

Reflections

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Introduction

1

In the first chapter we formulated some questions. The main question was ‘to what extent do the developments in local democracy differ between countries and how can those differences, if any, be explained?’ We suggested two possible answers:

- Either the same trends are taking place in almost all western democracies, whatever their history, political system, culture and structure, size, et cetera.
- Or major differences exist between countries, probably due to the same factors.

In the eight ‘country chapters’, the results of the research in fifteen different cities were presented. In this last chapter, we will attempt to make an analysis, in order to answer the main research question. Our aim is not to make an encompassing overview but rather to illustrate problems, solutions and trends. Firstly, an overview will be presented of the problems local authorities are faced with with respect to citizen participation. The problem definitions will be discussed in combination with the strategies municipalities apply in order to deal with them. Secondly, we will deal with the trends and the results of the participation policies of the local authorities that have been studied in this project, that is, in as far as we know the results. Thirdly, questions for further research will be formulated. After all, this is an exploratory study.

Problem definitions 2

In the cities we studied several problems with local democracy and with the relationships between the citizenry and local authorities were found.

Declining electoral turnout 2.1

The first problem some of the respondents mentioned, was the decline in electoral turnout. In the Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, as well as in England this problem was mentioned. We have to be careful, though: in Finland a low electoral turnout was perceived as a possible sign that citizens were fairly satisfied with local governance. In Sweden, the conservative character of political parties was mentioned and, at least in Örebro, the waning interest in being active in political parties.

Distance, a legitimacy problem 2.2

A second problem, apparently one of more importance, was the perceived distance between citizens and local governments, which hints at a legitimacy crisis, or a lack of responsiveness of the local authorities. The basic value underlying this problem definition is the belief that citizen participation is a prerequisite of a well-functioning democracy. This value we found was to be most strong in Spain, where the credo seems to be 'no democracy without participation'. Because participation in the traditional way, i.e. through associations, is declining, there is a legitimacy problem in Spain. The same holds for France, where the traditional neighbourhood associations are confronted with all kinds of problems.

In other countries and cities the same value is advocated, for example, in England where the lack of accountability is seen as a major problem of local government. In some countries we saw large differences between the two cities studied. Belgium serves as a good example: the respondents in Genk did not perceive any distance whatsoever between the municipality and the citizen, whereas their colleagues in Antwerp find themselves confronted with the almost insolvable problem of distrust of the citizenry of the traditional political parties and the local authority they run.

Insufficient information, ineffective problem solving

2.3

The third problem definition we observed is that cities are confronted with a lack of data. That is, there is not enough information available about the needs and wishes of the citizenry, and about the way to deal with the problems of the citizens. The necessity of knowledge about the needs of the people is the basis under the so-called Hämeenlinna model. In this model, the citizen functions as a source of information. In the two Spanish cities the problem is quite clear: the municipalities consider themselves incapable of problem-solving and policy-making if they do not know what the citizens want. Opinions of the members of the municipal council, the pleno, who are the bearers of the representative democracy, cannot fill this gap. In Ireland, the third country where this problem definition was encountered, the main difficulty is that, due to a lack of citizen participation, controversies emerge only during the phase of policy implementation.

Revitalising local government and democracy

2.4

Not surprisingly, in England and Ireland the debate on the relationships between the citizens and local municipalities is influenced by a debate on the position of local government in the total system of government. In both countries local government has long been a weak entity, which is partly the result of the ultra vires rule and the dependence on the central government. England combines this with a general governmental culture of paternalism and secrecy. In both countries, our respondents stated that decentralisation from the central to local government is a prerequisite for revitalising local democracy. The central governments of both countries have serious plans in this respect. It is likely that decentralisation is an important condition for revitalising local government, but at the same time we think it doubtful whether the same is true with respect to revitalising local democracy. In the Irish and English cities we studied, we encountered conservatism among local councillors, characterised by a fear of losing one's function and position and a resistance to innovation.

Representation or general will versus civil society

2.5

The last problem definition with respect to the relation between the citizen and the local authority and citizen participation is the fear some of the respondents expressed that citizen participation may lead to ad hoc decision-making and to a

decrease in strategic policy-making. In two countries, Ireland and Spain, this fear came up in the interviews. In Ireland not only citizens urged that their individual problems be solved, but municipal councillors did this as well (probably as the result of the Irish election system). Strategic issues are addressed only by the local administration, in particular the city manager. Some respondents almost advocated an increase in the distance between councillors and the citizens.

In Spain, the other country where this problem definition was found, the argument took a different direction. Here all respondents feared the specialised character of the participating associations. The associations act as interest groups, which leaves the local authority the task of weighing all popular demands and then deciding. We gained the impression that the municipality found itself unable to do so, if the participating civil society did not assume more responsibility.

In a few cities, the question was openly asked which interests the active organisations represent. The implicit suggestion is, of course, that it is risky to rely on the input of the organisations without any certainty as to who or what they represent.

Strategies

3

What strategies do municipalities apply in order to enhance citizen participation? As it was the case with the different ways our respondents defined the problems in the relations between local authority and citizens, again there are similarities and dissimilarities, between countries and also between cities in one and the same country.

Representative democracy emphasised

3.1

The first observation concerns representative democracy, which is the traditional way of decision-making in western-style democracies. Most interviewees emphasised their belief in representation as an important means of establishing good relations between the citizens and municipalities. Whatever the strategies used to enhance citizen participation, representation remains the key concept. This central role of the representative body, the municipal council, can be seen, firstly, in its function as the formally highest decision-maker (with the exception of Ireland, where the council only decides on its reserved functions). Secondly, representation

takes a central place in the way local governments deal with special committees. Most committees either consist of councillors, as, for instance, in Dublin and Birmingham, or of individuals who are appointed by political parties, the latter which is the case in Finland.

In some cities, the Spanish ones, Grenoble and Stockholm our respondents hardly mentioned any role of the formal representation of the citizens, i.e. the council.

Addition to representation: traditional means

3.2

One of the additions to the traditional representative model we came across is consultation, that is, asking opinions without transferring any decision-making powers. Consultation can assume different forms, as can be observed in many municipalities: either it takes place during the preparation of policies (Finland, England, Belgium, Germany), the delivery of services (Sweden), or it takes on the form a consultative referendum.

Another addition to the representation in the municipal council is direct election of the mayor. Direct election of the mayor is not very popular, although some countries use this system - the South-German Länder, for instance. However, in countries with a somewhat different tradition, the hesitance about or resistance to proposals for direct election of the mayor is remarkably high. Examples of such countries are England and Ireland (we could add the Netherlands as well). The same hesitance and resistance can be observed if proposals are formulated for the introduction of referenda, or, if referenda are possible, as in Spain, municipalities decide against actually holding one.

Addition to representation: new methods

3.3

All countries invest in new instruments and new ways to improve the relations between citizens and local government.

The first method can be summarised by the concept of New Public Management. Several techniques can be found which are related to this concept:

- In Stockholm we found user democracy and freedom of choosing services.
- In Örebro there are user committees within neighbourhood councils.

- In Dublin the citizen is, first and foremost, perceived as a customer of services, who has the right to get the best treatment and to complain if unsatisfied.
- In Leicester ICT is proposed a means of improving service delivery.
- In Belgium and Germany several techniques are used.
- In France and Spain, participating associations are partly responsible for the management of public services.

The second method is what we would call interactive policy-making (see chapter one of this book): by this we mean that citizens are seen not only as voters or customers, but rather as co-producers of policies. Interactive policy-making, or interactive government, requires a transfer of decision-making powers to citizens, either individual citizens or groups of citizens.

- In Nürtingen interactive government almost appears as the customary working method, judging by the number of instruments of direct democracy, the involvement of citizens in decision-making and the emphasis on the actor role of citizens (rather than the voter or client role).
- Other cities are in a more experimental phase. In Stockholm some interactive policy-making with individual citizens takes place. The procedure is under severe threat, however, because political support of those experiments is low. The municipality of Örebro seems to conduct some hesitant experiments of its own. In Ireland, Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) have been established, which are a form of co-operation between the city or county council and interest groups. The SPCs formulate strategic policies. A question that remains unanswered is whether the interest groups represent popular demands or only their own. In Birmingham and Leicester the municipality experiments with various kinds of councils and focus groups. Again the question is whether this really leads to a bigger say of individuals. As yet, most of the experiments still appear to be new methods of consultation, although our respondents had already perceived an increase in involvement and influence of the citizens. The two Spanish cities are of a somewhat different type: many people and associations are willing to participate and the municipalities are longing for citizen participation, however the ideal way of involving the citizen has not yet been found, which is partly due to the character of the associations. The Spanish strategy is clear, however; stimulation, facilitation, training, and empowering are applied in order to enable the associations to participate. Participation in the budgetary process, an attempt which has been made by the Córdoba municipality, is especially interesting.

- Some other cities are about to experiment with new methods of citizen participation. In Antwerp the municipality is going to test participatory strategies. Leipzig, too, is taking some first steps. Grenoble is discussing the possibility of going a bit further.

The role of the local civil service

3.4

In some of the countries we studied, the role of the local administration, i.e. the local civil service, is changing. The local administration is getting a more prominent position in developing strategies in neighbourhoods in, for example, Stockholm, the Irish cities and Antwerp. Some cities even have a special Participation Department (both Spanish cities). Innovation, applying new methods of neighbourhood development, empowering citizens, especially in deprived neighbourhoods, are becoming the tasks of civil servants. Politicians, i.e. the members of the municipal council, operate only in the background.

Problems

4

Of course the strategies we described above are not implemented without some difficulties and as yet unsolved problems and setbacks. These problems and setbacks can be grouped under the following headings:

- tensions in the bureaucracy
- the role of representative politics
- participation of the citizens
- the scope of decision making
- results

We will discuss these subjects below at some length. We do not do this because setbacks are more important than results. Setbacks are interesting simply because there are few concrete results to be reported (many of the processes of renewal are of a rather recent date), and because they refer to topical questions in the ongoing processes of renewal, which need an answer.

Tensions in bureaucracy

4.1

In Antwerp, this problem was stated loud and clear. Civil servants working at grass roots level in the neighbourhoods have the feeling that their work is not always taken seriously by their colleagues in the central city hall offices. Reactions from the city hall were perceived as slow, inadequate (not enough budgetary means were supplied) and not respectful enough of the work of the neighbourhood workers. This is, of course, a natural reaction of civil servants carrying out a concrete task. Yet there is more to it. It suggests that a cultural cleavage between the two categories of civil servants may be developing. An avant garde of enthusiastic, progressive, grass roots oriented civil servants confronts an established central bureaucracy, which reacts 'professional', with 'standard operating procedures', is sceptic or even cynical about the possible results and fearful of neighbourhood initiatives that conflict with central planning.

Stockholm also illustrated this. Of course, Stockholm is not Antwerp, but we saw some comparable tensions. Not everybody in Stockholm is as enthusiastic about the neighbourhood experiments as the civil servants directly engaged in this process of renewal. In other cities (Birmingham, Leicester, Nürtingen, and the Spanish cities), similar feelings were expressed.

To be precise, it is not the improvement of the citizen-city relationship in itself that is being questioned. As long as this improved relationship is considered to serve the quality of public management, it is welcomed. Techniques that focus on getting information from the citizens, such as user democracy, surveys and advisory schemes, meet almost no resistance. However, the moment the involvement of citizens tends to move up on the participation ladder and takes the shape of co-governance, feelings of wariness come to the surface.

To conclude, experiments with democratic renewal seem to lead to tensions within the bureaucracy, the moment the position of the traditional local civil service is challenged. The civil service does appreciate the exchange of information and the improvement of service orientation, but this positive attitude may change when their competence and local planning are challenged by forms of participation that tend towards co-governance. In these situations, a damaging cleavage may develop between, on the one hand, the part of the civil service that stresses the values of technical proficiency, integrated urban policies

and financial austerity and, on the other hand, the grass roots workers who focus on participation of and empowering the citizen, and on direct problem-solving, by taking local preferences into account.

The role of representative politics

4.2

Elected politicians often react in a way similar to the civil service. Experiments with local democracy, especially experiments that do not follow the tradition of representative politics are often seen by politicians as a challenge to their power and legitimacy. In almost all cities this was observed. We saw three types of reactions. First, we saw that politicians question the representativeness of participants and participating organisations and by this, they stress their legitimacy as elected representatives. It is remarkable, however, to observe that the representative quality of the representative system was hardly reflected on.

A second observation refers to the role of the politicians. When referring to the modest level of citizen participation and to questions of representation, elected politicians tend to stress that the final decision lies with them. In most countries, this is translated into playing an active role in forums for public participation. Members of the city council participate in these boards, by which means they influence the advice given to themselves. We have not seen examples of the question of the role of elected politicians in these new democratic processes having been solved satisfactory; discussions prevail.

Our third observation points to tensions between civil servants and elected politicians as a result of democratic renewal. We have observed that NPM techniques have been adopted in almost all cities we visited. Some of these techniques imply a strengthening of the relationship between the civil service and the citizen, sometimes explicitly in combination with a strategy to concentrate (or rather limit?) the role of the city council to decision-making on 'strategic issues' and leaving the more concrete problems to the civil service. But since local politics often is about small problems and really strategic issues are few, in effect this strategy leads to a retreat of representative politics. This phenomenon was earlier observed in the Dutch cities of Tilburg and Eindhoven, where it has resulted in a correction of the typical NPM approach and a search for new ways to involve the city council again (Hendriks and Tops, 1999). In Hämeenlinna and Nürtingen, similar experiences were explicitly

mentioned. More general, it is our impression that recent innovations, both democratic and administrative, have aggravated the already existing tensions between continuously professionalising civil service and lay politicians.

On the basis of this, it seems possible to conclude that democratic renewal often leads to questions about the role of representative politics. The answer to this question has not yet been found.

Participation of the citizens

4.3

The general picture of citizen participation seems somewhat disappointing. The efforts to increase citizen participation and diminish the gap between citizens and local authorities do not, in practice, lead to a substantial increase in participation. Combined with an also general decline in electoral turnout, participation is not what a 'participation-ideologue' would hope for.

However, in many cities we were told that the low level of participation can also have a positive meaning: the citizens are content and have the feeling that further investments of time and energy are redundant. This view is in accordance with some conclusions drawn by some political scientists (the so-called 'positive interpretation of non-participation'). Do our respondents, maybe, echo this well-known result of political science research? Civil servants and local politicians do read ...! But let us not be too cynical about this: there is reason to believe that satisfaction about the performance of local authorities may explain the low level of participation.

An alternative, more pessimistic interpretation also deserves a mention. It is possible that people have little faith in their ability to really influence local policies via political participation. This explanation of low participation rates is also suggested by political science. An interesting way to test the relevance of this explanation is to determine the social characteristics of participants and non-participants. If people who have little reason to be satisfied with their social position are overrepresented among non-participants, there is reason to have doubts about the easy, positive interpretation. This issue cannot be decided on the basis of our data, however.

Many of our respondents expressed doubts about the representativeness of local

participants. Sometimes it was stressed that local participants only participate to promote a specific interest or organisation. We have heard about this in almost all the cities we studied. This prompts the question who represents the 'general interest', a question that was asked by the interviewees in both Spanish cities, in Stockholm, Genk, Leicester and Grenoble. Interesting in this respect, is the experiment in Grenoble with 'random selection' of participants for some advisory committees.

Sometimes, too, the socio-economic representativeness of participants was called into question: aren't many of them middle or upper class? Do local authorities succeed in reaching precisely the classes of society that seem to be most losing touch with local governance? Questions like these, asked by many of our respondents, have led to concentrated efforts to mobilise the lower social classes by means of neighbourhood experiments, as we have seen in Stockholm, Dublin, Leicester, Birmingham and Antwerp. In the other cities as well, the neighbourhood approach seems to be a strategic option.

In general, it can be concluded that the risk of misrepresentation does exist but can be corrected by the representative system. New forms of participation are not seen as an alternative, but as an addition to classical representation. The balance between the two forms of democracy is, however, unstable. Whereas cities like Birmingham, Örebro, Nürtingen, and Antwerp seem to be inclined to transfer substantial decision-making powers to de-central (territorial or functional) bodies, in other cities, such as Helsinki, Genk, Leicester and Stockholm the final decision-making authority of elected politicians is stressed.

Scope of decision making

4.4

In some cases the experiments with democratic reform have raised questions about what can and should be decided at a certain level. What will be the scope of future decentralised decision-making? In almost all cities with experiments that go beyond the advisory model, this question is at least suggested. In Nürtingen, the answer to this question was stated in clear terms: it is a matter of low politics versus high politics (*kleine und grosse Politik*), which implies that participatory models (should) focus on low politics and leave the high politics to the elected representatives. This clearly underlines the complementary function of the participatory experiments. Unfortunately, such an answer is only an answer 'in abstrac-

to'. Because, what is high politics in local governance? The Finnish interviewees suggest that basically their business is pragmatic problem-solving and management of nationally decided policies, which leaves little room for truly political issues. And if we look what is going on in the decentralised decision-making forums, we do indeed see a lot of rather small-problem-solving.

This may suggest that the participatory issues are embroidery of local governance. The big issues are decided by elected politicians and traditional civil servants working in city hall, and the smaller (petty?) problems in new participatory experiments carried out by enthusiastic grass roots oriented colleagues (cf. Antwerp). Such an image is, of course, disenheartening. It suggests that the new forms of democracy do not touch the core of local governance.

On the other hand, is this at all a relevant theme? Firstly, as we observed above, much of local governance is about small issues, so the implied criticism (no big political issues) also applies to the traditional core of local policy-making. Secondly, the cases of cities with grave social problems in deprived neighbourhoods (Antwerp, Leicester, Birmingham, Stockholm) illustrate that it is maybe not the contents of policies but the act of decision-making that is most relevant. Of course, the new forms of democracy hope to find better answers to problems in the neighbourhoods. Above all, however, and our respondents are clear about this, it is the goal of democratic renewals to re-integrate a class of people that threatens to slip away.

Conclusion

4.5

To conclude this section about results, we can state that it is too early to list the results of democratic renewal in a systematic way. With respect to substantial results, we observe mainly the hope of better, more precise and widely supported policies. As for the process itself, we suggest that attention be focused on re-integrating the citizen, finding a new balance between representative and participatory democracy and between problem-oriented contacts with civil servants and more political contact (of an advisory or even decision-making nature) with local authorities.

We have seen that our respondents, proud as they may be of their work, are well aware of the many obstacles and unsolved questions. These obstacles and ques-

tions actually dominated the interviews. This may reflect our research interests, but it is also an indicator of the enormous amount of yet undecided issues and dilemmas. Above, we explored some of these issues: tensions within the bureaucracy; questions about the proper role of representative politics; the remaining low level of citizen participation and its implications; and, finally, the substantial relevance of decision-making in the new democratic forums.

Trends

5

Reading the previous chapters, one sometimes gets the idea that all is going well: enthusiastic civil servants and politicians are telling eagerly about their experiments. The results are expressed in different ways. In some cities, the effects on society were frequently mentioned. In Nürtingen, the phrase ‘communitarian approach’ was heard. Similar ideas were observed in Limerick, Genk and the Spanish cities, but parts of this communitarian logic seem to be implicitly present in almost all cities we studied. Democratic renewal is expected to contribute to rebuilding or maintaining ‘social capital’ and revitalising society. It is not strange that in cities where these effects are stressed, the focus of democratic renewal is on the participation of organised groups.

Other cities focus more on citizens as individuals. For example, the interviewees in Grenoble explicitly expressed their wish to re-integrate individual citizens into public governance. In cities like Grenoble it is assumed that, whatever the advantages of the communitarian approach may be, the conditions of modern metropolitan life often make it difficult to rely on organised citizens only. It is hoped that enhanced chances of public participation will contribute not only to improving the citizen-local government relationship, but also to the integration of the isolated individual in a vital society (which seems to hint at a communitarian approach after all).

In some cases (Helsinki, Hämeenlinna, Genk) the satisfaction of citizens was mentioned. However, usually this satisfaction stems mainly from the improved quality of service delivery that has resulted from the introduction of more client-oriented practices. This is important, of course, but not directly linked to improving the democratic process.

Another advantage of increased citizen participation in local governance that was

mentioned in almost all cities is the expected improvement of the quality of public policies. Because they are better informed, fine-tuned to real problems and supported by the neighbourhoods or groups concerned, these policies are deemed more effective and legitimate.

However, maybe the most interesting observation is the enthusiasm of those working on projects of renewal. This enthusiasm is an important finding of our study. Throughout Western Europe, from north to south, local governance is experimenting with democratic renewal. It is not a 'hobby' of one or a few countries: democratic renewal seems to be taking place everywhere. If one is willing to see this experimenting mood as a positive development, the enthusiasm of the people engaged in the process is to be applauded: it keeps them motivated.

Let us summarise the conclusions formulated above by trying to find trends in local democratic renewal. First, we will try to sketch some general trends. Afterwards we will discuss some differences we observed.

General trends

5.1

As for general trends, one observation is inevitable. Throughout Europe, the tool kit of New Public Management is being widely used. Of the cities we visited, there was not one where the NPM recipe had not been tested. Our respondents seemed satisfied about this, because the NPM techniques have resulted in much-needed changes towards a more client-oriented public service, new forms of user influence, and more policy effectiveness. Interesting enough, we observed that in some cities that have some experience with NPM the question about the role of politics in an NPM-dominated administrative culture is back on the agenda. The feeling is that politics should not completely wither away as a result of effective administrative renewal.

A second general trend worth mentioning is that experiments with democratic renewal seem to be taking place throughout Western Europe. We stressed this above. It is fascinating to observe the extent of innovation in Europe. Democratic reform is not a toy of older democracies with a traditionally strong local government (Nordic countries, north-west Europe). It is also found in systems where local democracy is revitalising and renewing (England, France and Spain) or emerging (Ireland).

A last general trend we would like to mention is the impact of communitarian ideas, or at least of approaches in which the role of ‘social capital’ and ‘civil society’ is recognised. Since municipalities are traditionally often seen as true communities, with intense interaction and little distance between the local authority and its inhabitants, this is not surprising. However, because many municipalities seem to be losing their ‘communal’ character, communitarianism may be an important element of the reform strategy, and be used to stress that local governance should remain a form of self-governance by people living together in cities or towns. Even if this may seem somewhat utopian in the context of modern life in individualised big cities, the communitarian challenge is felt (again) by those responsible for the quality of local governance.

Differences

5.2

Obviously, differences can also be observed. We would like to pay attention to a few of these. Firstly, the issue of local autonomy will be addressed. Following that, a few remarks will be made about possible differences in the role of representative politics, in the position of the citizen and in the relationship between the civil service.

Local autonomy

A question that was constantly on our minds concerned the degree of autonomy of the cities we investigated. This is a complex issue that falls outside the scope of this study. However, because the degree of autonomy may have consequences for the evaluation of the quality of local democracy, we will have to address this issue in the follow-up of this project (see below). For the time being, we have to satisfy ourselves with reporting some impressions.

A first impression is that our respondents themselves indicated that they perceive differences in local autonomy. Some of our respondents in Belgium suggested that Belgian local autonomy is less comprehensive than in the Netherlands or the Nordic countries. Some of our Irish respondents share this view, with respect to their country. Our interviewees in Finland and Sweden had indeed the idea that the autonomy of their local systems is rather high. If one looks at actual perform-

ance, though, the impression rises that the autonomous Nordic municipalities do not seem to be very much interested in political activism. Basically, they seem to be pre-occupied by managing and implementing the huge, nationally-decided package of welfare provisions.

Traditionally, it is thought that municipalities that operate under the 'ultra vires-doctrine' have limited autonomy, as compared to municipalities that have been granted a more general competence. In legal terms this is obviously true, but if one looks at practice, the image changes. Local government in England does indeed work under a set of rules that may cause some complications, but is nevertheless actively engaged in a set of tasks that resembles that of other continental cities: the English cities have to provide answers to more or less the same local problems. As we indicated above, the Nordic cities seem to illustrate the opposite. In practice, their system of legally guaranteed local autonomy, 'local self-government', does not seem to differ very much from the performance of some cities elsewhere on the continent.

Budgetary matters complicate this picture. From a formal point of view, it matters a lot whether cities have their own income, or are financially dependent higher authorities (i.e. national government). In practice, however, we can observe that most cities have to cope with the problem that their (own or assigned) budgets are often hardly sufficient to cover the expenses associated with their task to implement national policies, which leaves little discretionary space.

The role of representative politics

The role of representative politics seems to be changing. Not in a drastic way: in all the cities we studied, the representative system remains the backbone of local democracy. Also, in most of the cities instruments for enriching representative democracy (such as hearings, surveys, information centres, neighbourhood-visits and the like) are being tested.

Apart from this, we saw in some cities (a.o. Örebro, Nürtingen and Birmingham) some interesting experiments with new instruments for participation in the traditional system, and also with new forms of participatory democracy. In these experiments the citizen is required to play the role of co-producer of policies, sharing responsibility with elected politicians. It is interesting to observe that in most of

these cases the relationship between these new forms of democracy and the traditional representative system has not yet been settled. Often politicians have trouble defining their position in these new decision-making arenas. Do they have the right of the last say (in the city council) and, if so, what is the proper way to exercise this right, without frustrating the newly participating citizens? What role should they play in the participation process itself: do they have to remain in the background and only offer information on budgets and city policies, or are they expected to play a stimulating role in the discussion?

Not all cities seem inclined to adopt this participatory approach. In some cities, there is a feeling that a modernised version of classical political representation is an adequate operating model for democracy. This feeling was expressed by some of our respondents in Helsinki, Stockholm, Genk and Leicester. It will be a subject for further research to determine what the comparative advantages of both approaches.

A remarkable situation was found to exist in Finland and in the Republic of Ireland. Here, we observed the lack of a well-developed political executive. The mayors in Ireland seem to lack a well-staffed office and, as a consequence, are hardly able to play an executive role. This task is left to the city manager, who is a civil servant. In Finland, we saw how elected politicians do reach executive positions, but that they, once they have reached such a position, start acting like civil servants. In both countries, the traditional model of representative democracy is strongly adhered to. This leaves us with the puzzling question how to tie in the belief in representative politics with the absence of representative politicians in the executive sphere. Maybe the very pragmatic administrative culture we observed in both countries leads to downplaying the relevance of political debate at the local level. The resulting a-political climate is a possible explanation for the absence of a well-developed political executive.

The views on the position of the citizen differ from city to city. In all cities, the citizen is seen as a voter, client and carrier of information. Not only attention for the citizen as a voter and client of services, but also public hearings, the right to appeal, surveys and the like have become standard instruments of Western-European local governance.

In other cities we observed additional roles. For example, experiments were being conducted with making the citizen partly responsible for public policies, which

means that the citizen becomes a co-producer or partner in a user-democracy. Also, we saw how many municipalities seem to prefer to focus on what one might call the organised citizen. In that case not the individual citizen but all kind of local organisations become the target of participatory strategies. Above, we have suggested a relationship between this approach and the influence of communitarian belief systems.

We did not observe systematic, national differences with respect to the above. The differences we have seen seem to arise from the political views of the local officials.

The role of civil servants

Civil servants turn out to be strong actors in the processes of (democratic) renewal throughout Europe. In all the cities we visited, we met with enthusiastic civil servants, dedicated to the task of renewing local administration and making it more responsive to the needs and wishes of the people. Probably due to differences in the view on the reform process (perfecting representation vs. participatory strategies), the civil servants in the different cities play different roles. In the first category of cities (perfecting representation), civil servants concentrate on their role of collector and mediator of information, on policy preparation, and on managerial tasks. So, at first glance, these civil servants appear to play a neutral role, and to be serving the political system.

In the second category (participatory strategies), we see that civil servants play an active role in neighbourhood development, agenda building and stimulating participation. Political and ideological dimensions thus become visible aspects of their work.

These differences in the political side of the work of civil servants should not be overstated. It is a generally accepted and hardly contested view in Public Administration that civil servants do play political roles in all governmental systems. Usually, they are even considered strong players. The differences we suggested above may, however, stress the different political roles that civil servants can play; some civil servants play the role of the committed professional, expert in their domain of policy, eager to see their insights being used, whereas others picture themselves as agents of public mobilisation, who feel obliged to stimulate

especially the lower social strata to (re-)enter the public domain. The normative implications of these (new) political roles of civil servants are worth exploring, as are the behavioural consequences and the effects in the reality of politics and administration.

Further research is needed

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It is almost obligatory to end a book with the statement that further research is needed. For this study, however, it is a firm conclusion. We conducted this exploratory study, mainly to break ground for future research. It is our goal to form a group of researchers from various European countries to continue this project with in-depth studies of aspects of the issues we addressed above. The research style of this group will have to be a comparative one. We will not aim to produce a broad overview of local government in European countries, but rather wish to analyse specific questions in a comparative perspective, looking for explanations that only become visible when differences and similarities in the context of local government are taken into account.

Let us suggest some research questions. Firstly, we are convinced that a realistic appraisal of the empirical side of local autonomy is very much needed. What are the tasks of local government in the different national systems, are these tasks political or mainly administrative? Under what kind of legal and financial constraints do they work, and what is the resulting discretionary space? An interesting addition to this might be turning the world upside down by taking the citizen's perspective. For what kind of services and needs will the citizen, in various stages of his life or in various roles, meet local government as an important actor? What is the actual impact of local government on schooling, housing, welfare, health and so on, seen from the perspective of a real-life citizen in a certain European country? This may throw a new light on the relevance of local government.

The second set of research questions we would like to suggest concerns the concept of state tradition. The classification offered by Loughlin and Peters, which appeared very helpful at the start of our project, needs to be elaborated on. We have seen how their classification, tentative as it may be, suggests possible explanations of developments in the citizen-municipality-relationship. Sometimes our findings concur with their suggestions, but in other instances state traditions do

not seem to matter much. Nevertheless, we are convinced that elements of the concept of state tradition will have to be taken into account. In the first place, the 'objective' elements such as the legal status of local government, the financial statute and the supervisory structure have to be considered. In addition, more 'soft' variables like the political and administrative culture and the 'discourse' of democracy may serve as interesting possible explanations of differences we observed.

A third set of questions refers to the new participatory strategies. What kind of techniques are used; how do these techniques relate to the traditional system of representative governance; what role models for the behaviour of politicians and civil servants are developing; and what are the consequences of these developments for the relationship between citizens and their municipalities? Of course, legal and constitutional traditions as well as the political and administrative culture concerned may have to be taken into account as possible explanations.

Since many of our respondents appeared to use elements of the 'communitarian' approach in their reasoning, it might be useful to look at the quality of civil society in modern European cities. This is our fourth suggestion for further research. Modern life in big cities, with the associated problems of individualisation, alienation, lack of social control and loneliness, seems to conflict with the communitarian idea of citizens who are well-integrated into social and political networks. What then is the relevance of communitarian thought: is the neighbourhood approach a practical option of rebuilding communities? Or are the communitarian ideas mainly slogans and a 'cover-up' for the introduction of group democracy, in situations where individual citizens are difficult to reach and involve?

Obviously, more questions can be raised. We will refrain from this, trusting that the four questions mentioned above, are stimulating enough to continue the comparative study of local governance in Europe. Only by persevering we will be able to remedy the lack of systematic knowledge about European local government and local democracy.

