge to be the general interest is falling. At the same time the professionalisation of the political class (Cotta and Best, 2002: 493-525), both in terms of social background (highly educated and from the liberal professions) and career development (party political involvement), places great strain on the resemblance model of representation. Political bodies today look even less like a microcosm of the society they represent. Furthermore, the alleged crisis of political parties throws representation as a manifesto-based mandate into question. While the cartelized party in public office tends to float above its grass-roots foundation, connection with society in general seems to become slacker. In this debate, parties are built on social cleavages of the past and fail to incorporate those of the present. This is seen in dwindling membership of traditional political parties, low electoral turnout and the emergence of new types of parties of new politics, business firm or populist descent. Representation thus no longer equals enlightened judgement, shared social interest or party mandate⁴.

The current state of representation might actually come closest to delegation, and this is also true at the local level. In this scenario representatives act because of clear guidance and instructions conveying the views of those they represent, thus leaving more room for popular participation and even direct rule by the people. In our opinion, however, this differs from the classic conception of delegation in that contemporary measures to enhance responsiveness are intended to generalize the participatory elements in democracy neither in terms of issues nor with regard to the policy process development. Current participatory and direct democracy mechanisms seem to aim at either the input or the output of issue-specific policy processes, mainly to the extent that they are significant for the interests of the citizens directly concerned. In other words, the particular liberal logic of the stakeholder prevails over the more universal republican notion of citizenship as the driving force of participation. This leads to a picture differing substantially from an overall adoption of participatory and direct democracy which has important effects on the assessment of this renewed local democracy. Before we turn to the latter, we will first take a look at the forms democratic renewal takes at the local level.

Citizens in a reinvented local democracy: star restaurant or homemade meal?

In many countries the political reform which took place aimed to supersede the classic role of the citizen as voter in an attempt to tackle the problems outlined above. Some have stayed close to

⁴ The same consideration should be kept in mind regarding the alleged drop in traditional participation. The actual failure of these representational models (and hence of the factors leading towards it) is perceived as such if only by the decision-makers themselves. This is what gives birth to reform debate and practice.

traditional representation mechanisms, but have redesigned current practices. New electoral laws may be adopted e.g. personalising voting or altering eligibility criteria. The direct election of mayors is a good particular example as well as adopting wider candidate-oriented electoral system reforms such as open lists, single-member constituencies or panachage (Kersting et al., 2009). The role of the council may also be reconsidered mainly with a view to alleviating their day-to-day burden and making more room for steering along the main lines of community governance and the controlling of the executive (Vetter and Kersting, 2003: 18-19). In this respect a more general tendency of local governments to better inform citizens about the policy decisions and actions taken should also be situated. Although giving information or facilitating the accessibility for those interested in particular pieces of information can be considered to enhance involvement and provide leeway for participation, it is clear that this trend implies relatively passive citizens at the receiving end of a top-down process.

Others have tended toward the inclusion of more active participatory and direct elements in local democracy. Although the appearances of this initiative are extremely varied (Kersting, 2007), a distinction could be made as between whether they focus on the input or the output of legitimate policy-making. Both redefine the role of the citizen in a different way. Both also seem to refer to different stages in the policy process. Whereas input-oriented devices concentrate on the early stages of decision-making (setting the agenda, selecting policy preferences), their output-oriented counterparts tend to be more related to the later phase of the process (implementation and evaluation).

With regard to input, reform thus aims at including and involving citizens to a greater extent and in a different way in the early stages of decision-making (Denters and Rose, 2005: 257). The extent to which these practices leave room for 'unmediated rule by the people' varies. Citizens are thus empowered to different extents in actually deciding on policy (Arnstein, 1969).

Many devices retain a consultative conception of participation, asking for opinions on policy issues or letting people come forward with opinions but not transferring the actual decision-making power to the citizen. The citizen is consulted by local political institutions and decision-makers or given an advisory role. The political player prevails, however. Elected politicians are accountable for final decisions. With regard to content, this conception matches previous adaptations in local democracy which have been taking place even since the 1960s. The outward forms change, however. ICT and other communication technologies have supplied new ways of consulting citizens and room for incorporating their views in policy. Doubts exist about the inclusiveness of such an e-democracy

(Drücke, 2005), but these technologies have revitalised and/or complemented hearings, advisory boards, neighbourhood councils, citizen forums or other consultative local democracy expressions.

Others players are much farther advanced in opening up political decision-making to the citizen. Current local democracy has witnessed the emergence of two such mechanisms: interactive policy-making and referenda. Stemming from the notion of deliberation the former holds democracy to be an argumentative, open and rational dialogue between the governed and the governors (Elster, 1988). The practice of interactive policy-making thus in theory upgrades citizens to a level of equal partners with politicians. Joint decision-making occurs in which both parties agree on a policy agenda, objectives and methods (Devos, Reynaert and Verlet, 2005: 33-39). Often a territorially restricted stakeholder's perspective is adopted. Politicians work with different parties (residents, private firms and third party organisations) with an interest in policy issues affecting a specific area (often a neighbourhood; Leyenaar, 2007). Participatory budgets can be seen as examples of interactive policy-making (Sintomer, 2009).

The device that leaves the most room for popular self-government is that of referenda. These allow the citizen to express views on particular policy themes. A number of countries have adopted referenda, at least at the local level (Hamon and Passelecq, 2000; Kersting et al., 2009). Variation exists, however, in the importance of the policy process to which they refer. They either raise issues for discussion (initiatives) and thus set the political agenda or they are used to decide on established policy proposals (plebiscites). In their purest form referenda are initiated by citizens and their results are binding. Soft versions also exist in which government permits a vote on a policy issue that is only advisory⁵. The latter might be characterized as popular consultation. Referenda also differ on more formal institutional grounds that can nevertheless have important political implications: what are the prerequisites, for example, in terms of support for making a claim eligible and a result binding, to what extent is participation in a referendum compulsory for the citizen, what kind of questions can be raised, etc.? (Lupia and Matsusaka, 2004: 463-467; Kersting, 2007).

Other reforms focus not so much on policy-making input but tend toward the output side of legitimate government. Here questions of the effectiveness and efficiency of public services become central and the way in which citizens at the end stage of policy-making can contribute to those principles. It is not accidental that this brings local democracy closer to the business model. Many of these reforms match the broader move towards a New Public Management and draw participatory

⁵ Of course, a blend of these elements (binding versus advisory and citizen versus government-initiated) is also possible.

conclusions within a managerial, service-oriented logic (Christensen and Lægreid, 2002: 280-286). The question here is not whether decision-making has succeeded in including and involving (a wide array of) citizens but rather the extent to which the latter are satisfied with what the governmental process brings about, that is, policy output (the consumer position) and the way in which this has been achieved (the customer position). Such a conception opens a set of instruments such as customer surveys, devices for complaint management and monitoring quality care probing into the satisfaction of individual citizens with the extent to and the way in which public agencies (including local government) fulfil their private needs. Alternatively it may lead to wider, more collective and deliberative arrangements related to the notion of user democracy (Rose, 2007).

Mixing the ingredients of representative, participatory and direct democracy by introducing the devices discussed above leads to the varied menu of contemporary local democracy. Part of the cooking (i.e. decision-making power) in politics is 'contracted out' or 'given back' to those who are actually supposed eating it. Applying the 'nothing-better-than-a-homemade-meal' philosophy to politics citizens rather opt for own recipes and experiments even if 'less perfect' as compared to the labour of the 'professional kitchen brigade of the democratic restaurant (elected politicians, administrators, etc.). Using the services of the latter in decision-making might be considered as 'too pricy' in terms of the alleged gap between citizens and politics or less transparent as a result from bargaining package deals, etc. First assessments seem to suggest however that the homemade-syndrome is not omnipresent but rather adds up to the professionals in decision-making, not leaving the state of local democracy unaffected. Moreover homemade politics is unevenly spread throughout Europe.

Comparing local democratic renewal: systematic divergence *and* hybrid convergence

The initial assessments of local democratic renewal have revealed tendencies that diverge according to the governmental system under study. Drawing on a classic comparative scheme (Hesse and Sharpe, 1991: 605-609) the Anglo group is often characterised by a focus on NPM in service-related reforms. The latter do not necessarily run counter to democratic renewal but are mainly accompanied by top-down initiatives aimed at enhancing the role of the citizen as the consumer of policy output. Nevertheless pilot projects and experiments with more participatory and direct democracy do exist (John, 2001: 160-161)⁶.

⁶ Certainly in the UK – at least in theory – recent attempts have been made to renew local democracy beyond consumerism and customers-oriented approaches (Bonney, 2004: 43-51).

The Northern and Middle European group reveals a more mixed picture. Switzerland is of course the cradle of participatory and direct democracy, leaving a great deal of room for self-determination through local referenda. Hence, the tendency is to uphold traditional practices rather than to introduce new participatory mechanisms. Some countries in this group have adopted quite substantial change in the direction of participatory and direct democracy. Germany and Austria can be quoted as examples where the use of local referenda, for example, has at least theoretically been extended (Walter-Rogg & Gabriel, 2007). Others are more reluctant and are experimenting with pilots schemes which make more room for self-reliance. The Scandinavian countries (which have substantial trust in and support for collective representation and an existing tradition of citizen involvement) and the Netherlands are often placed in this category (Vetter and Kersting, 2003: 340-342).

The southern group (France, Spain, Greece, Portugal) seems to cling most tightly to the idea of a local representative elite, with powerful interest groups and a centralized bureaucracy accounting for the remainder of strong patronage networks, thus leaving less room for participatory democracy. The collapse of its party system at the beginning of the 1990s and the subsequent reforms of the local political system seem to have placed Italy in a rather peculiar position within this Southern group. Here participatory democracy emerged to a larger extent (Bobbio, 2005: 43-44). In the former East and Central European countries both trends are to be found. While the Baltic countries follow the pattern of the South, others (e.g. Poland and Hungary) have witnessed substantial reforms in the direction of participatory democracy (Campbell & Coulson, 2006).

In spite of systematic divergence two general tendencies stand out, leading to the conclusion that contemporary local democracy is essentially hybrid and a dish with mixed flavours. The first has to do with the importance of decision-making aimed at by democratic renewal. Though both appeal to a fundamentally different logic, input- and output-oriented reforms in citizen participation come together in practice, leading Caulfield and Larsen (2001: 16-17) to talk about a general transformation of the public domain. Classical forms of participation are giving way to new modes of temporary involvement which are more direct, ad-hoc and narrow in scope. At the same time, the public domain is being redefined: while citizens are increasingly becoming consumers of policy outcome, responsiveness is swinging more towards perceived output quality than to input-inclusiveness. Both aspects do not necessarily blend smoothly, however. A concentration on output may cause 'collateral damage' to democracy by squeezing it into a reduced and one-dimensional interpretation or even driving more participatory elements out (Steyvers et al., 2006).

The second refers to the overall balance between representative and direct democracy. Despite its perceived shortcomings in contemporary society and the subsequent introduction of participatory and direct elements, representation in most systems and for most policy domains or decisional arenas remains the core of local democracy (Vetter, 2000: 437-446; Kersting et al., 2009). While striking experiments and pilot schemes may attract the spotlight away from (defective) old practices, at best these new forms of citizen inclusion add to, rather than entirely replace, representative democracy. Leaving aside consultation in which they still retain the whip hand, politicians may accept partnerships in certain policy areas or even yield to referendum results, but it seldom or never abdicates their pivotal role in general local governance. This does not mean that the role of political institutions has not changed or that new power structures cannot emerge (both within institutions as well as in governance networks) with their subsequent problems. But a warning is sounded against inept generalizations based on highly profiled but specific and particular changes in, and additions to, the representational system⁷. Political institutions lose their monopoly on public decision-making but retain its core and nucleus.

Recipes are thus mixed both in terms of policy importance and institutional device. This leads us to conclude that today's local democracy is essentially hybrid and its kitchen one of fusion. It combines and complements representative with participatory and direct democracy. The balance between these elements may vary according to a number of factors (policy issues, political system, etc.). In spite of a historic development toward a graded granting of more inclusive and participatory elements in government (with co-production and referenda as contemporary and far-reaching variants) representation remains the nub or fond of local democracy. Assessing participatory and direct democracy should take notice of such fusion and be aware of the challenges that stem from these mixed recipes.

Assessing participatory and direct democracy at the local level: some guidelines

At the end of this chapter we want to make a brief assessment of the state of participatory and direct democracy and the way in which they complement representative democracy at the local level at the beginning of the 21st century. This problem can be tackled in a number of ways referring to the multiple dimensions linked to local democratic renewal. The description above has already made

⁷ This profile is partially influenced by the fact that these changes are often seen as a cure for democratic deficits or even crises. Politics often uses and highlights them as an, or even *the*, answer to many problems with which local government is faced. They have become part of a political process to put citizens 'back' in the 'centre'.

reference to some important questions in that respect. Does the tendency to include more participatory elements in local democracy exist in a given context? What factor might account for this trend? What forms do new mechanisms of citizen inclusion take? Do the latter differ according to the local political system being studied? To what extent does more direct democracy weaken or even replace its representative counterpart?

It is apparent that contemporary local democracy faces some qualitative changes: because of both exogenous and endogenous factors mechanisms for involving citizens are being questioned. Representation is being supplemented with new forms of democracy differing in the extent to which they are participatory. Some elements are more far-reaching than previous practices: they allow citizens to be partners in policy making or provide grounds for self-government while sometimes also enhancing consumer power. These are newer forms of citizen participation. Others connect with consultative democracy already established in the past. While these occur in many systems, patterns differ, although leading to the general conclusion that contemporary local democracy is hybrid and fused.

To grasp and to assess the hydra-like appearance of hybrid democracy from its participatory and direct perspective some additional guiding questions are needed. The fact that (new) integrative elements now add up to representation tells us something about the formal appearance of participatory and direct democracy but less about its actual use. This holds true both quantitatively and qualitatively. While the frequency and distribution of participatory mechanisms for cases or countries have been mapped, more comparative assessments on the proliferation of these devices in respect of citizen involvement are scarce (Kersting et al., 2009 give a broad and global account however). They could tell us something about the conditions facilitating actual use or the drawbacks connected to them.

Qualitative aspects are concerned with the effects of this actual use (following the reflections made by Daemen and Schaap, 2001: 173-179). When applied, where does participatory or direct democracy lead to? This question is related to many of the original motivations for supplementing representation and thus is of considerable scientific *and* political importance. The answer places qualifications on redesigning the relationship between governed and governors at the local level and the outcome of their changing interaction: public policy.

From the perspective of those who are governed, important questions emerge. Does introducing more integrative democratic devices really substantially increase the overall level of citizen involvement and participation? In other words: does it bring citizens back to politics? And even if it

does account for some fluctuation in the latter, then what does it mean? Firstly, it can be argued that participation – certainly through these new mechanisms – is merely problem-driven and particularistic. According to this logic citizens will only participate when they are directly and negatively affected by certain decisions. From a more neutral perspective, the potential of mobilisation of participatory devices might be highly dependent on the salience and conflicting nature of the issue at stake. How then to interpret a possible absence of participation? Does it reflect extensive satisfaction with policy and hence no need to be involved, or a residual feeling of political powerlessness despite inclusive devices?

Second, even if participation grows, then how is it distributed among citizens? Do new mechanisms appeal to an audience which was formerly not served? Do they bring back those citizens who opted out from a more representational democracy? Or do they act as yet another amplification of the demands of an unrepresentative participatory elite focussing on their own specific interests. It is often argued that participatory and direct democracy benefit highly educated citizens with the resources and capacities to influence public decision-making. At the same time, the individual citizen's power may be tackled when private firms or third party organisations are involved in the new decision-making devices. The latter also refers to the conflict-based nature of politics. Participatory and direct democracy often implicitly assume a commonality of interest among citizens. 'The citizen' should be involved and included but what guarantees are there that all citizens hold the same views and goals? And, if not, how should divergence be mediated? It is often argued that representational mechanisms essentially function as devices for embedded interest articulation and hence conflict reduction or solution. Additionally, even if participatory mechanisms are able to mobilise a wide array of different citizens in the process leading to decisional consensus, one should question its effect on those who participate. Do participatory devices in fact lead to the development of new skills linked to empowerment (e.g. confidence, social networks and capital, policy knowledge) and an increase of feelings of political efficacy (Pratchett et al., 2009)?

As far as the governors are concerned, introducing participatory and direct democratic elements could blur their attitude towards the governed. While inclusive mechanisms more generally break down the decision-making monopoly of politicians they remain largely predominant when consultation is the integrative device. The supremacy of politics remains in taking final decisions. This might be weakened when partnerships and joint decision-making emerge. The distinction between governors and governed becomes less distinct as self-government grows, and roles could even be reversed. Often, politicians (but also administrators) feel proportionately uncomfortable. As the perceived legitimate representatives of all the people, they question how representative are the

individuals or organisations involved. Many might stress that final decision-making is vested in the democratically elected institutions, i.e. themselves. These 'representational threats' are of special importance to local legislative bodies. Local governance has often strengthened executive leadership (both political and administrative) redefining the role of councils to policy strategy and scrutiny. As citizens are integrated in policy-making (even accommodating decisive power) and many of the day-to-day and meaningful aspects of local governance are put in the hands of the executive, councils might be brought to the existential question of what is left to do. Participatory and direct democracy elements then might not abolish representation but together with other tendencies could seriously challenge the position of traditional local political institutions. Alternatively, it is perhaps no surprise that amongst the factors that tend to predict the success of empowerment by participatory and direct democratic devices (for participants, communities and decision-making) political and administrative buy-in in terms of support and follow-up are amongst the most prominent (Pratchett et al., 2009). Therefore the assessment of participatory devices should include the question of the effect they have on governors and the way this is reflected in their discourse and action.

Finally, the result of the transforming interaction between the governors and the governed is also affected. Including participatory and direct democracy might have effects on public policy. These might be diverse and not necessarily unambiguous. Involving citizens might either increase the support base for a given policy direction or just instigate discord. They also tackle the somewhat tricky notion of policy quality. Does inclusiveness lead to the integration of new and valuable knowledge and experience unknown to mere representation? Or does it delay decision-making or even limit its effectiveness to those domains where consensus is most easily found? The latter also refers to the functional distribution of participatory and direct democracy. While opening up decision-making might be a highly valued ideal, practice could show it to be entangled in peripheral policy domains where integration and inclusiveness are deemed as harmless lip service to the 'chattering classes'. The scope of decision-making open to more participatory elements and the institutionalisation of such devices into the wider process of public policy might thus play an important role (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006).

Last but not least is the question of compatibility. While participatory and direct democracy elements are to a different extent included in many systems, most remain predominantly representational. This may create friction due to the divergent nature of the relationship systems existing between governors and governed. In their contemporary appearance, the more participatory decision-making mechanisms are characterized by functional and personal specificity (Denters and Rose, 2005: 260-261). An involvement model is often connected with a very particular set of decisions and oriented

towards one or more particular target groups. It is ad-hoc, directly aimed at those affected and mainly temporary. This may run counter to the logic of the general, undifferentiated and non-timed electoral representation system, challenging especially to the strategic coherence of policy which seems to become increasingly more important giving the overall role of local government in community leadership (whether or not with a developmental agenda). What happens when the result of such a participatory device arising from an intensively expressed and well-supported joint decision satisfies all parties in a given neighbourhood but completely contradicts the long-term council strategy for community development? In other words, a variety of tasty and family-member favourite dishes does not make up a coherent menu. While the presence, frequency and effects of such tensions may be debated from a more normative point of view, a more factual conclusion stands out. Our hybrid form of local democracy renders decision- and policy-making more complex. It poses challenges to all parties involved and sounds a warning against expectations which are too high to be met smoothly in a governance-style society.

In order to answer the question above in more systematic manner we argue the necessity to assess participatory and direct democracy practices in a comparative way (Denters and Mossberger, 2006). By leaving aside some of the particularities of context, we can learn from others experiences both scientifically and politically. At the same time comparisons involve a warning against single-dimension conclusions drawn from specific experiences. By looking at the spread of various practices, the conditions governing their success or failure and the effect they have on governors, governed and policy-making, we may provide more founded answers to many of the questions outlined above. These cannot, of course, be all-encompassing and everlasting. They can only be the clarion call of scientific effort: future research.

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