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Participation vs representation: Councillor attitudes towards citizen engagement

Alex Parsons, Rebecca Rumbul
Executive summary

Citizen participation can be used by local and national public bodies to improve the quality, relevance and legitimacy of policies and services. The political backdrop to uses of citizen participation shapes the form and likelihood of success of the exercise, as elected decision makers can influence the result through decisions around the scope of the exercise, as well as less subtly through the ability to selectively accept or reject recommendations.

Using a survey of local councillors, this research explores how their awareness and perceptions of citizen participation is affected by political party or political situation. This includes a councillor’s personal partisan identity, but also the political balance of the council. The survey identified partisan and structural factors that shape the perceptions of local representatives of citizen participation. Our findings include:

- Councillors have diverse views toward citizen participation, with some supportive of more weight being put on this form of decision-making, while others arguing that if decisions are made by elected councillors there is someone to hold accountable.
- Councillor awareness and support for these methods increase if a participatory exercise has previously taken place in the area.
- There were high levels of acceptance of participatory processes being run by the current leadership of a council (86%), with this remaining quite high (76%) among councillors currently not part of a council majority.
- 56% of councillors would give greater weight to their own views than the results of the process (with no details of what that process had been). This is lower in areas where there is no overall control, where only 41% would give greater weight to their own views.
- Very few councillors favour approaches where the result is authoritative or binding.
- Every policy area except Children’s Social Care had over 50% acceptance that a participatory exercise could be appropriate. Programmes related to environment and cultural programmes rated highly, while programmes concerning social care scored lower. For all categories except planning and public health, councillors rated these activities as more appropriate if their council had previously engaged in such an exercise.

These findings show that councillors make personal evaluations of participatory exercises based on a mix of political and practical factors. While there is a tension between participatory and representative democratic structures, in practice this tension can lead to a variety of outcomes. Predicting the success or failure of future efforts in community participation requires understanding about how this tension affects not only the form of deliberative exercises, but how results will be interpreted and implemented.
About mySociety

mySociety is a not-for-profit social enterprise, based in the UK but working with partners internationally. We build and share digital technologies that help people be active citizens, across the three areas of Democracy, Transparency, and Community. As one of the first Civic Technology organisations to be established, we are committed to building the Civic Technology community and undertaking rigorous research that tests our actions, assumptions and impacts. Our global research work into digital development, civic technology and user-centred design has positioned mySociety as a leading authority in digital civic engagement and participation.

About Public Square

Public Square is about building better local democracies, where citizens participate more in local decision-making. We’re bringing together a range of perspectives, including service design, digital transformation and democratic innovation to investigate what is needed to improve participation. By weaving together these disparate strands, we’re developing tools, frameworks, and approaches that match key unfilled needs for practitioners, councillors and citizens.

Public Square was launched as a programme of action research, run by Democratic Society. In the first year of the programme Democratic Society worked in partnership with mySociety. Together we focused on four places in the UK where we worked with councils and residents to understand how to improve local democracies. It was initially set up with funding from Luminate.

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Introduction

One of the important questions to arise immediately after the UK’s Brexit referendum was whether the result should be seen as binding by elected officials. Referendums sit outside of the ‘normal’ course of representative democracy, inviting citizen participation on a key question, but they are generally not binding in law, meaning that Parliament can theoretically refuse to honour the result. This became one of the more divisive arguments in British politics and reflects a key challenge in integrating new innovations and novel democratic exercises into our existing democratic institutions. New forms of citizen participation are meant to give citizens input into important public decisions, but may come into conflict with existing decision-making structures.

For UK local authorities, the conflict between these two systems shapes not only the design of participatory systems, but if, how and when their outputs become policy. This is not a straightforward collision between an established representative model and new forms of participation, but an ongoing and shifting debate about what the role of a local councillor is while the role of local authorities themselves change. This conflict might express itself in exercises not held, but could also be seen more subtly where outputs of participatory processes are selectively approved, so that the outcomes that make it into policy are only those where there is no conflict. Opposition or support of participatory approaches may be based on experience, local political circumstances, or principled views.

The increase in deliberative democratic processes means it is increasingly important to understand how representative and participative democracy exercises interact. This research aims to build an understanding of the views of local councillors in the UK towards participatory and deliberative approaches. Using a survey of local councillors mapped against their different political circumstances, we explore how their awareness and perceptions of participation is affected by political party, political situation, and previous experience of citizen participation.

The survey found that councillor awareness of and support for participatory methods increases following experience of such activities. Even opposition councillors tended to be quite supportive (76%) of participatory processes when run by the current leadership of the council. Where more disagreement arises is in how the outcome of processes should be handled. Very few councillors favour approaches where the result is authoritative or binding, and while there was no strong consensus on whether participatory exercises should be a permanent fixture or conducted issue by issue, the balance of opinion leans towards weak forms of the latter. Councillors in councils where there is no one party with an overall majority are more likely to give greater weight to participatory exercises (59%) than those where there is a single party majority (38%). In open ended responses, councillors articulated a mix of reactions to participation, from complete support, through conditional requirements,
to defences of the primacy of elected local councillors. There is a tension between participatory and representative democratic structures but in practice this tension can lead to a variety of outcomes.

