

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

**Civil Society and New Forms of Governance in Europe Conference:
Citizen Participation In Policy Making
14-15 February 2007 Bristol, UK**

**Paper Title: Public Participation in Local Representative Democracy: The
Importance of Local Political *elite* Perspectives on Participation and Methods of
Citizen Engagement to Democratic and Political Activity**

**Dr Colin Copus
The Institute of Local Government Studies
School of Public Policy
The University of Birmingham
0121-414-4988
c.m.copus@bham.ac.uk**

Public Participation in Local Representative Democracy: The Importance of Local Political *elite* Perspectives on Participation and Methods of Citizen Engagement to Democratic and Political Activity

Abstract

The notion of political efficacy, that is, the expectation amongst citizens of being able to wield effective political action, rests less on citizens taking action than it does on political elites being willing to respond to that action. At the local level, political efficacy is a product of the way in which councillors respond to citizen engagement in local politics and the attitudes they have to the very means available to citizens to engage in politics and about the issues that drive that engagement. Moreover, political efficacy rests on how councillors interpret and understand the tension between representative democracy and citizen political engagement. The chapter examines the various ways in which citizens can attempt to communicate with councillors over local issues and policy and whether councillors believe such activities to be legitimate in a local representative democracy and to be effective when it comes to influencing what they do and the decisions they make. The chapter considers what party political membership tells us about the ways councillors respond to notions of citizen engagement in the political processes and what that means for local representative democracy.

Introduction

Attempts to assess the efficacy of public participation and political protest have taken into account whether those conducting action, of one sort or another, believe their actions to be effective in influencing political decisions. Young (1985) described political efficacy as ‘people’s expectations of being able to wield effective political influence’.¹ Yet, approaching political efficacy from the perspective of the powerless, or rather those less powerful than the holders of political office, has the potential to distort our understanding of the political processes and to cloud our appreciation of how public participation operates within a representative democracy. Such distortion occurs because those citizens attempting to influence local elected representatives may view the effectiveness and legitimacy of political action very differently to the local elected representatives who are on the receiving end of citizen political engagement.

When the notion of political efficacy is placed in a specifically local setting, with councillors as the local political *elite*, three dimensions of citizen engagement emerge for exploration. First, there are the views councillors, as holders of political office, have about the principle of public participation and protest activities set within a representative democracy and what they consider to be the proper balance between citizen participation and the roles and responsibilities of the elected representative; secondly, there are councillors’ views about the mechanisms available to citizens for political engagement, which concern issues of legitimacy and whether or not, in the eyes of the representative, those mechanisms are politically acceptable. Thirdly, councillors are called upon not only to distinguish between the legitimacy of the mechanisms for citizen engagement, but also to distinguish between what they think are *effective* methods for citizens to employ when it comes to influencing the political processes in a local representative democracy; in other words, will the methods

citizens employ have a demonstrable impact on the activities of councillors. It is in understanding these attitudes and how councillors deal with any set of political circumstances in which they find themselves, that help us to explore local political efficacy. In understanding what the power-holder thinks of political action and engagement by the citizen, we can start to predict likely political responses to different sets of local political circumstances.

In the chapter the results of two different research projects are presented, both of which have been repeated to provide time-spaced data for analysis. The two research projects were conducted amongst councillors across England and the sample group was designed to ensure the three main parties and all types of principle council were captured. The research projects involved literature reviews, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with councillors and the circulation of a questionnaire survey. The first project, exploring councillor attitudes towards aspects of local representation, was conducted in 1994 and repeated in 2004; the second project was conducted in 2003/4 and repeated in 2005/6. In the first project in 1994, 1067 questionnaires were circulated and 628 were returned and usable for analysis, giving a response rate of 58.9 per cent; 1200 questionnaires were circulated when the research was repeated in 2004 and 648 were returned and usable for analysis, giving a response rate of 54 per cent. In the second, smaller project in 2003/4, 700 questionnaires were circulated to councillors and 289 were returned and usable for analysis, giving a response rate of 41 per cent; in 2005/6 another 700 questionnaire were circulated and this time 306 were returned and usable for analysis, giving a response rate of 44 per cent.

The first section of the chapter sets the context of local politics and political engagement. The second explores the attitudes councillors display to aspects of local representation and democracy and assesses the impact of those attitudes on citizen engagement in the political processes. The third section examines the distinctions councillors draw between the effectiveness, in terms of influencing local politics, of a range of ways in which citizens can engage local politics. The final section presents the lessons that can be learnt for citizen engagement in local politics from the attitudes and interpretations held by the local political *elite* and what that tells us about citizen participation in local politics and democracy.

The Local Political Arena

English councillors must, Janus like, look in two different directions at once: first, towards the demands of their political party group for public loyalty, discipline and coherent, unified action; secondly, towards the demands for representation, responsiveness and the articulation of local views, made by citizens and communities, focused, as they often are, on some specific local issues. If the demands made by the party group and the local community coincide, then so much the better, but as increasingly more likely, if those demands differ, then the councillor faces a *crisis of representation*. A *crisis of representation* occurs when the demands for loyalty to decisions of the party group clash with the issue based demands for responsive representation made by local communities (Copus, 2000 and 2004).ⁱⁱ In these circumstances the councillor must try to negotiate a settlement, or chose whether to act in accordance with party group decisions, or to articulate and support the demands of those they were elected to represent. In which ever way the councillor attempts to resolve the *crisis of representation*, it is generated by the very nature of public

political participation within the structure of representative democracy, which is based on the requirement that citizens do little more than select by whom they wish to be governed. Indeed, some have argued that citizens lack the basic political wherewithal to fulfil even that requirement adequately (See, Sartori 1962 and Schumpeter, 1974).ⁱⁱⁱ

Whilst views which question the worthiness of citizen participation in politics, particularly local politics, are not as widespread as they once were, English councillors conduct their activities as part of a representative system, which gives primacy through the electoral system, to the representative rather than the citizen. In a representative democracy local government is not inherently more participative than central government simply because it operates closer to the citizen; public participation in local politics exists within a 'representative framework' (Bulpitt, 1972).^{iv} That is, local government, democracy and politics are based on the same principles of political representation as national government, with a political *elite* elected to conduct local political decision-making and provide local political leadership. Citizen input to local political decision-making introduces a participatory tension into local representation and challenges the role of councillors as an arbiter of local affairs, it also poses a challenge to long-established *elite* views that see only a 'modest role' for the public in political affairs (Putnam, 1973, p.198).^v Indeed, as Bulpitt (1972, p.295) notes: 'if participation is to be taken seriously, then the present representative character of local government will have to be radically altered in both form and spirit'. Indeed, for local government, local representation remains a process of 'ruling and being ruled' (Parry, 1978, p.41).^{vi} It remains so, despite the changes to local political decision-making processes, introduced by the Blair government's modernisation of local government (See, ODPM, 2005, detr, 1999, detr 1998 (a) and (b)).^{vii}

Local political representation takes place in an increasingly diverse, complex and fragmented arena; a disparate local polity exerts pressure on the institutions and actors involved in local representation to take on a greater participatory form (Gyford, 1986).^{viii} It is the attitudes councillors hold towards citizen engagement in local politics and how they respond to it, which determines whether such engagement will have an impact on local political decision-making and the direction pursued by local political leaders. Parry *et al* (1992) found little dissonance between councillors and citizen over what constituted important local issues and, indeed, that councillors expressed generally positive attitudes towards increased citizen participation in local affairs.^{ix} Comparing the attitudes of councillors and citizens to what is an important issue and to how that issue should be resolved, indicates the existence, or otherwise, of shared local agendas between governors and governed. If however, citizens' concerns vary from those of the local political *elite*, either because that *elite* is unaware, fails to address, or disagrees radically about the matter and potential solutions, then a failure of representative democracy occurs. The task then, is to reconnect citizens and councillors into an agenda that reflects more broadly the concerns of the citizens (Dahl, 1961).^x Citizen interest and participation often centres on specific local issues and it is these very local matters and events which trigger community action (Boaden, et al, 1982, Cochrane, 1986).^{xi} It is the immediate, local and important issues which have an impact on the well-being of local communities that can stimulate the previously acquiescent citizenry into intense though intermittent action (Parry, et al, 1992, p.358). It is the power of immediate local issues to stimulate periodic and episodic citizen engagement in politics, which gives citizen engagement

a different texture and purpose to the constant, broadly based and general interest focused political activity that constitutes *elite* politics.

Such tension as exists between local political *elites* and citizen engagement in local politics can be exacerbated by the role of the political party. When councillors find the issue-based demands for representation of citizen views about local issues, clash with the party-based demands for councillors' loyalty and discipline over a broad governing approach to local politics, a *crisis of representation* is generated. The crises of representation has been examined in detail elsewhere, but suffice to say that such a *crisis* exemplifies the governing / representing dichotomy present in English local politics (Copus, 2000, and 2004).^{xii} In such circumstances, where citizens expect councillors to respond to articulated views and to act in certain ways, councillors will emphasise their governing role – that is one based on making difficult choices and decisions that must focus on some general well-being or interest and they do this to protect themselves from participatory pressure (Rees and Smith, 1964, Jones, 1969, Parkinson, 1985).^{xiii}

As a result of public election, councillors claim a right to govern in the general public interest; a claim which often conflicts with citizen participation in local politics (Muchnick, 1970, Batley, 1972, Lambert *et al*, 1978).^{xiv} Indeed, councillors will criticise as 'parochial' those citizen views which conflict with their own authority-wide governing interpretation of local democracy (Blondel and Hall, 1967, Glassberg, 1981).^{xv} Councillors and citizens are often motivated by different political and local issues and by a different scope of political concern, and when councillors complain of the electorate's lack of interest in the broad view of local politics, they are reflecting these different motivations (Hampton, 1970).^{xvi} It is these divergent perspectives between councillors and citizens on what constitutes the proper dimensions of local politics that has seen councillors faced with a citizenry growing in assertiveness, with greater willingness to take political action and with a developing belief in the effectiveness of that action (Marsh, 1977, Young, 1984 and 1985, Bloch and John, 1991).^{xvii} Moreover, citizens and communities have come to display an 'enhanced potential for protest' (Kavanagh, 1989); a 'greater wish to be consulted in the political process' (Heath and Topf, 1987); and, a belief in their ability to influence events; (Young and Rao, 1995).^{xviii} Indeed, for the citizen, councillors are seen as an *effective* focus for protest activity. Yet, Young and Rao (p.109) also report that the majority of citizens 'appear to have a wary cynicism about their councillors, saying that they can be trusted only some of the time' (Also see, Hart, 1978).^{xix}

More recently, Lowndes *et al* (2001, pp. 450-451) indicate the existence of very negative views held by citizens about councillors, who were often seen as 'inaccessible and unlikely to be interested' in citizens' concerns.^{xx} Indeed, amongst those that had contacted a councillor, 'the dominant experience was one of disappointment'. Such 'disappointment' indicates a worrying disconnection between citizens and local representatives and results from the effectiveness, or otherwise, of popular involvement in local politics being dependent on whether councillors are willing to respond positively, or not, to that involvement. To understand how councillors interact with the local citizenry intent on influencing, or at least having some say over local political affairs, we need to explore the development of councillor attitudes towards the workings of certain aspects of representative democracy. We also need to consider how councillors conduct their political activities when faced

with participatory pressure from citizens who may no longer be willing to acquiesce to decisions and policy, made by the local political *elite*.

The Local Political *Elite*: Attitudes towards Democracy, Revisited

The extent to which councillors are willing to respond to citizen participation is influenced by their interpretation of the nature of that participation within the representative processes, as it is played out at the local level. It is that responsiveness, or lack of it on the part of the local political *elite*, which in turn is a key factor in whether or not citizen engagement is demonstratively effective, or whether it fails to achieve what it set out to achieve. In two surveys, one conducted in 1994 and the other in 2004, councillors from the three main parties were asked to respond to the following statements:

- *Ordinary citizens should have more say in the decisions made by local government* (a statement used by the Widdicombe Committee in its 1986 research report)^{xxi};
- *More should be done to interest people in local government;*
- *More should be done to involve ordinary people in local decision-making*
- *It is for councillors rather than the public to make decisions on local issues and priorities; and,*
- *People only become interested in local government when an issue directly affects them.*

The statements were designed to test councillors' attitudes towards discrete but linked aspects of citizen participation in local affairs: citizen *say*, *interest* and *involvement*. In both surveys these were presented to respondents with the following definitions: *say* being the opportunities provided for citizens to articulate and express opinions and views on local issues and concerns, or on policy proposals made by the council; *interest* being the general levels of attention and salience given by citizens and communities to the activities of councils and councillors; and, *involvement* being the provision of opportunities for citizens and communities to explore issues and consider alternative courses of action and to work closely with political representatives on developing policy responses.

Such distinctions are necessary because councillors can and in practice do, discriminate between citizen '*say*', '*interest*' and '*involvement*'. Such discrimination is necessary for councillors to determine what they believe is the proper balance of influence in local decision-making between citizen and councillor. Moreover, distinguishing between aspects of citizen participation enables careful consideration of what it is about citizen input that councillors support or reject and allows us to explore whether the councillor's political affiliation is a likely predictor of attitudes towards citizen participation.

Table 1 set out the responses from councillors to the statements regarding citizen participation received in 1994 and 2004; the strength of agreement with the statements is shown as the results are heavily skewed towards 'agreement' in both surveys.

Table 1. Councillors attitudes towards aspects of citizen participation

Statement	Party	1994 Agree %	2004 Agree %	1994 base	2004 base
Say	Lab	83	85	224	249
	Lib Dem	92	97	99	135
	Con	56	59	225	263
Interest	Lab	79	81	224	249
	Lib Dem	87	91	99	135
	Con	85	86	224	263
Involvement	Lab	81	80	223	245
	Lib Dem	94	96	95	133
	Con	52	57	219	259
Cllrs decide	Lab	57	65	222	241
	Lib Dem	53	55	98	135
	Con	80	87	224	259
Interested if affected	Lab	79	83	224	247
	Lib Dem	87	94	99	132
	Con	85	89	224	258

Table 1. displays a clear affinity in both surveys between Labour and Liberal Democrats when it comes to support for enhanced citizen 'say' in local political decision-making, with Conservatives lagging some distance behind in that regard in both surveys. Both sets of findings underpin the conclusion from the research for the Widdicombe committee (1986), that the councillor's party affiliation is 'a uniquely powerful discriminator' towards the issue of citizen *say* in local government.^{xxii} There is however, general support amongst councillors for the idea that citizens should have a 'say' in local government and indeed - more of it. It is however, the Liberal Democrats that distinguish themselves as indicating in 1994 and 2004 the strongest response to the issue of citizen 'say'.

Councillors across all parties, and in both surveys, overwhelmingly share the view that the community should take a greater *interest* in the activities of local government, although Conservative councillors again lag behind their Labour and Liberal Democrat counterparts. The high levels of agreement to this proposition indicates the underlying acceptance amongst councillors of the need for a more interested electorate and also supports the findings of the statement regarding why and when citizens are interested in local affairs. Citizen *interest* in local government need not conflict with councillors' decision-making role and is thus safe to encourage and indulge. When it comes to *involving* people in local decision-making, the Labour-Liberal Democrat affinity is again evident; but, in 1994 and 2004 it was the Liberal Democrats that were the most enthusiastic for greater involvement. Yet again, party affiliation is shown to be an important discriminator of councillor attitudes towards this aspect of democracy, with less Conservative enthusiasm apparent.

In both research projects a majority of councillors, across the three political parties, took the position that it is for councillors, rather than the public, to make the decisions on local issues and priorities. Yet again, the two sets of results show an affinity in the responses received from Labour and Liberal Democrats and a divergence from that view when it came to Conservative councillors, although this divergence is only of degree, not opinion. The latter expresses more and stronger support for an unhindered role for the councillor as the arbitrator of local affairs, expressing an attitude toward local representation peculiar to the Conservative. Liberal Democrats are less prone than Labour and Conservative councillors to see councillors as the final decision-makers and, the increase in Liberal Democrat respondents holding such a view is marginal when compared to the shift from Labour and Conservative respondents. The idea that councillors should act as final decision-maker can be said to conflict with Liberal Democrat notions of transferring power to local communities through community politics and even with well documented Liberal Democrat experiments with decentralisation (see, Burns, *et al* 1994).^{xxiii} Yet, such a view is of course consistent with a system of representative democracy and decision-making by elected representatives on behalf of local citizens. Here we see that there is no uniquely Liberal Democrat approach to local politics and that many Liberal Democrats recognise that as someone must make the final decision, it should be the elected representative.

Councillors of all parties clearly draw a boundary between citizen input to local government and their own position as the final decision-makers over local issues. Part of the reason why councillors guard their decision-making role so jealously, rests on formal legal restrictions and legislative requirements placed on them within the context of English local government. A further and more revealing part of the reason however, is evident in the attitudes councillors, of all parties, display towards what they consider to be the proper role of the councillor and the citizen when it comes to political decision-making and this can be seen in the responses councillors provide to the statement concerning citizen motivation to participate in local affairs.

Councillors display a firm view that people only become interested in local government when an issue directly affects them and there exists a constant cynicism amongst the political *elite* as to what motivates citizens into action: self-interest, if not selfishness. As one Labour councillor recorded in an interview: '*people don't care about anything; unless it's happening outside their front door*'! Another Labour councillor commented:

Someone has to look at the big picture and make the difficult decisions; you have to think of the general public good and what will benefit everybody. As a councillor I have to think about what's best for the whole borough. A while ago the council supported the building of a new motorway, now, some people went mad about this and protested, demonstrated, and all sorts; it went on for ages, but, they were just interested in how it would affect them, the council had to think about the jobs it would bring and the benefit it would have to the area. You can't make decisions based on what a few people want. What's more, I've been elected and those people protesting hadn't!

What might be thought surprising is that Liberal Democrat councillors display the highest levels of agreement with the statement across all three parties and in both surveys. Indeed, Liberal Democrats record the greatest increase in levels of agreement with the statement compared to Labour and Conservative councillors. The result, at first glance is intriguing, as this appears to sit uneasily with the Liberal Democrat style of local community politics, in which they have specialised to some considerable effect. Yet, the responses also reflect the experiences of local politicians that specialise in community politics have had when working closely with local citizens on very local matters; such councillors are likely to be very well aware of what motivates citizens locally.

A Liberal Democrat councillor commented in interview:

most people think the community starts and finishes at their front door and trying to get people to see beyond the very immediate and very local can be difficult. It's no problem getting people to sign a petition for better street lights; I get inundated with complaints about broken street signs or lamp posts, but try getting people to think about asylum-seekers or the environment and that's different

The two surveys show a slight increase in councillors' support for enhanced citizen engagement in the local political processes as they relate to citizen 'say', 'interest' and 'involvement', and this is the case across the three parties. The survey results also show a desire amongst councillors for an engaged citizenry and this desire has increased slightly over the 10 year period between surveys. It is also clear, that there exists a Labour – Liberal Democrat affinity in this regard, with Conservative councillors still lagging behind when it comes to notions of citizen engagement. As one Conservative county councillor summed things up:

my voters do not want me to bother them every five minutes about this decision or that; they want me to get on with things. They can judge on whether they liked what I did or not at the elections'. he went on to add: 'of course, they have to be able to know where I am and how to contact me...I put out a regular newsletter telling them what I've been up to and how to make contact

There has been a hardening of the view amongst councillors of the three parties, that the citizenry are motivated by issues that affect them and that generally people are focused on the very local or immediate, rather than sharing councillors' broad governing approach to representation. Councillors continue to hold onto the view that final decision-making power should rest with elected representatives and as a consequence with political parties and party groups, which are to remain the 'aggregator' of local interests (Mabileau, Moyser, Parry, Quantin, 1989).^{xxiv} Citizen engagement, it would appear, is to inform not replace the decision-making processes conducted by the local political *elite*; and, local representative democracy, whilst developing a more participatory edge is seen by councillors, as a necessary bulwark against a local citizenry with a very narrow political focus and interest. Indeed, when councillors are called upon to address the governing / representative dichotomy, that is when they must strike a balance between what they perceive to be in the interests of the whole community and the demands of what they perceive to be sectional, local interests; councillors show that far from being dichotomous, the solution is simply:

govern, rather than represent. Representative democracy enables political *elites* to govern, but when faced with an assertive community, what that *elite* makes of the way in which the governed attempt to communicate with them, has much to say about the political effectiveness, or otherwise, of that communication and engagement.

The Effectiveness of Citizen Participation: Local Political *Elite* Responses

To test the effectiveness of citizen participation and to assess the influence that participation might have on the local political *elite*, a range of methods by which citizens engage with councillors were placed into different categories: *protest activity*, *direct contact* (between citizen and councillor); *indirect contact* (citizens using bodies outside the council to apply pressure to it on their behalf); *electoral pressure*; and, *council sponsored engagement*. The tables below show that councillors clearly distinguish between these types of citizen activity and moreover, that they distinguish between what they see as being the more effective tool for political engagement.

Table 2 sets out the activities citizens might be involved in for each of the categories

Table 2. Methods of public participation

Political pressure	Direct contact	Indirect contact	Electoral pressure	Council sponsored
Form a campaign group	group contact with own local councillor	contact the ombudsman	campaign for a sitting councillor during an election	citizens juries
Submit a petition	individual contact with own local councillor	contact local MP	join ruling political party	focus groups
leaflet campaigns	Group contact with council leader	contact district auditor	join opposition political party	citizens panel
letter writing campaign	Individual contact with council leader	take the council to court	vote against the council ruling group at election time	deliberative opinion polls
organise / attend public meetings	group contact with executive member	Contact a govt department	stand candidates at election	community forums
Local press, TV and radio for publicity	Individual contact with executive member	contact a minister	referendums	neighbourhood committees
Delegation to ruling party group meeting	group contact with council officer			
delegation to full council	Individual contact with council officer			
attend a protest demonstration or march	use informal social links with a councillor			
disrupt council meeting				
occupy council buildings				

Councillors were asked, in a questionnaire, to comment on the effectiveness of each of the methods of influencing political decision-making open to citizens. In the survey effectiveness was defined as:

The ability of the citizen, or groups of citizens, to have a clear and identifiable influence on any political decision. That is, new decisions being made as a result of citizen involvement or, where demonstrable change occurs to existing policy or decisions.

Effectiveness relates to the ability of citizens to raise an issue and place it in a meaningful sense, before councillors, in such a way as to influence the policy process. Effectiveness does not mean that citizens will always be successful in achieving their objectives, it is not about success or failure in achieving a desired outcome for citizens; rather, effectiveness means that an issue will be recognised and addressed by councillors and that citizen opinion will be transmitted to them - if only to be rejected as a result. Indeed, a discrepancy may exist between what councillors believe are 'effective' methods of participation and those methods that on more objective assessment, have actually resulted in demonstrable policy change. Demonstrable policy change would require a different set of measures to those used here to explore what councillors, as politicians and representatives, see as making for effective and legitimate participation, and that was outside the scope of interest of the research. Rather, central to understanding how local politics operates and how efficacious citizen engagement in it will be, is devising some way of judging, or predicting, the responses of councillors, not only to a message, but also to a particular type of political activity. Councillors, in the 2003 and 2006 surveys were asked to indicate the 'effectiveness' they thought attached to a range of methods available to citizens to influence political decision-making and to engage in local politics.

Table 3 presents councillors' responses to the effectiveness of *protest* activity in attempting to influence local political decisions.

Table 3. Effectiveness of political protest, by political affiliation

Protest method	Party	2003 % effective	2006 % effective
form campaign group	Conservative	61	60
	Labour	63	64
	Lib Dem	77	81
petitioning	Conservative	60	60
	Labour	64	68
	Lib Dem	61	59
leaflet campaigns	Conservative	50	55
	Labour	50	47
	Lib Dem	68	79
letter writing campaign	Conservative	56	52
	Labour	58	55
	Lib Dem	60	63
organise / attend public meetings	Conservative	78	81
	Labour	82	85
	Lib Dem	82	89
use local press for publicity	Conservative	77	80
	Labour	72	65
	Lib Dem	77	86
use local electronic media	Conservative	68	67
	Labour	69	64
	Lib Dem	71	67
delegation to ruling group meeting	Conservative	51	53
	Labour	59	66
	Lib Dem	46	44
delegation to full council	Conservative	46	44
	Labour	49	43
	Lib Dem	52	50
attend a protest demonstration or march	Conservative	25	21
	Labour	35	31
	Lib Dem	33	27
disrupt council meeting	Conservative	8	5
	Labour	8	6
	Lib Dem	7	6
occupy council buildings	Conservative	8	5
	Labour	15	11
	Lib Dem	14	13

The responses indicate a general agreement across the political spectrum about the effectiveness or otherwise, of political protest. What might be considered ‘safe’ methods of protest, such as forming a group, conducting a letter writing campaign or submitting a petition, are held by councillors as effective ways of raising an issue. Leafleting campaigns however, are seen to be less effective by Labour and Conservative councillors than some other methods, but find more favour with Liberal

Democrats. Indeed, a difference is shown between the two surveys with Labour councillors losing confidence in this method, whilst Conservative and Liberal Democrats have gained confidence. Such a result is of no surprise considering Liberal Democrats commitment to community politics and the importance attached by Liberal Democrats to communicating with the electorate (Pinkney, 1983 and 1984).^{xxv} Moreover, the requirement, set out by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, in its model standing orders for Liberal Democrat groups, for its councillors to keep in touch with the electorate through regular newsletters, implies a similar importance will be attached to public leafleting campaigns. What is perhaps surprising is that the Liberal Democrat response is not greater than the 68 per cent recorded in 2003 but, such requirements from the ALDC might partly account for the leap to 79 per cent in 2006 (ALDC, 1995).^{xxvi}

A Liberal Democrat councillor commented:

Before I won this seat I delivered a newsletter every month for almost two years; sometimes, I even managed to get a local leaflet out covering just a few streets; but, I had to deliver all these leaflets myself. Now, since being a councillor, I still have to deliver my newsletters by myself and I've only been able to put out three last year [2005]; I'm up for re-election next year [2007] and people have already been saying "we've not had anything from you for ages, you're all the same"; if I don't hold the seat, it'll be because I just could get enough leaflets out and people feel I've let them down.

Displaying an alternative approach to leafleting campaigns, a Conservative metropolitan councillor said in interview 'many leaflets are so much waste paper, good for the budgies' cage though'. Or as a Labour district councillor commented: 'unless it is a well run leafleting campaign I may not even get a leaflet... this approach is often used by professional protesters anyway, not real people'.

One aggrieved Conservative councillor facing a strong Liberal Democrat challenge in his ward commented:

They [Liberal Democrats] take the credit for everything we have done and just because it appears in one of their Focus leaflets, people believe them. I have one of these so-called Focus teams in my ward and the things they say in those leaflets; if I lose my seat it will be because of distortion and half-truths. The Liberals hold all the executive seats on the council and the Focus leaflet still says that they have "got onto the council" about this, or "contacted the council" about that, or "spoken to the council" about the other, so I got up in our last full council and asked the leader of the council [a Liberal Democrat] to remind their candidate in my ward just who it was that was running the council she keeps getting onto – perhaps she'd like to put that in her Focus leaflet.

Councillors across the political spectrum find direct contact with citizens through delegations a less effective method of communication than other protest methods. Labour and Conservative councillors find delegations to the ruling group, more effective than delegations to full council, emphasising the greater importance for them than Liberal Democrats, of the party group as a place in which to conduct

representation, and the body which is represented in public (Copus, 1999).^{xxvii} Whilst there has been some shifting of responses between the two surveys, the pattern has remained constant. Yet, there was a considerable leap amongst Labour councillors indicating the group was more effective a forum for citizen delegations than full council. Delegations of course, require councillors to hear from a group of citizens wishing to discuss a certain issue – it is a far more deliberative approach than much of what passes for political campaigning. Maybe it is not so unsurprising that councillors do not put more faith in direct discussions with citizens, either in the safety of a party group meeting, or the public setting of a council meeting. Such direct discussion may require councillors to reconsider an issue, about which they have already made up their mind, and to do so in front of a number of citizens.

Across the party spectrum and across both surveys, councillors are particularly unwilling to admit that protest action such as disrupting meetings or occupying buildings has any influence on them as decision-makers. Indeed, there has been a decline – albeit marginal in some cases - between 2003 to 2006 in the view amongst councillors that these are effective methods of political engagement. Thus, those wishing to exert influence over councillors must employ respectable and legitimate methods of pressure, rather than more direct means of political engagement; even for councillors of the centre-left and left, such direct action is beyond-the-pale. Protest action has a collective target, either the collective body of councillors, or a wider public audience; but, when it comes to direct contact between citizens and councillors we see some very powerful messages for participatory processes with a representative democracy, begin to emerge.

Table 4 sets out councillors' responses to the effectiveness of direct contact between the citizen and the local political *elite*.

Table 4. Effectiveness of direct contact with councillors, by political affiliation

Direct contact:	Party	2003 % effective	2006 % effective
group contact with own councillor	Conservative	95	97
	Labour	93	96
	Lib Dem	94	98
individual contact with own councillor	Conservative	86	90
	Labour	88	88
	Lib Dem	89	91
Group contact with council leader	Conservative	72	78
	Labour	79	84
	Lib Dem	71	77
Individual contact with council leader	Conservative	66	69
	Labour	67	69
	Lib Dem	60	67
group contact with executive member	Conservative	75	77
	Labour	78	81
	Lib Dem	79	80
Individual contact executive member	Conservative	63	65
	Labour	65	69
	Lib Dem	65	68
group contact with council officer	Conservative	43	45
	Labour	46	48
	Lib Dem	47	45
Individual contact with council officer	Conservative	36	34
	Labour	34	35
	Lib Dem	39	41
use informal social links with a councillor	Conservative	39	44
	Labour	38	40
	Lib Dem	34	31

When questioned as to direct contact by individuals or groups of electors with the political *elite* – either the local councillor or a member of the council leadership – some very important and revealing patterns have emerged across the political spectrum, and have remained constant between the surveys. First, contact by groups of electors, with councillors is seen as more effective, in each and every case, than citizens making individual contact with key political players - even for Conservative councillors with a political philosophy based on the concept of the individual. Conservatives see collections of individuals as more effective politically than individual individuals. Collective political action has a loud and clear resonance for all councillors, irrespective of political affiliation.

Secondly, councillors display a very strong belief that the most effective point of contact for citizens is that made with their own local councillor and this view has strengthened between the surveys. Group and individual contact with the citizen's own councillor is seen as more effective than group or individual contact with the

political leadership of the council (the latter having also increased in effectiveness as councillors have greater experience of executive local government in English councils). Councillors here, display a continuing and firmly held belief that the correct (rather than effective) line of engagement for the citizen, collectively or individually, is with their own local councillor.

Thirdly, councillors hold that any contact with political players is more effective than contact with council officers, although there has been some slight shifting around of opinion here, but with nothing major emerging by way of a change of attitudes between the surveys. Councillors remain unwilling to publicly cede much effectiveness to officers when it comes to influencing policy. Indeed, they see informal social contact in much the same light, reluctant to admit that either officers or friends are able to influence events above more formal contact with the elected member made by citizens. The responses indicate a very clear and strongly held view, amongst members of the three main parties, that their electorate is best served by contacting their own councillor above all others and this is a powerful message from the two surveys. The responses however, say more about the way councillors see their own role and local position and the appropriateness of citizen engagement, than it does about what are effective methods for citizens to engage with the political processes. Maybe here, councillors are overestimating their own influence within the local political process, both within and beyond the council of which they are a member.

Similar strong patterns emerged in the two surveys when it came to the citizen attempting to leapfrog over the local political *elite*, to secure influence by indirect means of pressure, through contacting those outside the council or even outside the locality. Table 5 sets out councillors' responses to the effectiveness of indirect citizen engagement.

Table 5. Effectiveness of indirect contact, by political affiliation

Indirect contact	Party	2003 % effective	2006 % effective
contact the ombudsman	Conservative	54	57
	Labour	49	47
	Lib Dem	56	56
contact local MP	Conservative	53	50
	Labour	56	49
	Lib Dem	51	52
contact district auditor	Conservative	49	47
	Labour	48	49
	Lib Dem	51	54
take the council to court	Conservative	50	48
	Labour	48	45
	Lib Dem	47	49
Contact a govt department	Conservative	21	19
	Labour	24	22
	Lib Dem	15	17
contact a minister	Conservative	32	30
	Labour	36	37
	Lib Dem	23	19

Broad similarities exist across the political spectrum in councillor's responses to the effectiveness or otherwise, of indirect contact – that is with contacting political officials outside the council in a hope they will indirectly influence decisions, or apply pressure to the council. The responses have remained more or less constant between the two surveys. Councillors see citizen contact with the ombudsman or a local MP as the most effective methods of indirect pressure, whilst contact with a government department or a minister is seen as less effectual. A curious result when councillors – particularly leading members - often invest much of their own time and effort into contact with ministers. The clear message however, is that councillors see citizen engagement with the local political *elite*, as a more effective form of participation and pressure than contact with the national political *elite*.

Councillors' views about the use by the citizen of electoral pressure to engage with and influence the local political elite, provides some equally powerful messages.

Table 6 sets out councillors responses to the use of electoral pressure by the citizenry

Table 6. Effectiveness of electoral pressure, by political affiliation

Electoral pressure	Party	2003 % effective	2006 % effective
campaign for a sitting councillor during an election	Conservative	56	61
	Labour	54	59
	Lib Dem	60	66
join ruling political party	Conservative	50	52
	Labour	60	69
	Lib Dem	54	60
join opposition political party	Conservative	34	30
	Labour	28	20
	Lib Dem	34	29
vote against the council ruling group at election time	Conservative	55	53
	Labour	53	52
	Lib Dem	60	61
stand candidates at election	Conservative	57	51
	Labour	45	38
	Lib Dem	58	54

There has been a discernable increase across the two surveys, in the responses indicating that councillors hold campaigning for a sitting member during an election as providing the citizen with some means of political influence. The explanation for this can be found in the fact that at election time, more than any other, councillors become acutely receptive to the expressed views of the electorate and particularly those involved in the councillor's re-election campaign. A good time then for the concerned citizen to express policy preferences is when actively campaigning for the re-election of a local councillor. There has been a noticeable increase between the surveys in Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors responding positively to the notion that joining the ruling local party, provides citizens with an effective means of

political influence. A slightly smaller increase amongst Conservative councillors is also noticeable in this regard. Such responses echo the importance attached to the party by councillors of all affiliations but particularly Labour members. It also underlines the view amongst councillors of all parties that the political party itself is the most legitimate, appropriate and effective means of engaging in local politics.

Councillors by contrast are far less convinced that joining the local opposition political party is an effective action for the citizen seeking to exert some influence or pressure. Thus, joining the opposition in a fit of political pique is unlikely to wield positive results. Indeed, a district council Conservative group leader commented:

I campaigned and worked for Labour in 1945 and there was no one happy than me when Attlee won; I wasn't a party member. But, I just hate what this Labour lot have done [on the council] and are doing to this area and some of the councillors themselves are detestable. So eventually I joined the Conservative Party, really only to have a go at them, and you sort of get drawn into things and then I ended up leading the Conservative group - of 6. We had very little influence as you would expect - I just couldn't work with some of the Labour people, I had to go somewhere else.

Whilst over 50 per cent of Conservative and Labour councillors in both surveys see voting against the ruling group at election time as an effective weapon for the citizen, the Liberal Democrats put greatest store by this method. In a representative democracy, it could be anticipated that elected representatives would display far greater faith in the value of using the public vote as an effective method of political engagement for the citizen. Yet, what is being reflected here is not so much that the vote is ineffective, rather that it is too effective; councillors display a fear of the public vote, a fear that contradicts moves in England to increase voter turnout at local elections. Councillors, do not require large scale public engagement in elections; they assume legitimacy for their office from any turnout and are largely unperturbed by voter abstentionism. Indeed, a depressed level of voter turnout and low salience for the citizenry of local elections serves to protect representatives from political upheaval wrought by an awakening mass local electorate.

The notion that citizens should stand as candidates at election time – as non-party candidates – has declined across the parties as an effective way of influencing local politics; most markedly, this decline is amongst Labour councillors. It is on the issue of citizens standing candidates in local elections from non-party based *political associations* that we find the most vociferous and visceral reaction from councillors of the political parties. The firmly held view amongst party councillors is that elections are the property of political parties and ordinary citizens, from outside the parties, step into this territory at their own peril; local elections are for party competition, not for citizen organisations to enter the fray. (see, Copus, 2004).

A Labour councillor summed-up the view of councillors from all parties when he spoke about a single-issue group thus:

At the start they [a citizen protest group] said they weren't political and they did all the usual things of leafleting, writing to the papers, calling public meetings, and we listened to them. Then, because the council couldn't get the government to change its policy, they stood in the local election. Right, first

that shows they were political all along; and, second, they're just a one-issue group, what do they think about schools, housing, jobs, social services; we all know what they think about the hospital, but what about these other things. Some of us couldn't believe it when they won seats, I mean, the council doesn't have any say over the hospital and people didn't seem to care about anything else, I understand people were angry about the hospital, but that's nothing to do with the local election.

If such an issue is 'nothing to do with a local election' then what is it to do with! Rather, what the councillor meant was the council does not control the health services, therefore, such issues are outside the purview of the local election; for local citizens, this is just not the case and, here, they saw the local election as very much about the local hospital (see, Crow, 2002).^{xxviii}

A Conservative councillor, from an authority where a resident's association had won a number of council seats, commented:

I can not for the life of me understand why the Residents Association stood in the election; they just didn't seem to like political parties running the council; there was nothing else that held them together. We had beaten the socialists and Liberals and then these resident's people come along and start to interfere in things.

A Liberal Democrat councillor stated:

Parties provide the voter with a clear and identifiable choice for the election. When you get residents groups and single-issue groups involved it crowds the pitch, so to speak; it confuses things. These organisations don't have a clear platform and when they are focused on one issue, how are you suppose to know what they stand for on other issues.

The point that had been missed here, of course, is that when the electorate vote for a single-issue group, they do not care what that group thinks, or does not think, about other issues, as the single issue has transcended all other political concerns.

Finally, the survey sought to assess councillors' attitudes towards those methods of citizen engagement and consultation that form a key part of the Government's modernising agenda for local government. Such consultation methods often find favour with councils because they are, after all, in the control of the council, unlike other methods of political engagement, which rest with citizens to activate.

Table 7 sets out councillors' responses to the effectiveness of council sponsored consultation.

Table 7. Effectiveness of council sponsored methods, by political affiliation

Council Sponsored	Party	2003 % effective	2006 % effective
citizens juries	Conservative	22	24
	Labour	49	51
	Lib Dem	51	53
focus groups	Conservative	45	44
	Labour	71	70
	Lib Dem	71	70
citizens panel	Conservative	38	34
	Labour	60	57
	Lib Dem	66	66
deliberative opinion polls	Conservative	39	35
	Labour	56	50
	Lib Dem	55	51
community forums	Conservative	58	60
	Labour	79	73
	Lib Dem	77	76
neighbourhood committees	Conservative	59	60
	Labour	71	62
	Lib Dem	77	81
referendums	Conservative	64	59
	Labour	61	55
	Lib Dem	72	80
annual council elections	Conservative	60	60
	Labour	65	61
	Lib Dem	50	58

Table 7 shows Labour and Liberal Democrats as far more enthusiastic than Conservatives about the methods of consultation available to councils to consult the citizenry. These mechanisms are favoured by the government's modernising agenda, and they also represent a far safer avenue of citizen engagement for councillors, as they pose no threat to the position of the elected representative. Moreover, mechanisms such as citizens' panels and juries, opinion polls and focus groups are more managerial and marketing tools rather than serious means for citizens to engage with the political *elite*. As such, they pose no real threat or challenge to the interpretations the political elite have of democracy, representation and citizen engagement in local politics and so can be safely encouraged. There appears however, to be a slight decline in notions that these are effective methods of citizen engagement when the two surveys are compared; as with other aspects of the survey, this decline, in places, is quite marginal. The most marked change comes with Labour responses to the idea that neighbourhood forums are an effective tool for citizen engagement; and, with Liberal Democrat support for referendum. It is the idea of holding local referendum, where we find a fascinating set of contradictory, yet firmly held, *elite* perceptions about politics and democracy.

The local referendum: the bete noire of the local political elite

Table 7 shows that councillors, across the political spectrum, do see the referendum as an effective method of public political engagement, although there is a falling away of this view amongst Labour and Conservative councillors between the two surveys. Yet, because councillors see referendum as an effective tool for public engagement, does not mean that they like the idea of using such a method, far from it. Qualitative research amongst councillors uncovers a supreme irony of local representative democracy and that is that councillors in England, themselves a product of the electoral system, display views about the use of local referendum that are mainly negative. It would appear that voting is an appropriate mechanism for the public to choose their governors, but not a mechanism by which the public should be able to use to decide on specific issues.

The use of referendum in the UK has been sparse. Since 1975 there has been only one national referendum, when the voters were presented with the question: *Do you think that the UK should stay in the European Community (Common Market)?* To which they responded with a 'Yes' vote. A number of sub-national referendum have been held; voters in Scotland were asked in 1979 if they wanted devolution and said 'No'; in 1997 when asked if they wanted a Scottish Parliament they said 'Yes' in a referendum. A similar pattern occurred in Wales, with a 1979 'No' vote to devolution and a 1997 'Yes' vote to a Welsh Assembly. In 1998 the voters of Northern Ireland were asked if they wanted a Northern Ireland Assembly, to which they voted 'Yes'. In November 2004, voters in the North East region of England were asked if they wished to see an elected regional chamber formed, and at the same time, local government reorganised on a unitary basis across the North East; the voters delivered an emphatic 'No', de-railing the government's agenda for regional elected chambers. The English as a whole have never been asked in a referendum to vote on whether they want an English Parliament and there is no sign of any party being prepared to ask them that question!

Prior to 2003 there was some legal confusion as to whether English councils had the power to call local polls; Section 116 of the 2003 Local Government Act ended that confusion and clarified the power of councils to consult citizens in local referendum. A further two Acts of Parliament gave citizens locally, the right to decide how they wish to be governed: by a directly elected mayor or an indirectly elected council leader. Under the provisions of the Greater London Authority Act 1999, Londoners were asked to give consent to an elected mayor for the capital and, on 7 May 1998, a majority 'Yes' vote was received in the referendum but, on a turnout of only 34 per cent. Yet, with 1,230,715 'Yes' votes recorded (72%) and 478,413 'No' (28%) and with every London Borough providing a majority 'Yes' vote, this was a clear public endorsement for executive directly elected mayoral government sanctioned by a referendum.

The arrival of directly elected mayors elsewhere in England has to be sanctioned, under the provision of the Local Government Act 2000, in each and every case, by a referendum, called either by the council, directed by the government on the council, or called if 5 per cent of the local voters sign a petition to the effect. Table 8 sets out the referendum so far held on whether an elected mayor should be introduced as the

form of local governance. The results of the referendum, under the Act, are binding on the council.

Table 8 Results in Mayoral Referenda

Council	Date	Result	For	%	Against	%	Turn Out	Type
Berwick Upon Tweed	7 Jun 2001	No	3617	26%	10212	74%	64%	Poll with GE
Cheltenham	28 Jun 2001	No	8083	33%	16602	67%	31%	All Postal
Gloucester	28 Jun 2001	No	7731	31%	16317	69%	31%	All Postal
Watford	12 Jul 2001	Yes	7636	52%	7140	48%	24.5%	All Postal
Doncaster	20 Sep 2001	Yes	35453	65%	19398	35%	25%	All Postal
Kirklees	4 Oct 2001	No	10169	27%	27977	73%	13%	Normal
Sunderland	11 Oct 2001	No	9593	43%	12209	57%	10%	Normal
Hartlepool	18 Oct 2001	Yes	10667	51%	10294	49%	31%	All Postal
LB Lewisham	18 Oct 2001	Yes	16822	51%	15914	49%	18%	All Postal
North Tyneside	18 Oct 2001	Yes	30262	58%	22296	42%	36%	All Postal
Middlesbrough	18 Oct 2001	Yes	29067	84%	5422	16%	34%	All Postal
Sedgefield	18 Oct 2001	No	10628	47%	11869	53%	33.3%	All Postal
Brighton and Hove	18 Oct 2001	No	22724	38%	37214	62%	32%	All Postal
Redditch	8 Nov 2001	No	7250	44%	9198	56%	28.3%	All Postal
Durham	20 Nov 2001	No	8327	41%	11974	59%	28.5%	All Postal
Harrow	7 Dec 2001	No	17502	42%	23554	58%	26.06%	All Postal
Plymouth	24 Jan 2002	No	29553	41%	42811	59%	39.78%	All Postal
Harlow	24 Jan 2002	No	5296	25%	15490	75%	36.38%	All Postal
LB Newham	31 Jan 2002	Yes	27163	68.2%	12687	31.8%	25.9%	All Postal
Shepway	31 Jan 2002	No	11357	44%	14438	56%	36.3%	All Postal
LB Southwark	31 Jan 2002	No	6054	31.4%	13217	68.6%	11.2%	Normal
West Devon	31 Jan 2002	No	3555	22.6%	12190	77.4%	41.8%	All Postal
Bedford	21 Feb 2002	Yes	11316	67.2%	5537	32.8%	15.5%	Normal
LB Hackney	2 May 2002	Yes	24697	58.94%	10547	41.06%	31.85%	All Postal
Mansfield	2 May 2002	Yes	8973	54%	7350	44%	21.04%	Normal
Newcastle-under-Lyme	2 May 2002	No	12912	44%	16468	56%	31.5%	Normal
Oxford	2 May 2002	No	14692	44%	18686	56%	33.8%	Normal
Stoke-on-Trent	2 May 2002	Yes	28601	58%	20578	42%	27.8%	Normal
Corby	3 Oct 2002	No	5351	46%	6239	53.64%	30.91%	All Postal
LB Ealing	12 Dec 2002	No	9,454	44.8%	11,655	55.2%	9.8%	Combination postal and ballot
Ceredigion	20 May 2004	No	5,308	27%	14,013	73%	36%	Unknown
Torbay	14 July 2005	Yes	18,074	55%	14,682	45%	32.1%	Unknown

Source: New Local Government Network: nlgn.org.uk

So far, of the 32 referendum held under the 2000 Act, only 12 have delivered a ‘Yes’ vote, bringing England’s collection of elected mayors to a total of 13, including the mayor of London (see, Copus, 2006).^{xxix} Yet, whilst it appear that being governed by

an elected mayor has not ignited a blaze of excitement for English citizens, there have however, at least been a number of referendum where voters have had the opportunity to decide how they want to be governed locally, and where the local political *elite* have had to justify their own preference of an indirectly elected council leader to the public and win a public vote in its favour. The latter, of course, is a relatively easy feat when all three parties locally campaign for a 'No' vote, which is what has happened in most cases.

Other than mayoral referendums, the most celebrated cases of councils holding referendum in English local government are those called by Bristol City Council, Milton Keynes Borough Council and the London Borough of Croydon, all three of which were about the rate of local council tax that should be levied. The turnout in the four referendums (Croydon held two in different years) was respectable: Bristol secured a 40 per cent turnout, Croydon 35 per cent and Milton Keynes 45 per cent. In Bristol the voters went for a tax freeze; in Croydon for a 5 per cent increase (the middle option) and in Milton Keynes almost a 10 per cent increase, again the middle option available (see, ODPM 2002)^{xxx}.

Despite a smattering of council called referendum, by-and-large councillors do not like them. Even when faced by a complex local issue, where public opinion is at variance with the council and also where the public do not speak with one voice; councillors would rather avoid using the referendum as a technique to solve a political crisis. Councillors often pour scorn on referendum, or more accurately upon the voters and the choices they might make. Common amongst the complaints from councillors and often quoted in interviews is the 'capital punishment' argument. As many councillors have said in interviews: 'if you had a referendum tomorrow, they'd bring back hanging'. Thus, it appears that not liking the result of a public vote, is a good enough reason for not having one.

Another common response is the 'voter ignorance' argument. As a Conservative councillor commented:

they [the public] just don't understand the issue, they don't have enough information on which to make up their mind and they wouldn't invest the time to think about it properly. Plebiscitary democracy is just mob rule and rule by an ignorant mob at that.

A Labour councillor commented in a similar vein:

local government is a complex and difficult business and we [councillors] have access to information and advice that the public don't have. You just can't go around asking people what they think, it's not that easy, in fact, asking people to decide in a vote what we should do is a terrifying thought; they'd want to cut council tax and have everything as well

Finally, there is the: 'what would be the point of being a councillor' argument. As a Conservative councillor commented:

people elect councillors to make decisions; they wouldn't thank me if I keep asking them to vote about what we should do; what would be the point of

being a councillor. I am a Burkean through and through; I make the decisions and the public can let me know what they think about them at the local election; anything else just undermines representative democracy.

To which can be added the comment of a Liberal Democrat councillor:

I support community involvement in local politics; we have to have more people getting involved, its makes politics healthy. But, as far as referendum go, why ask people to elect councillors if we then ask them to make decisions about a range of issues by voting; maybe there's a place for it in really important issues, but I wouldn't want to see referendums as a general practice, certainly not like in America where they have them all the time.

It should be no surprise that councillors, as a product of the electoral system, do not like issues being put to a public vote, where it is they that have been elected to decide upon those issues in the first place. In the English case, councillors see referendum, not as complementing a representative system, but as conflicting with it and ushering in a form of plebiscitary democracy, in which the local political *elite*, from whichever party, would be far less certain of securing the policies they wish to implement, when set against what the public might want. The English local citizen is likely to continue to be denied the opportunity of casting a vote on local issues, for the fear amongst the local political *elite* that the voter would either be confused by the complexity with which they are faced; or, more simply, the voters would just deliver the local political *elite* with the wrong answer.

Conclusions

When councillors are faced with public engagement, of one sort or another, they have different views about the effectiveness or appropriateness, of the method employed by the citizen, both in terms of the categories of activity and the methods of engagement. What is striking is the considerable similarities of beliefs that are held by councillors from across the party spectrum, about the appropriate way in which the citizen should take part in local politics – political affiliation makes less difference than might be expected. Party councillors have a shared belief about what constitutes legitimate local politics and legitimate and effective means of citizen engagement. Moreover, they hold shared beliefs about the role played by councillors and parties in local politics – beliefs which do not see political territory shared equally between parties and citizens.

Councillors accept the effectiveness of, and are open to, what could be called acceptable and legitimate forms of political protest; they reject demonstrations and occupations of council buildings as being an effective method of political protest. Strikingly, councillors see the most effective way in which citizen can participate is, individually or collectively, to contact their own local councillors, or after that, a leading member of the council. Here councillors express great confidence in the position they hold as an effective means of facilitating citizen engagement in politics, because that office – and its holder – is sanctioned by the public vote. Yet, councillors are less enthusiastic about the citizenry using the electoral system as an effective method of pressure on councils and councillors – elections are for parties and

politicians, not for citizens to stand their own candidates and to use to signal discontent with the political *elite*.

The attitudes councillors hold towards a wide range of elements concerning citizen engagement in local politics, shows a remarkably consistency over time and two key lessons emerge concerning party political affiliation. First, that political affiliation is a powerful indicator of perceptions about the effectiveness of public participation and various participatory tools in the political processes, with a Labour- Liberal Democrat affinity evident. Secondly, that where political affiliation breaks down as a clear indicator of attitudes towards aspects of local politics, it is replaced by the shared experience councillors have as members of political parties - albeit different ones - and by their belief that party is the rightful dominating force within local democracy and politics.

Those councillors with a strong belief in the virtue of participation would admit to one thing – that if the party wish to respond negatively to, or even to ignore the outcomes of citizen involvement, then the councillor will – in most instances - back the party above those he or she represents (See, Copus, 2004).^{xxx} That is because, despite trends towards encouraging citizen engagement in local politics and a growing assertiveness amongst local communities, local democracy is representative and political parties are the vehicles through which local representation is secured – at least in the mind of the party affiliate. Moreover, representative democracy, by resting on notions of the existence of a local political *elite* freed from too close a tie to the citizenry and its wishes, enables political parties to fill the gap between governor and governed and thus come to dominate the local political landscape.

Citizen engagement in local politics and democracy generates a participatory tension within a representative system. That tension is produced because, whilst citizen engagement does not negate the decision making responsibilities of local representatives, it challenges the role of the representative as the final arbiter of local affairs. It is a simple process for councillors, as product of the electoral system, to marginalise any form of citizen participation as ