Strengthening the local representative system: the importance of electoral and non-electoral representation

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Strengthening the local representative system: the importance of electoral and non-electoral representation

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ABSTRACT

Local democracy has increasingly faced problems such as declining voter turnout and decreasing trust in political parties. Certain forms of participatory democracy have been introduced to address political disengagement. Often these efforts do not deliver the envisaged results, as they exacerbate existing inequalities by attracting only certain groups of citizens. This paper takes a close look at representation to find out if and how it can strengthen local democracy. Non-electoral representation, as manifested by representative claims based on non-electoral grounds, such as identity and expertise, made by local councillors, as well as non-elected individuals and organisations, might serve to mitigate democratic problems. We empirically study manifestations of electoral and non-electoral representation and their interactions. We conclude that non-electoral representation can strengthen local democracy, but its relationship with electoral representation can also be problematic. We make suggestions as to how these problems might be overcome in an effort to strengthen the local representative system.

Introduction

Strengthening local democracy has been on the agenda in many countries in recent decades (Forde 2005, Geurtz and van de Wijdeven 2010; Michels and de Graaf 2010; Ladner and Fiechter 2012). Nevertheless, local democracy increasingly faces problems. In a variety of Western European countries, including the Netherlands, election turnout is steadily declining and political parties struggle to provide a connection between society and politics (www. kiesraad.nl). This is reflected by decreasing trust in parties and difficulties associated with recruiting (local) elected representatives (Mair 2005;

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Hendriks 2009; Saward 2010; Copus 2012; Voerman and Boogers 2014; Grimberg and Vollaard 2016).

Forms of direct, participatory and deliberative democracy have been introduced at the local level in an attempt to address this political disengagement and the inequality it entails (Meadowcroft 2001; Forde 2005; Geurtz and van de Wijdeven 2010; Michels and de Graaf 2010; Ladner and Fiechter 2012; Michels 2012). However, these efforts often do not deliver the envisaged results (Meadowcroft 2001; Ladner and Fiechter 2012). A key problem is that these tactics often attract the same groups of citizens that participate in elections, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities and creating the danger that the distrust felt by those without a voice will increase further (Michels and de Graaf 2010; Bovens and Wille 2011; Michels and Binnema 2016).

In this paper, we look more closely at representation to explore other ways of strengthening local democracy. While scholarly attention has often focused on electoral representation alone, it has long been recognised that political representation involves a variety of activities by many people and groups (Pitkin 1967). Recent contributions to representation theory take this into consideration by emphasising the many manifestations of representation (Rehfeld 2006; Urbinati 2006; Lord and Pollak 2010; Saward 2010; Severs 2010; Taylor 2010; Disch 2011; Maia 2012; Montanaro 2012; Chapman and Lowndes 2014; van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2018). They do so by focusing on *all* actors making representative claims, including those claims made on a basis other than having been elected (Saward 2010). These actors can be elected representatives such as local councillors, but also non-elected organisations and individuals, including, for example, environmental organisations that claim to represent future generations or doctors who claim to represent patients.

By taking non-electoral representation into account as well, we are able to assess the democratic quality of the representative system as a whole (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Lord and Pollak 2010; Taylor 2010; Disch 2011; Mansbridge 2011; Maia 2012). This also requires analysis of the way electoral and non-electoral representation interact and how they complement and/or conflict with each other (Lord and Pollak 2010). We are still in need of empirical studies that explore how non-electoral representation might strengthen local democracy and how it interacts with electoral representation in practice (Hendriks 2009; Taylor 2010; De Wilde 2013; Dufek and Holzer 2013; Saward 2016). This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question: *how does non-electoral representation relate to electoral representation at the local level?*

In what follows, we first discuss recent contributions to theory on non-electoral representation and how it relates to electoral representation. Second, we present the methods we use to study democratic representation empirically. Third, we present our empirical findings on representation at the

local level in the Netherlands. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results in terms of studying local representation and improving local democracy.

Electoral and non-electoral representative claims

Democratic representation relates to the creative activity of 'making present again' citizens' preferences, identities and/or desires in public decision-making (Pitkin 1967). Traditionally, elections and political parties have been key topics in discussions and studies of representative democracy at the local level. The responsiveness of elected representatives to their constituents is considered to be the determinant of the democratic quality of representation and includes the criteria of authorisation (selection or direction of representatives) and accountability (a representative's sense of obligation to explain and justify their conduct to those they represent) (Pitkin 1967; Bovens 2007; Urbinati and Warren 2008). According to the traditional view, citizens authorise and hold parties and local councillors accountable for actions taken on their behalf by means of elections. However, the viability of this aspect of representative democracy has been called into question, as electoral authorisation and accountability have begun to face increasing problems. These problems include parties losing their roots in society, the nationalisation of local elections, declining voter turnout and a growing reluctance on the part of citizens to become politicians (Mair 2005; Hendriks 2009; Saward 2010; Kroger 2013; Grimberg and Vollaard 2016). In the meantime, non-elected actors are emerging increasingly often as potential representatives in local governance networks (Sweeting and Copus 2012), thus challenging traditional electoral democracy.

Instead of juxtaposing traditional and network forms of democracy, we adopt an inclusive view of representation in our study by using the concept of representative claim, which includes representation manifested in electoral and non-electoral claims (Saward 2010; Rehfeld 2006). The concept of representative claims allows us to explore representation beyond the electoral mandate by focusing on all actors, including unelected ones, that claim to represent certain groups or causes in the public sphere. For instance, churches can claim to represent followers based on religion, doctors can make claims for patients based on their medical expertise and patients can do so on the basis of shared experiences (Saward 2009, 2010). Furthermore, taking a representative claim approach allows for deeper analysis of claims made by elected councillors. Councillors may base their representative claims on their elected position, but they are also able to make claims on behalf of groups and causes on non-electoral bases, including expertise, shared experience or common identity.

To ensure responsiveness, non-elected representation depends on alternative means of authorisation (to select and direct representatives) and

accountability (to create an obligation on the part of representatives to be accountable to those they represent). These alternative means include petitions, contributions to public deliberations, organised protest, membership to an organisation, accounting for one's actions in public debates, meeting with members and making plans and reports publicly available. These authorisation and accountability mechanisms can serve to ensure the democratic quality of their representation efforts (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Montanaro 2012; van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2018).

As said, studies of non-electoral representation are needed to understand its effect on local democracy. There is, of course, an abundance of literature that focuses on civil society organisations (CSOs), network governance, corporatism and pluralism. This literature tends to zero in on how CSOs and private organisations contribute to the effectiveness of policy-making or deal with the influence of their lobbying activities on policy. However, these studies remain limited in terms of their analysis of the role of these issues in relation to democracy (Sorensen and Torfing 2007). When these studies do take this into account, they often analyse them as instances of participation or deliberation rather than representation (Dryzek 2007; Kroger and Friedrich 2013; Wolff 2013). As such, there is little scholarly reflection on how these actors contribute to representative democracy (for exceptions see for example Sorensen 2002; Esmark 2007; Kohler-Koch 2010) and how they relate to electoral representatives. In addition, these studies do not take into account that elected representatives can also practice non-electoral representation by relying on foundations and mechanisms of authorisation and accountability other than elections to justify their representative claims. Moreover, these studies have a tendency to neglect individuals who appoint themselves or are appointed by others as representatives. They also often disregard the fact that representation is not a given, but rather a construction in a creative process initiated by a representative claim. In making a representative claim, a new group of represented individuals can be created. In addition, at the outset, an actor might be unwilling to be or unaware of being a representative, but is perceived as one nonetheless as he or she makes claims on behalf of others. Therefore, recent theorising on representative claims and empirical studies inspired by the concept are a useful addition to the current literature on CSOs and network governance. The concept of representative claims allows us to assess the democratic quality of the representative system as a whole.

Exploring the local representative system

To determine the democratic quality of local representation, it is not sufficient to simply look at the relationship between representatives and those they claim to represent. Studying the local representative system *as a whole* is important

here, which requires an exploration of how electoral and non-electoral representation relate to each other. Several ideas exist about this relationship.

First, adding non-electoral representation to the representative mix is said to influence *equality* in a number of ways. Some authors point out that non-electoral representation is a danger to equality because it often lacks clear authorisation and accountability structure based on equality of voice, as exists in elections. Moreover, it is argued that non-electoral representation can exacerbate inequalities as, in the context of seeking to influence policy, some actors enjoy more resources, capabilities and access to decision-makers than others (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Lord and Pollak 2010). However, the reverse argument is also made that non-electoral representation can make an important contribution to equality in the representative system. As mentioned above, non-electoral representation may rely on alternative authorisation and accountability mechanisms. Also, the principle of one person, one vote fails to encompass the patterns of disadvantage apparent across certain groups. People may remain silent because they lack the capacity to raise their voice or have lost trust in electoral authorisation and accountability. Non-electoral claims might, therefore, be accepted because they are considered more authentic than electoral ones (Saward 2009). Also, uneven voter turnout is a problem because it brings with it the danger that elected representatives are not equally responsive to the needs and preferences of all citizens. If certain groups of citizens are invisible, a representative will not be inclined to respond to them (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba 1996; Bovens and Wille 2011). This is where non-electoral representation has potential; opening up representation beyond *elected* representation can help make the invisible visible (Taylor 2010; Kroger and Friedrich 2013; Saward 2016), as groups that are not inclined to raise their voice themselves can be represented by means of non-electoral representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Montanaro 2012). Moreover, through non-electoral representation, representative claims can be made for specific groups that are disproportionately affected by certain policies (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Lord and Pollak 2010). Here, the distribution of influence over decisions according to the principle of one person, one vote seems rather unfair (Saward 2009, 2016; Lord and Pollak 2010).

Second, non-electoral representation can *provide information about citizens' views* on particular issues, thereby contributing to authorisation within the representative system. It can do justice to the varied preferences of citizens and emphasise issues that citizens feel most strongly about, which cannot be fully expressed through a single vote (Saward 2009, 2016; Lord and Pollak 2010;). Moreover, non-electoral representation can connect society and politics, between elections in particular, when (new) salient issues are at stake (Saward 2010; van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2015). In this view, non-elected representatives can be seen as an information channel, in addition to elections.

Third, elected representatives can complement non-electoral representatives focusing on the interest of specific groups by weighing different interests in the public debate, thereby ensuring accountability with a view to serving the common interest of the community (Wolff 2013). Also in this sense, the two avenues of representation can be considered complementary. Together, elected and non-elected representatives can create *checks and balances* in the representative system (Lord and Pollak 2010; Maia 2012). However, Lord and Pollak (2010) warn against assuming too quickly that combinations of electoral and non-electoral representation will necessarily add up to good representation. The two can also undermine each other. Studies of direct participation of citizens reveal the tensions between direct forms of democracy and electoral representation (Meadowcroft 2001; Forde 2005; Geurtz and van de Wijdeven 2010; Ladner and Fiechter 2012). Similar tensions can be envisaged between electoral and non-electoral representation. For instance, an increasing number of representative claims means that claims can collide, creating deadlock when claim-makers refuse to give way to other claims. Alternatively, a large number of claims can lead to duplication and inefficiency (Lord and Pollak 2010).

As the points made above illustrate, it is important to focus on the inter-relationship and interactions between non-electoral and electoral representation to explore the contribution of non-electoral representation in terms of strengthening local democracy. Figure 1 summarises the theoretical debate discussed here. Empirical studies on this issue are important, but they are few in number (Taylor 2010; Kroger and Friedrich 2013; Saward 2016). In the next sections, we will develop our empirical case in an effort to fill this void.

Methods

We studied local policy-making in the area of recently decentralised health and social policies in the Netherlands. On 1 January 2015, the amended Social Support Act (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning*), the Youth Act (*Jeugdwet*) and the Participation Act (*Participatiewet*) transferred tasks such as the labour reintegration of people with a handicap, youth mental health care and care for the elderly and people with a handicap from the national to the local level. These decentralised policies constitute an excellent case for exploring a local representative system in its entirety. The first reason for this is that the Dutch have, themselves, identified the problem of low trust in politics and political parties (Den Ridder and Dekker 2015). Moreover, it has been noted that many council members lack knowledge about the decentralisation effort and its impact on vulnerable groups in society, which is said to limit their ability to act as representatives (Loots and Peeters 2013; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2013; Van Den Berg 2013). Second, as was the case here, decentralisation is often seen as being a catalyst for the revitalisation of local

	Complement	Conflict
Equality	Non-electoral representatives can enrich the representative system because they can speak for groups who remain silent. Non-electoral representatives can make more specific claims focusing on groups who are specifically affected by certain policies	Non-electoral representatives often lack a clear authorization and accountability structure based on equality of voice like elections, which can result in increased inequalities depending on the actors who are most successful in influencing policies
Information about citizens views	Non-electoral representatives do justice to the varied preferences of citizens and emphasize issues citizens feel most strongly about, which cannot be fully expressed through a single vote Non-electoral representatives are an additional information channel for elected representatives	
Checks and balances	Elected representatives can weigh the different interests in the public debate	Different claims can undermine each other causing deadlock, duplication and efficiency loss

Figure 1. Arguments from the literature on how non-electoral representation can complement and conflict with electoral representation.

democracy (Canel 2001; Peters, van Stipdonk and Castenmiller 2014). Third, people confronted with the consequences of the decentralised policies raise their own voice less often than others. For example, less-educated people turn up less often to vote at elections (Bovens and Wille 2011), which is challenging because their labour issues and health problems are different from those of more highly educated people (Denktas and Burdof 2016). Finally, the Netherlands traditionally sees a variety of both non-elected and elected representatives, also at the local level.

The Netherlands holds elections for 380 (as of 2018) local councils every four years. These councils appoint the aldermen in the executive board, who cannot be members of the local council. While the mayor is formally appointed by the government for a period of six years, the preference of the local council is usually decisive. The mayor chairs both the local council and the executive board. The local council is responsible both for legislation, usually in keeping with the proposals of the executive board, and for the control of the executive board. The executive board is responsible for

preparation of legislation and implementation, including the many tasks to be carried out on behalf of the national state, from which they receive most of their budget.

For exploratory purposes of our study, we sought to carry out in-depth case studies as they allow us to determine what kind of non-electoral representation takes place and how it relates to electoral representation. In an effort to find as much variety as possible in terms of non-electoral representation, we selected two municipalities that differ in terms of their population's health and socio-economic issues, their socio-geographic nature and level of education. We conducted qualitative case studies of a mid-sized, economically vibrant, university city (Municipality A) in the heavily populated conurbation in the west of the country and one small amalgamated municipality in the rural, economically declining north (Municipality B). We conducted the study in the period between January 2014 and June 2015, when major decisions on the decentralised social and health policies needed to be made. The two cases differed in terms of the level of education of constituents, which is a strong indicator of political participation (higher in Municipality A) and the percentage of people that rely on services provided under the decentralised acts (greater in Municipality B). This allowed us to explore non-electoral representation in different settings.

We used a multi-method design consisting of: (a) a survey of existing literature; (b) document analysis and (c) qualitative interviews. The literature studied dealt with representation in the Netherlands and decentralisation. We used this literature to place our case studies in a broader context. The document analysis included analysis of the proposals made by the national government and the local executive boards regarding decentralisation. To learn about the kind of representatives involved in the policy-making process, we examined contributions in formal decision-making processes (e.g. reports on consultation rounds and council meeting minutes); local newspaper reports on the decentralisation and documents and websites of non-electoral representatives. These documents were also used to identify representatives. The results of the document analysis were subsequently used in the selection of respondents for our interviews and the topics discussed with them. We interviewed: (a) elected representatives (n = 7); (b) non-elected representatives (n = 21), such as members of patient organisations, advisory council members, (health care) professionals and a local journalist and (c) aldermen (n = 3) and civil servants or consultants in the employ of the municipality (n = 3). Interviews focused on who claimed to represent whom and based on what, as well as ideas about other representatives and the relationship between electoral and non-electoral representation.

Results

In this section, we first describe the various actors that act or identify as possible representatives in the debate on decentralisation. Next, we discuss how electoral and non-electoral representation complement each other and how they may serve to undermine one another.

Electoral and non-electoral claims

Our study reveals that a variety of actors make representative claims at the local level.

Electoral representation

First, representatives at the local level are the elected local councillors who are usually organised in political parties. Their claims are often not very explicitly made. Sometimes, parties claim to speak on behalf of 'the people' or citizens in general, but also more specifically on behalf of certain groups affected by the decentralisation, including people that receive social benefits. Elected representatives derive their claims in part from their electoral mandate. However, they also rely on informal contact with citizens to educate themselves on the (effects of) decentralisation. For instance, they open up contact points for citizens, go on site visits, interact with non-elected representatives (more on this below) and/or draw on their own experiences as professionals or service users (see also van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2018). The extent to which elected representatives put effort into these contacts differs, however.

Non-electoral representation

Many non-elected representatives are active in the debate on the decentralisation. We looked at a broad set of actors making claims, including those who did not describe themselves as representatives when they asked for special attention to be paid to certain groups. This analysis drew on a wide variety of representatives.

First, non-elected representatives were active at the national level, where the decentralisation plans were intensely debated. Health care professionals, patient organisations and health insurers were among the actors actively claiming to represent clients and patients (van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2015). They wrote letters to the government and parliament and participated in the public debate on the decentralisation, expressing their concern about the implications for vulnerable and dependent groups of citizens. For example, a number of psychiatrists petitioned against the decentralisation

of youth care, calling on people to sign: 'We need your help to ensure good care for children' (www.petitiejeugdggz.nl).

At the local level, many actors that claimed to represent service users were active as well. In addition, other actors identified possible representatives for the future. The identified non-electoral representatives include patient organisations, associations of the elderly, informal carer organisations (health care) professionals, neighbourhood organisations, local advisory councils (which are officially assigned the role of advisor to the local executive board), churches and schools. This variety of representatives were observed in both municipalities; those who were active in the local public debates on the decentralisation on behalf of some sort of constituency, provided input during consultation rounds and in the context of formal and informal contact with the responsible aldermen and local councillors. Their claims were often more specific as compared to the ones made by elected representatives; whereas local councillors referred to the general public, non-elected representatives focused on, among others, people receiving social benefits, patients with chronic disease, the elderly and youngsters suffering from psychiatric problems or addiction. The bases of the claims of non-electoral representatives identified varied from their institutional position (in the case of appointed advisory councils) and their own experience as health and welfare service users, to day-to-day contact with service users (whether as fellow patients, neighbours or clients), site visits or meetings with members. Through direct contact, member meetings and media contributions, they sought to authorise their representative claims. They also accounted for their representative activities in a number of ways, including writing minutes of their meetings and reports on their activities, making the recommendations sent to the municipality publicly available on their websites and sending newsletters to their members.

Non-electoral and electoral representation as complementary avenues of representation

We identified a number of ways in which electoral and non-electoral representation can complement each other.

Equality

Equality in electoral representation is often translated into practice in terms of the principle of one person, one vote. However, as demonstrated above, certain problems arise in relation to electoral representation in practice. These problems also came to the fore in our study. People who did not show up to the ballot box, tended to be the ones that were specifically affected by the decentralised social and health policies. This is problematic,

as their needs and preferences concerning labour and health differ some-what from more highly educated constituents who more readily take part in the electoral process (Denktas and Burdof 2016). Yet the preferences and needs of these groups can be incorporated into electoral representation when elected representatives also act on behalf of non-voters between elections and maintain close contact with them. Local councillors do so to varying degrees. Some try harder to voice the concerns of citizens who remain silent in elections and participatory arrangements:

> That's why, in addition to seeking contact with neighbourhood organisations, we also knock on the doors of people who don't show up anywhere. These people won't go to meetings [of the neighbourhood organisation] and if you go to these town meetings you just hear the people who do most of the talking. As a political party, should you follow just them? (…) You need good representation for the whole village, you know. (Municipal council member)

However, even for the elected representatives who put in quite a bit of effort to seek contact with citizens, certain groups remained out of reach:

> People with a migrant background and mental health problems – you won't get anyone from those groups to talk about [their problems]. (…) So, if I try to learn things through the usual channels I don't get anywhere. (Municipal council member)

Here, non-electoral representatives can complement electoral representatives because they can provide a voice for certain groups that might otherwise remain out of sight by maintaining closer contact with them than local councillors. Some non-electoral representatives, such as certain patient organisations and advisory councils, pay specific attention to vulnerable groups, including those with lower levels of literacy, homeless people and certain groups of non-western migrants and their descendants. However, even these representatives faced difficulties in maintaining contact with specific groups.

Respondents noted that actors, such as health professionals and churches, only take up a representative role at the local level to a limited extent. However, they are well-positioned to be the ones to ensure further equality because of their daily contact with service users; '*they go to someone's home and see the misery*' (respondent patient organisation). Indeed, they come into contact with all kinds of people.

> It [the church] is one of the few organisations that gets into all kinds of peoples' homes (…) I mean in most cases a church has properly arranged home visits. They go to peoples' homes and see what happens there, talk to people. So, it's one of the organisations [that is capable of spotting problems] first. (Chairman, local advisory council for the Social Support Act)

Non-electoral representatives can also bring to the fore the wishes of certain groups who are difficult to reach by acting as an intermediary between the municipality and service users. For example, an alderman talked about the difficulties he encountered when trying to talk to young people who use certain services: '*I want to talk to that one with that baseball cap (…) what does he want? I can't get to him: [he] thinks: "whatever".*' A regional patient organisation is trying to reach these youth by using methods familiar to them, such as making short videos on cell phones about what they find important. Moreover, non-electoral representatives are well-positioned to act as representatives of people with little trust in politics. Non-electoral representatives can, therefore, be considered legitimate or, as Saward puts it, 'authentic', because they operate outside the electoral arena. Yet even patient organisations can face problems in this respect:

> It is already a constant struggle, more or less intense, to explain to citizens that we are an independent organisation, in principle. Because actually a lot of people don't trust anything anymore. (…) A lot of people don't trust the government. (Employee, patient organisation)

Although non-electoral representatives can contribute to ensuring equality by bringing certain under-represented groups into view, respondents note that some groups receive more attention than others. In general, it seems that more representatives are active in the field of care and social policies and fewer are concerned with issues of work and income:

> We contributed to input on the Participation Act (…). We were one of the few who wrote recommendations for it. It struck me that no one else responded. (Representative, patient organisation)

We can conclude that an important benefit of having a wide variety of representatives is that more groups are represented in decision-making. Non-electoral representatives can put extra emphasis on the interests of specific groups affected by the decentralisation who were at risk of remaining out of sight. However, there remain certain groups that still seem to be under-represented in practice.

Information about citizens' views

Our study has shown that non-electoral representation on the part of both local councillors and non-electoral representatives can provide information about the interests of certain groups of citizens. When non-electoral representatives pass on this information to electoral representatives, the two forms of representation can complement each other. Elections do not provide direct information on the specific preferences of citizens regarding the decentralisation, especially where voter turnout is low and parties are

less connected to society (Mair 2005; Wolff 2013). In the case of the decentralisation, an additional problem that emerged is the local council members' limited knowledge of the decentralised policies (Loots and Peeters 2013; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2013; Van Den Berg 2013). Our respondents also recognised this problem. The decentralisation process took place very quickly. Moreover, a large number of newly elected council members had to begin their council work when the decentralisation process was already well underway. However, better connected and better informed non-electoral representatives could help council members address their lack of knowledge.

> I called the previous chairman of the social support council on a weekly basis, so to speak, so we had lots of informal contact. (…) We kept each other posted on what was happening and who you should talk to. (Local council member)

At the same time, because of the formal competences of the local council, these contacts also enabled non-electoral representatives to achieve their objectives by influencing council members.

> It has a bigger impact when the local council says it. It's convenient for municipal council members because, all of a sudden, they have more ammunition. I think you can have more influence that way. (Employee, client organisation)

It is interesting to highlight here the key figures who emerge at the municipal level. These actors often fulfilled various representative roles. For instance, former council members were active as non-elected representatives, while some individuals acted as representatives in different fora (e.g. in a patient organisation and on an advisory council), at times for a variety of groups. These well-connected individuals could ensure smooth communication between elected and non-elected representatives and between various non-elected representatives.

Checks and balances

Non-electoral representatives in particular can cater to specific groups by giving voice to their preferences. Although electoral representatives can and do claim to represent specific groups, they also have a significant role in the system of representative democracy vis-à-vis the municipality as a whole, as they must make decisions on policy proposals. Many council members also regard the whole community as the most important object of representation (Karlsson 2013). Council members can, therefore, complement the efforts of non-electoral representatives, who focus on the interest of specific groups, by balancing these interests with the shared interest of the community as a whole (Wolff 2013; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2016). In this sense, the two avenues for representation can be considered

complementary, in particular if council meetings serve as a forum in which both electoral and non-electoral representatives explicate their various claims, open to public scrutiny. This, however, is not always how things happen in practice (see below).

Non-electoral and electoral representation as undermining avenues of representation

So far, the results suggest that electoral and non-electoral representation co-exist nicely and complement each other. However, representation proves to be messy in practice; the two can also undermine each other.

Undermining claims

Our study shows that the way in which electoral and non-electoral representation relate to each other can lead to conflicts that weaken the democratic nature of representation. An important cause of such problems is the fact that non-electoral representatives often make their claim directly to the local executive board or, more specifically, to the alderman in charge of a certain policy, and not to the local council. Because of this focus, respondents say that contact between these representatives and the local council becomes somewhat problematic.

> We are advisers of the executive board and are appointed by the executive board. We make sure that the politicians know about [our advice]. (…) They know our position. We need to know our place; we are not an advisory council to the Council. (Chairman, Social Support Advisory Council)

This position means that there is little public discussion about the representation efforts of non-electoral representatives.

> They [the advisory councils] are advisers to the executive board. And that means that they do not advise the local council, but the executive board. So, if there were a problem and they communicated that through the press, then we would have a problem. Because you need to come to me with that. Then you should say: hey, you're doing something that I completely disagree with and I'm going to tell the press […] That would be really unusual if that happened. (Alderman)

As said, the focus of non-electoral representatives on the executive board and the ensuing sensitivity around the contact between elected and non-elected representatives can be an important reason for the different claims to undermine each other.

First, this issue limits the potential for non-electoral and electoral representatives to share information that they could otherwise use for productive, representation-related work. Second, non-electoral representation can

undermine electoral representation, as it can be used strategically to silence elected representatives. This is something that also happened in the context of participatory policy-making with citizens (Mayer, Edelenbos et al. 2002). Some non-elected representatives were granted a fair degree of influence by the alderman. For example, the Social Support Act advisory councils are often involved in policy development at an early stage; earlier, in fact, than the local council.

> I think they have even more influence than the local council. The local council has to make the final decision and does so based on the documents we present from the executive board. But before those documents reach the council, three advisory councils have seen them first. (Alderman)

This can lead to questions about the role of electoral representatives in these processes, as the proposals were already discussed with other actors making representative claims. In Municipality B in particular, the municipal council was informed about the proposed policies at such a late stage (and much later than the advisory councils) that they were no longer able to make any substantial changes.

Checks and balances

Contact between non-elected representatives and aldermen and civil servants is often informal. The same goes for existing contact between non-electoral and electoral representatives. This impedes the functioning of checks and balances in the system. Non-electoral representatives seldom exercised their right to speak at council meetings in the cases we studied and elsewhere. In turn, local councils seldom draw on their right to organise public hearings on the subject of the decentralisation. Informal contact keeps discussions on policy issues and, in this case, on the fundamental issue of health and social policies, largely outside the public debate. This limited the extent to which arguments concerning the decentralised policies were publicly debated and the extent to which representatives could be held accountable for the claims they made.

We observed that having key figures active in various representative roles has the advantage of helping to encourage the exchange of information between different representative channels. But it also has a downside. As one of the aldermen noted, it can make representation vulnerable and selective. It becomes vulnerable in that non-electoral representation depends exclusively on a small group of individuals. As soon as one of these individuals stops doing his or her representative work, holes emerge in the representative system. This was an issue in the smaller Municipality (B) in particular. The difficulties encountered by the advisory councils and patients and elderly organisations in finding people that

were willing to become active supports this view. Hearing the voices of only certain individuals in multiple places also creates the danger of encouraging selectivity:

> You know he has a key position in [this city] […] and that means, no matter how hard you try not to draw on your own opinion, the opinion of just one person is still heard in a lot of things. (City council member)

In short, our case studies show that the combination of electoral and non-electoral representation is not necessarily innocuous and can also cause problems in practice in a number of ways. In the next section, we reflect on these and other findings and explore ways in which the representative system can be strengthened at the local level.

Discussion

In many countries, revitalising local democracy is a key issue on the political agenda. In this paper, we aimed to explore how local democracy can be strengthened through representation defined more broadly than just *elected* representation. In this section, we reflect on the lessons learned in our case studies as they pertain to the study of local democracy and the identification of possible reinvigoration strategies.

The case studies showed that both electoral and non-electoral representation occurs at the local level and that their occurrence varies according to the nature of municipalities and policy sectors and the strategies of the representatives themselves. To explore this variation in depth, further research is needed that examines a larger number of municipalities. However, the two cases we studied offer important insight with regard to the discussion on how to reinvigorate local representative democracy.

We adopted a broad definition of representation that encompassed all actors that made explicit representative claims, as well as those that did so more implicitly by asking that attention be paid to specific groups. This made it possible to bring into view the multiple activities of the many people and groups involved in political representation (Pitkin 1967). Often, non-electoral representatives are also involved in activities other than representation. In our cases, for example, patient organisations also provided peer support and information to their members, whereas the main activity of professionals was providing care to their patients. Despite the fact that representation is not their sole or even core activity it is important to take their representative efforts into account when studying representation to determine how a representative system functions in its entirety.

Looking at the contribution of non-electoral representatives is important in an effort to move closer to the ideal of inclusion; equality requires complex combinations of representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Non-

elected representatives can speak for groups of citizens who are affected by a certain policy, but are often not inclined to speak up for themselves. This was the situation with certain service users in our case studies. Thus, these non-elected representatives can play an important role in making the invisible visible (Verba 1996). Based on experiential knowledge, day-to-day contact with service users, site visits and/or meetings with their members, non-elected representatives are well-placed to identify the interests of these specific groups. But, to contribute to democratic decision-making at the local level, non-electoral representatives need to be responsive to their created constituency. Our study shows that they have alternative authorisation and accountability mechanisms in place (for more on this, see van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2018). Our case study, therefore, shows that the importance of non-electoral representatives in terms of democratic decision-making is not exclusively relevant in the area of global issues as is often proposed (Saward 2010; Montanaro 2012; Kroger 2013). This form of representation is also important within bounded territories, in our case the municipalities, where electoral representation *is* available. Still, it should be recognised that the combination of electoral and non-electoral representation will not necessarily solve all issues related to inequality. There will always be certain groups that receive less attention than others (Saward 2016), as we saw in our case study. It is, therefore, argued that what is left out of representation is as important as what is included (Schweber 2016). While no doubt a challenge, future research should also examine the groups that remain out of sight. In addition, it should also be acknowledged that, despite their potential contribution to the vitality of local democracy, self-appointed representative 'key figures' can produce rather fragile and selective channels of representation.

Electoral and non-electoral representation can be mutually reinforcing as they encourage the sharing of information on citizens' views and thus ensure authorisation in the representative system. This was especially important in our case study because many council members admitted to lacking the necessary knowledge of the decentralised social and health policies. Non-electoral representation can, therefore, be a crucial information channel for elected representatives. In this way, electoral and non-electoral representation can also help to ensure the proper functioning of checks and balances in the representative system (Lord and Pollak 2010; Maia 2012). According to the 'sluice gate' model, the information provided by non-elected actors must be subject to the right democratic procedures to result in legitimate decision-making (Habermas 1996; Lord and Pollak 2010). Seen in this way, elected representatives have an additional role to play in balancing the different interests of citizens in an effort to serve the common interest of the entire community (Meadowcroft 2001).

However, our case studies show that, in practice, the interactions between electoral and non-electoral representation are complicated, which can limit the sharing of information and may cause problems in terms of the functioning of checks and balances in the system. Saward (2016) points out that non-electoral representation can be messy, but the same applies to electoral representation and to interaction between the two forms (van de Bovenkamp and Vollaard 2018). This messiness means that electoral and non-electoral representations are not necessarily complementary and can also undermine each other (Lord and Pollak 2010). For example, the focus of non-electoral representatives on executives limits the potential of electoral and non-electoral representatives to share information (Wolff 2013). Even though this might be also common practice at other levels, it allows executives to strategically play various representatives off each other. The informal nature of the contact between non-electoral representatives and the executive, and among various types of representatives themselves, means that these interactions happen, in large part, outside of the public debate, thereby limiting authorisation and accountability of the representatives and the decision-making process.

We would like to conclude by identifying avenues for strengthening local representation further. According to the sluice gate model (Habermas 1996), making non-electoral representation and electoral representation part of the public debate could be a way to strengthen the relationship. Representative claims made by different actors can be viewed critically, for instance professionals may sometimes have other interests at heart than those of their patients. Patient organisations may claim to speak for all patients but may actually represent the voices of particular groups of patients (Van de Bovenkamp & Vollaard 2018). A public debate on the legitimacy of claims has the advantage that claims need to be explicated, accepted and thereby legitimated in public, which can strengthen the representative relationship.

Public debate on representative claims highlights the need for local media reporting on local political issues. However, local media are disappearing in many Dutch municipalities, which limits the transparency of local politics (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers 2012). The decline in local media makes creating alternative opportunities to ensure public debate increasingly important. Non-electoral representatives can use their right to speak at council meetings. And local councils can organise hearings that include non-electoral representatives. Even in the debate, different claims will not always align and conflicts may still arise. This need not be a problem, however, and can actually strengthen the representative system. The debate among representatives can ensure reflexivity between claim-makers and can encourage contestation (Disch 2011; Maia 2012; Saward 2016). Competing claims force representatives to better justify their claims and, depending on the outcome of the debate, claims can

be accepted or rejected. Being explicit about the trade-offs made in the local council can also help to strengthen the accountability of the representative system (Lord and Pollak 2010).

Local councils play an important role in local democracies (Copus 2013). The concept of representative claims allows us to reconsider their representative practice. According to this view, elected representatives need to work on explicating and giving meaning to their claims in order to remain relevant. As stated earlier, it has been argued that electoral representatives and the political parties they belong to have lost their roots in society, which limits their potential to act as representatives (Mair 2005). In the past, these representatives could count on a clearly demarcated constituency, workers or Christians, for instance. This meant that representative claims could remain fairly implicit (Saward 2008). Today, party ideology has become less clear and local councillors can no longer count on a loyal constituency. As a result, elected representatives are required to explicate more clearly who they claim to represent and on what basis (Saward 2008). These claims can then be subject to public debate to be scrutinised.

In sum, our analysis has shown that local representation is more vibrant and varied than is often depicted. Both electoral and non-electoral representation can and do play an important role in local democracy and could, together, serve to strengthen it. In order to strengthen it further, it is import to explicate claims and make them part of public discussions.

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