**Background**

**Local councillors**

There are over 20,000 local councillors in the UK. The role is an elected, part time, political role. A 2018 survey found that on average councillors spent 22 hours a week on council business (Local Government Association 2018). The Local Government Association (2019) guidance for new councillors details the responsibilities that will be expected by ‘residents’, which includes casework, communicating council decisions and working with local organisations. There is scope to self-define the aspects of the role that are important, and more generally the role evolves in response to changes in local authorities. A University of Birmingham project, The 21st Century Councillor, identified that new technologies, new scales of working, and perma-austerity were forces leading to changes in how councillors work and interact with council officers and constituents (Mangan et al 2016, p.6). The nature and remuneration of the role means that councillors are not generally not demographically representative of their area.

Councillors are more likely to be older and male than the area they represent. In 2018, 63% of councillors were male and 45% of councillors were retired, with an average age of 59. Only 15% were aged under 45, while 42% of the over-20 population was between 20 and 45 (Local Government Association 2018, United Nations 2019). A Fawcett Society (2017) report into the representation of women in local government points out that while the representation of women at the national level has improved, the progress at the local government level has been much slower. Recently created levels of devolution have been male-dominated: ‘[a]ll of the metro mayors are male [and] 9 in 10 seats at the top table of Combined Authorities are occupied by men’. Similarly, the proportion of ethnic minority local councillors is only 7%, compared to 10% in Parliament and 14% in the overall population (Sobolewska and Begum 2020). As well as being less representative of the population than the national parliament, they are also elected by far fewer people and elections compare poorly in terms of turnout compared to national elections.

Turnout is low in local government elections and councillors (and councils) are often elected on turnouts below 50%. The overall turnout in an English local election was last above 50% in 2015, when it was held alongside the general election. Turnout is better in Scotland, but only 8 out of 32 councils in the 2017 Scottish local elections had a turnout above 50%. Only one council in England has had more than 50% turnout since 2016 (Uberoi 2017). While electoral participation is weak, councillors are firmly embedded within the national party system. The
vast majority (88%) are associated with national parties, and 68% are associated with the Labour or Conservative parties. Councils are typically run by an administration of councillors from a single party: only a third of councils had no overall majority by a single party. Lack of majority is far more likely outside of England, with the Single Transferable Vote (STV) voting system in Scotland and Northern Ireland meaning most councils do not have an overall majority for a single party. Changing local circumstances for local government, as well as critiques of both demographic representation and electoral mandate, create situations where new forms of deliberative participation may be attractive as solutions to deadlocked political problems, but will represent challenges to the authority of current methods of council decision making.

**Deliberation, participation and representation**

The adoption of alternate forms of democratic process can have many different motivations. As French and Laver (2009) put it, ‘public consultation is multifaceted and serves no single purpose – agencies can use it to obtain information from citizens, to gain public approval for projects or decisions, to legitimate previously taken or unpopular decisions, to legitimate the organisation itself, to foster community action, or simply to meet statutory requirements’. Complicating the design of new democratic mechanisms are these ambiguities over motive, as well as questions of how these processes should relate to decision making structures.

That deliberation transforms participants is part of the point of the process but also means they are no longer typical members of the public. What right do randomly selected participants have to influence policy decisions on behalf of non-participants? Restating Parkinson (2006)’s argument, Lafont (2015, p. 13) suggests that sampling methods used by deliberative processes break ‘the bond of accountability of authorization between poll participants and outsiders - a bond that is characteristic of elected representatives and necessary for democratic legitimacy’. Regardless of whether the deliberative process produces a better outcome, there is no direct consent to that outcome by the public as a whole. The authorisation of processes by the public flows through elected officials, who can claim a legitimate basis for accepting or rejecting the result.

If electoral authorisation is an important differentiator from other democratic exercises, the practical realities of authorisation need to be considered. It is difficult to imagine a standard for meaningful authorisation that did not require at least 50% participation in the process (and ideally 50% approval of the winner). Indeed, majority turnout has a meaningful basis in UK law, with the Trade Union Act 2016 requiring that strike ballots have a 50% turnout to authorise the result. As local elections rarely achieve majority participation, this is an area where forms of deliberative democracy present a more substantial challenge. They may involve decision-making by groups that are more representative of the area than councillors themselves (both demographically and politically), which makes the reply that councillors
are authorised by the electorate difficult to substantiate. While in theory this results in two less than perfectly authorised systems in conflict, in practice one already holds the power and how that power is distributed politically affects the viability of alternate forms of citizen participation.

**Political circumstance**

For councils with narrow majorities or 'no overall control', alternate forms of governance or decision-making are harder to describe as 'giving away power', when that power currently cannot be effectively exercised. In these situations political circumstance leads to questions about the correct structure of local democracy. A Centre for Public Scrutiny blog post looking at changes in the governance structure of councils found that '[c]ouncils feeling their way through the realities of 'no overall control' are in some cases alighting on the committee system as a model to assist them in making decision-making more consensual' (Hammond 2019). The decision-making processes councils adopt are affected by the ease or difficulty of exercising power, and alternate forms of democracy may be effective ways to break deadlocks and allow progress.

Alternative democratic schemes may serve a legitimising rather than a conflict resolution purpose. Examining the use of national consultations in Hungary, Batory and Svensson (2019) argue that consultations can use the involvement of the public as cover for existing agendas while shielding against external criticism of actions. While the stakes are lower, the same dynamic can apply to the use of participatory approaches by local government. For instance, Lewisham Council is a 'one party council' where the Labour party holds all the seats. Lewisham’s 2019 Local Democracy Review covers a range of issues related to how the role of councillors was understood by citizens and the effectiveness of existing forms of participation, but the review does not engage with the 'issue' of only one party being represented, or indeed mention the word 'party' (London Borough of Lewisham 2019). Participatory democracy can be used to present an alternate vision of democratic improvement that does not involve increased electoral competition. The goals of alternative democratic exercises can be shaped by how power is already distributed. This also affects how decision-makers will react to the results of these processes.

**Elite reaction**

If an alternative democratic process is meaningful, it should be able to deliver a different result from that delivered by the current process. This sets up a conflict with current actors who hold power over decision-making, both in and out of government. Niessen (2019) examined how political actors and other stakeholders regarded a mini-public about climate change in Luxembourg. They found that while opinions were positive, this did not translate into the belief that its recommendations should be binding. Examining whether there was
any factor explaining responses to this question the key difference was ‘the extent to which actors agreed with the recommendations’. This is a key issue for mini-publics given the number of people directly involved is small, so the implementation of recommendations requires either moving public opinion or the buy-in of existing sources of power.

Democratic elites react to new forms of democratic participation in ways that reflect their varying motivations and goals. Niessen (2019) divided elite reactions into four groups: elitist, expert, (re)connection, and reinvention. The latter two argue that mini-publics complement or improve on existing democratic practice. The first two resist this interpretation, arguing that expert opinion is more useful in consultation than citizens, or that elected politicians have greater legitimacy. That mini-publics may produce many recommendations gives scope for reaction between total acceptance and rejection. Hendriks (2016) examined the example of an Australian state where a mini-public was formally integrated into a legislative committee. This led to a situation where ‘some of the more controversial citizens’ recommendations were misinterpreted, watered down or rejected’. In this way, recommendations of mini-publics may become policy, but the tension between the two forms of democracy (where present) is resolved in favour of current systems of decision making.

Veto power over the effectiveness of mini-publics does not just lie with the end decision-makers, but anyone invested in current methods of decision making. As Hendriks (2006) found, the engagement of organisations in a deliberative exercise varies by their perception of how it affected their existing interests, and non-participation could be used strategically. Similarly French and Laver (2009) discovered that groups opposed to a mini-public could act to minimise it through withholding experts. Existing actors have substantial power to resist and undermine (or alternatively, welcome and support) alternate decision-making processes. This makes understanding their motivations and attitudes key to the success or failure of new democratic approaches.

**Research questions and methodology**

Table 1 shows the political variables under examination, and the hypothesis of how they may affect councillor perceptions or opinions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State of council control</td>
<td>In parties with no overall control, alternative approaches may be seen more favourably.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual relation to council control</td>
<td>Councillors in opposition parties may have greater support for participation as they currently lack power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To investigate these hypotheses, an email survey of a representative sample of local councillors was used to gauge attitudes and knowledge of different forms of deliberative or participatory democracy. The survey had two sections. The first sought a general picture of knowledge and attitudes towards citizen participation. Respondents were asked questions related to familiarity with different kinds of participatory or deliberative approach, policy areas they considered citizen participation appropriate for, and what factors they saw as important for the process to be legitimate.

Councillors were asked about their level of knowledge of the following approaches (the definition was not provided):

- Participatory budgeting - direct voting to decide which projects should receive public funds.
- Civic crowdfunding - crowdfunding for civic projects, often topped up by public money if meeting set requirements.
- Citizens’ assemblies - groups of 50-250 people who are representative of the community and meet over a number of weekends to deliberate on a topic.
- Citizen juries - groups of 12-24 people who are representative of the community and meet over several days to deliberate on an issue.
- Co-production of services - involvement of citizens in the design and delivery of public services.
- Local forums - Structured discussions involving both members of the public and councillors and council officers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word-of-mouth/ familiarity</th>
<th>Those more familiar with participation (particularly with positive outcomes) may be more supportive than individuals without experience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Support or opposition may be ideological, and directly relate to party identity. Smaller parties may be more likely to support participatory exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation/area</td>
<td>Different areas of the UK have different political environments and this may lead to different opinions on alternate forms of participation. In particular, Scotland has a different form of local government and more consistent use of participatory exercises.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Political variables and hypotheses
Exercises may be carried out under one of these names that does not exactly match that description. This survey question will in many cases be testing 'brand awareness' rather than detailed knowledge.

The second section was interested in differences between groups of councillors in terms of attitudes towards the conflict between alternate forms of democracy. Responses were weighted to be representative of the demographics and political situations of respondents, and chi-squared tests were used to determine where a distribution for a sub-group was measurably different to the overall distribution. Differences with a standardised coefficient above 2 or below -2 were highlighted. Where multiple possible factors were identified, regression analyses were used to determine if these were independent factors.

The dataset of all UK councillors was created by merging several datasets that were in turn derived by scraping council websites. An export from opencouncildata.co.uk formed the core of the data (including name, council and party information), and emails for a large subset of councillors were gathered through Democracy Club’s Local Government Scraper Framework (2018). Gender information was added to this dataset using a combination of previously crowdsourced Democracy Club (2020) candidates data, deriving likely gender from name, and filling any remaining gaps with online research. This resulted in a dataset of 20,249 councillors.

From this dataset, the councillors were grouped into clusters that were unique combinations of: major party, nation, if councillor was part of majority, if council had a majority, council type, and councillor gender. A stratified sample was created that was representative of these factors within the limitation of the large number of missing email addresses (32%). Nine councils were omitted from the sample to avoid a conflict of interest where they were involved in separate programmes related to deliberative democracy the researchers were also involved in. Following a pilot exercise sending 60 emails (to test the validity of the survey questions), a first batch of 6,000 emails was sent. Additional batches of 300 and 500 emails were sent to improve the representation of non-English and Conservative councillors respectively. At the conclusion of this exercise, there were 122 responses, with a higher than expected number of responses from female, Liberal Democrat and Green councillors. The anesrake R package was used to reweight the results with a raking approach, which dynamically adjusts weights to create values that are representative for multiple criteria. Due to the lack of responses, councillors in Northern Ireland, UKIP councillors, and councillors for the City of London were omitted from the analysis.
Survey analysis

Awareness of different activities

Local councillors had a wide spectrum of knowledge of participatory exercises, with certain activities far more widely known than others. Using the weighted responses, Table 6 shows the percentage of respondents who were aware of different forms of participatory or deliberative activity, sorted by the average score. This demonstrates that there was more awareness of citizens' assemblies than citizen juries, and that there was broader but less detailed knowledge of civic crowdfunding than participatory budgeting. Using weighted t-tests (Figure 2), the average level of knowledge for all except civic crowdfunding was higher when the councillor was aware of a previous participatory exercise at their respective council.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Know nothing</th>
<th>Know a little</th>
<th>Know a lot</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local forums</td>
<td>12.52</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>46.38</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens' assemblies</td>
<td>20.91</td>
<td>57.63</td>
<td>21.46</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-production of services</td>
<td>34.75</td>
<td>42.46</td>
<td>22.79</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory budgeting</td>
<td>37.56</td>
<td>46.85</td>
<td>15.59</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic crowdfunding</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>53.58</td>
<td>11.22</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen juries</td>
<td>57.96</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>9.44</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Weighted awareness of all respondents of different forms of citizen engagement
Figure 1. Weighted awareness of all respondents of different forms of citizen engagement

**Previous exercise and perceived awareness**

Awareness scores of policy areas with difference (95% paired interval)

Figure 2. Change in awareness scores if a previous exercise was held.
Table 3. Results of weighted t-tests of awareness against if a previous exercise has been held.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Average score if no exercise or unsure</th>
<th>Average score if previous exercise</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local forums</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>*0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens' assemblies</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>*0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-production of services</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>*&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory budgeting</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>*&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic crowdfunding</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen juries</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>*0.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participatory budgeting

Knowledge of participatory budgeting (PB) was different for different parties (Figure 3). More independent councillors ‘knew nothing’ about PB (72%), while Labour councillors were less likely to ‘know nothing’ (24%), but also not any more likely to ‘know a lot’ (16%). The (few) SNP respondents universally ‘know a lot’ about PB. This is not limited to the SNP, but applied to most respondents in Scotland, where 77% of respondents knew ‘a lot’ compared to 16% across the country (figure 4).1 In the charts below, a + or a - show where a chi-square test suggests a category is significantly different from the overall breakdown (a standardised residual above 2 or below -2). Categories that are not statistically significant to the overall breakdown of responses are not displayed.

1 Figure 4 is not reflective of the party balance in individual countries. However, the weighting means that the SNP has been adjusted to 34% from 27% of respondents from Scottish councils - which is correct for Scotland, and so this graph is showing something additional to results for the SNP in the previous table.
Figure 3. Distribution and chi-square test of awareness of participatory budgeting against party

Figure 4. Distribution and chi-square test of awareness of participatory budgeting against nation

Citizens’ assembly, co-production and local forums

Figure 5 shows that Conservative councillors were more likely to say they knew nothing about citizens assemblies than respondents in general (36% compared to 21%), while Labour were much less likely to say they knew nothing than respondents in general (3.71% compared to 21%). Figure 6 shows Independent (67%) and (to a lesser extent) Conservative councillors (49%) were more likely to ‘know nothing’ about co-production of services
compared to all respondents (35%), while Labour were more likely than the general set of respondents to ‘know a lot’ (41% versus 23%). There was a difference in knowledge of local forums (figure 7) depending on whether a councillor was part of the governing bloc of a council, where they were more likely to ‘know a lot’ (58% compared to 46%). This suggests this is terminology that is better known or practiced by existing council administrations.

**Figure 5. Distribution and chi-square test of awareness of Citizens’ Assemblies against party.**

**Figure 6. Distribution and chi-square test of awareness of co-production of services against party.**
Appropriateness of use for different policy areas

Generally councillors thought that participatory exercises were appropriate for all policy areas, but saw participation as especially important in some policy areas. Using the weighted responses, Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents who found a policy area (Education, Planning, etc) appropriate for a participatory exercise, sorted by the average score. For every category except Children’s Social Care, over 50% thought a participatory exercise could be appropriate but there was variation within this. Exercises related to environment and cultural programmes rated highly, while those concerning social care scored lower. Figure 8 shows the average scores for different policy areas, with the highest average score for Environment exercises and the lowest for Children social care. For all categories except planning and public health, councillors rated activities as more appropriate if their council had previously engaged in an exercise (Figure 9, Table 5).
Appropriateness of an exercise

What kind of exercises are on average more appropriate?

![Bar chart showing average scores for different policy areas](chart.png)

Figure 8 - Average scores assessing the appropriateness of an exercise for different policy areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Area</th>
<th>Not appropriate (-1)</th>
<th>No opinion (0)</th>
<th>Appropriate (1)</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>7.83</td>
<td>86.54</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural programmes</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>13.11</td>
<td>80.32</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>12.79</td>
<td>8.48</td>
<td>78.73</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing services</td>
<td>10.55</td>
<td>17.36</td>
<td>72.09</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health</td>
<td>14.54</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70.46</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>23.28</td>
<td>12.34</td>
<td>64.38</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>23.08</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>59.02</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult social care</td>
<td>23.64</td>
<td>18.86</td>
<td>57.49</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children social care</td>
<td>33.04</td>
<td>24.05</td>
<td>42.91</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Weighted scores of appropriateness of methods for different areas of policy
Previous exercise and perceived appropriateness

Appropriateness scores of policy areas with difference (95% paired interval)

Figure 9 - Differences in appropriateness score for exercises in different policy areas if an exercise had previously been held.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Average score if no exercise or unsure</th>
<th>Average score if previous exercise</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>*0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children social care</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>*0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult social care</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>*&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing services</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>*0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural programmes</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>*0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>*0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>*0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Results of weighted t-tests of policy appropriateness against if a previous exercise has been held.
There were partisan differences in the perceived appropriateness for several policy areas. There is a general pattern where Conservative councillors were less likely to think a participatory exercise is appropriate in general (Figure 10). Conservative councillors were more likely to have no opinion and less likely to think that participatory exercises are appropriate for cultural programmes than the overall pattern of responses (65% compared to 80%). Labour were more likely to have an opinion, and for that opinion be positive (95%). Figure 11 shows Conservative councillors were less likely to think education-related participatory exercises were appropriate (32% compared to 59%), and more likely to not have an opinion or think it would not be appropriate than all respondents. Labour councillors thought education-related exercises would be more appropriate (80% compared to 59%). There was no significant difference related to whether a councillor is in the majority or not.

For public health (Figure 12) and transport (Figure 13), Conservative councillors were also more likely to not have an opinion or think participatory exercises would not be appropriate than all respondents. Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors thought participatory exercises would be more appropriate than the overall picture. The analysis also showed significant effects for Plaid Cymru in Figure 8, however the small number of responses (2) overall for the party made this difficult to interpret and it was removed from the chart.

**Exercises related to cultural programmes are...**

![Distribution and chi-square test of appropriateness of exercises looking at cultural programmes against party.](image)

*Figure 10. Distribution and chi-square test of appropriateness of exercises looking at cultural programmes against party.*
Figure 11. Distribution and chi-square test of appropriateness of exercises looking at education against party.

Figure 12. Distribution and chi-square test of appropriateness of exercises looking at public health against party.
Exercises related to transport are...

Figure 13. Distribution and chi-square test of appropriateness of exercises looking at transport against party.

Holding a previous exercise increased the perceived appropriateness of an exercise independently of a partisan effect. Averaging the score for all activities and running a linear regression (Figure 13, table 6) against both party and whether a previous exercise was run found that there remained an effect of previous exercise even when accounting for partisan differences), raising the average score by 0.26 (on a total scale from -1 to 1) if there was a previous exercise.

Are participatory exercises appropriate?

Figure 13 - Linear regression of party and previous exercise effects.
Table 6. Linear regression of average appropriateness score against party and if a previous exercise was held.

Which aspects are more important to the process?

Respondents rated the importance of all 'elements' of a participatory process highly, but put special importance on some aspects of an exercise. Using the weighted responses, Figure 14 and Table 7 shows how respondents rated different aspects of a deliberative or participatory process in terms of how they affected the validity of the process, sorted by the average score. This finds that the quality and the transparency of the process were the most highly ranked, while the length of the exercise and having independent conveners was ranked lower (while still being considered objectively important by most respondents).

|                  | Estimate | Std. error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| (Intercept)      | 0.14     | 0.07       | 1.93    | 0.056    |
| Previous exercise| 0.26     | 0.09       | 2.99    | 0.003 ** |
| Party-GRN        | 0.65     | 0.31       | 2.10    | 0.038 *  |
| Party-IND        | 0.33     | 0.14       | 2.32    | 0.022 *  |
| Party-LAB        | 0.40     | 0.10       | 3.93    | <0.001 ***|
| Party-LD         | 0.48     | 0.14       | 3.49    | <0.001 ***|
| Party-PC         | 0.14     | 0.42       | 0.33    | 0.745    |
| Party-SNP        | 0.33     | 0.30       | 1.09    | 0.279    |

***: 0.001, ** 0.01, * 0.05
Figure 14 - Average importance score of different elements of the process.

Table 7. Weighted percentage distribution of scores given to the importance of different features of citizen participation.

Ratings of the importance of these elements had no variation resulting from a council holding previous exercise, being in the majority, a council having a minority, or between parties. The exception to this is the demographically balanced participants element, where a linear regression (Figure 15, Table 8) showed a greater support for this from Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors (a score 0.6 higher compared to a baseline of a Conservative councillor), and less support by councillors who belonged to a council with a majority (an average score 0.45 less). For context, these factors only explain around 10% of the variation in the importance of demographically balanced participants ($R^2$).
Figure 15 - Linear regression of party and council effects against the perception that demographically balanced exercises are important.

|                      | Estimate | Std. error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|----------------------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| (Intercept)          | 3.70     | 0.24       | 15.45   | <0.001*** |
| Previous exercise    | 0.35     | 0.20       | 1.75    | 0.082   |
| Party-GRN            | 0.67     | 0.71       | 0.95    | 0.346   |
| Party-IND            | 0.40     | 0.34       | 1.18    | 0.239   |
| Party-LAB            | 0.69     | 0.23       | 2.93    | 0.004** |
| Party-LD             | 0.70     | 0.31       | 2.25    | 0.026*  |
| Party-PC             | 1.21     | 0.96       | 1.26    | 0.210   |
| Party-SNP            | 0.84     | 0.70       | 1.20    | 0.231   |
| Council has Majority | -0.45    | 0.22       | -2.03   | 0.045*  |
| Part of majority     | 0.24     | 0.21       | 1.13    | 0.261   |

***: 0.001, **: 0.01, *: 0.05

Table 8. Linear regression against importance of demographically balanced participants
Interactions with political circumstances

Split between own views and participatory method

As asked which they would give greater weight to in the event that the results of a process conflicted with their own views (Figure 16), a narrow majority (56%) favoured their own views. This varied by whether a council had an overall majority: councillors in an area with no overall control were more likely (59%) to follow the exercise results. This is a question several respondents highlighted as giving them a lack of opportunity for nuance as ‘it entirely depends on issue, scope of process, fairness of process, quality etc’. As such the variation in council control is more interesting than the overall picture, which would be likely to vary depending on the qualities of the project being considered.

Most respondents would be supportive of a process if led by the current leadership of the council (86%). There was more opposition by councillors who were not part of governing coalitions/parties, but support remained high at 76% among this group.

In the event of a conflict, which has more weight?

![Graph showing distribution and chi-square test of if councillors weight their own views or results of the process higher, against presence of council majority](image)

**Figure 16. Distribution and chi-square test of if councillors weight their own views or results of the process higher, against presence of council majority**

Authoritative vs consultative

Most councillors lean towards participation processes being consultative, with some differences between parties. Using weighted responses, Figure 17 shows how respondents reacted when asked if participatory processes should be authoritative (citizen recommendations should be carried out without question) or consultative (results are reviewed by council decision-making processes). Most respondents favoured the softer
‘mixture/consultative’ leaning option, with 33% opting for purely consultative while only 0.3% opted for the entirely authoritative option. A chi-square test shows that the distribution was uneven for various parties. Conservatives were more likely than the average councillor to favour pure ‘Consultative’ (56% compared to 34%), while Greens (55%) and Liberal Democrats (37%) were more likely than typical councillors to favour ‘Mixture/Authoritative’ (10% overall). There was no difference based on the presence of a council majority or whether a councillor is part of a majority.

**Participatory exercises should be...**

[Chart showing distribution and chi-square test of if councillors think a process should be authoritative or consultative by party.]

**Temporary vs permanent**

Using the weighted responses, Figure 18 shows how respondents reacted when asked if participatory processes should be *ad hoc* (convened only for specific purpose) or permanent (a recurring process on a policy area). Most respondents favoured ad hoc options, but there was variation by party. Conservative councillors were more likely than the typical councillor to select *ad hoc* (49% compared to 30%), while the (small number of) SNP respondents universally selected the mixture/permanent option. Independents were more likely to select ‘mixture/ad hoc’ (69% compared to 38%).
The role of councillors

In the open-ended comments, respondents discussed the role of councillors in relation to citizen participation. Some were keen on increasing the use of participatory methods:

*I want to see as much emphasis on participatory politics as possible going forward and very much welcome all experimental attempts at finding the best ways to initiate it. I see this definitely preferable to falling back on established methods of representative local democracy.*

Others saw a need for hybrid approaches similar to those discussed in the 21st Century Councillor report (Mangan et al. 2016):

*Feel that the role of councillors needs to change in order to increase participatory role of citizens with councillors as facilitators.*

Others highlighted that a significant reason for preferring Councillor decision making was that representatives are accountable to the electorate:

*'While participation is important, there’s no doubt about it that it would end up favouring those who shout the loudest. Representative democracy, for me, ensures that electors are accountable to their electorates.’*
Similarly if the main goal is gathering a group of citizens, some argued that public money has already been spent doing that through elections:

‘This presumes that the forms of citizen participation you are biased towards are the only ones available and that Councillors are not representative Citizens. I am a citizen and I belong to a citizens assembly - it’s a Council. If decisions are to be devolved I prefer Community Councils, democracy and elections.’

While no individual can be representative of everyone, it is difficult to argue that existing councils are meaningfully representative of their populations. However, this challenge is highlighting a bar that citizen participation has to reach to demonstrate a superior approach. It is clear from other councillor responses that their experiences of citizen participation have not had a focus on being representative:

Participants are those who are most likely to be against a plan, and do not tend to think of a picture larger than their own immediate circumstances.

I think the approach is very helpful to gather a broad range of input and increase citizen buy-in. I am wary of the participants being unrepresentative (e.g. more keen on protection of house values than addressing housing shortages for people not yet living here).

In theory participatory democracy sounds good. If it is the ‘usual suspects’ trying to get their way by the back door I will oppose it. We had the biggest participatory democratic event in history, June 2016 that has not yet been implemented!

Trying to get single parents with young children with 2-3 years of experience in such accommodation to come to any such forum is almost impossible so their voices are not heard, or they feel drowned out by the mass ranks of righteous homeowners who don’t see or listen to them even when I can get them to such events. Often as councillors we have to stand up for the least vocal and least able to attend such participation events .]

The constituents for our Assemblies so far have been self-selecting and, inevitably, the same old faces appear. I would like to see sortition, although it’s more expensive.

[C]are must be taken to ensure that discussions are well informed, otherwise conclusions could easily be reached that are imbalanced or ill-informed which is why I have inclined towards favouring the elected representatives view. However, if citizens are fully informed, regularly engaged, sufficient in terms of participation and discussions are balanced properly then I feel these views cannot be overlooked.
Along different lines, if participation is a solution to the problems of representative democracy, it could be better to reform that directly: ‘The route to better [democracy] is through some form of PR, not parallel bodies with dubious democratic credentials’, or more bluntly that ‘citizens’ councils are a political gimmick and no substitute for a proper local democratic system which we do not have but need’.

Others argued that even in the event of councillors who were more representative of the population, there would still be a clear role for elected decision-makers:

> As we have seen with the EU referendum there is no guarantee that even a demographically and class balanced process will produce agreement/consensus. We have a representative democracy and elected representatives need to use more information than public opinion in making their decisions. We have a duty to respect minorities and avoid prejudice of whatever sort.

This point raises the consideration that while minorities may be better represented according to their number in a representative exercise, they would still by definition be a minority and in the long run their rights are better safeguarded against the views of the majority by legal protection, which permanent representatives may be better at considering in complex decisions. This relates to where citizen participation may or may not be appropriate:

> There are often issues that are so complex that it’s extremely difficult for the public to have a view that can reflect a balanced conclusion, especially in planning where the planning laws change so frequently.

While the above views do not necessarily reflect the broad spectrum of opinions held by councillors (only around a third of respondents left comments), they reflect a range of arguments that show councillors are engaged in considering the complications of how their roles interact with citizen participation.

## Conclusion

To say something is the opinion of 'councillors' hides the diversity of opinion among the thousands of people in the UK who hold that title. This research found there were partisan differences in response to several questions, indicating that political ideologies form a part of how councillors perceive citizen participation. Differences related to relative power held in a council or previous experience reflect that practical considerations are also important in how councillors make evaluations.
State of council control/individual relation to council control

In terms of whether councillors would put the results of an alternative process above their own views 44% of councillors would give greater weight to the results. While this is short of a majority it is encouraging for long term trust. This is even higher in areas where there is no overall control, where 59% would afford greater weight to exercise results than their own views. Similarly, there were high levels of acceptance of participatory processes being run by the current leadership (86%), with this remaining quite high (76%) among councillors currently not part of a council majority. This is contrary to expectations that opposition councillors may prefer participatory approaches, but suggests the positive factors for opposition councillors (that the result may include people with their views more than council governance does directly) versus the negative factors (concern that the process is slanted in favour of current leader) generally results in support.

Familiarity/nation

Perhaps unsurprisingly, awareness of different methods increases when an exercise has been run already in a council. A more important finding is that overall approval across policy areas increased after an exercise had been run (a factor that remained even after accounting for partisan differences). As one respondent put it, '[g]ood experience might make me more inclined to give greater weight to such exercises'. This does not remove the initial hurdle, but reflects that councillor opposition might be possible to address through practical demonstration rather than being a permanent obstacle. The survey results suggest greater knowledge of participatory budgeting in Scotland and less in England, which fits with the greater use of participatory budgeting at an official level in Scotland.

Some methods were better known than others: for instance citizens’ assemblies were far better known than citizens’ juries (where 57% knew nothing as opposed to only 20% for citizens’ assemblies). Given concern among practitioners about demands for shorter, cheaper citizens’ assemblies (Involve 2019), this represents an opportunity either to present citizens’ juries as a solution to this problem, or to accept the branding loss and relabel the jury playbook as mini-assemblies.

Party

Only a small percentage of councillors favour any kind of approach where the result is authoritative or binding. The importance of ensuring that the make-up of participants is demographically balanced both had a partisan element, and a structural element, with less support from councillors who belong to a council with a majority. There was a grouping in the written responses where respondents' opinions on participatory exercises was clearly informed by their lack of demographically balanced participants, and this had a wider impact on their evaluation of those exercises. While there is a theoretical conflict between
unrepresentative councillors and representative deliberative exercises, in reality the common picture is that neither councillors nor participants are representative of their area.

Across different policy levels there were generally high levels of perceived appropriateness of participatory methods. Some areas (planning, education, adult social care, and children's social care) had one quarter to one third of respondents considering that the use would be inappropriate. Proposals in these areas may encounter greater resistance, even if generally there is support for their use. Generally Conservative councillors were more likely to think exercises were not appropriate or not have an opinion.

**Discussion**

The conflict between representative democracy and alternate democratic exercises needs to be positioned within the wider picture of criticisms and proposed reforms of representative democracy. The open-ended responses include councillors saying that if citizen participation is a reaction to problems with local democracy, reform of local democracy may be a better approach. Growing awareness of methods that manage a better demographic balance than the councils themselves suggest reforms in this area would help validate arguments for the primacy of elected bodies. As Niessen (2019) argues:

‘[T]he use of mini-publics does not leave traditional representative institutions unaffected [...] mini-publics make traditional policy actors (and ideally the broader public) think about the place that citizen deliberation should take in the political system.

The rise of new means of citizen participation challenges the role of elected councillors. This can result in a number of different outcomes because elected councillors are not monolithic and exist both in competition with each other as political parties, but also in different political circumstances. New forms of citizen participation may be welcomed as a challenge to a broken system by those outside power, seen as a tool for resolving issues for those managing a balancing act, a spur to reform by believers in representative democracy, or alternatively rejected as an unnecessary addition to the existing work of the council.

This range of circumstances means that advocates of new forms of citizen participation need to understand how they fit into different political situations, to both understand the reasons councillors would be willing to defer to a process, but also why they would have grounds for objection. New forms of participation are neither likely to go away nor completely replace current forms of power. In the space between those two positions, a variety of constructive overlaps are possible.
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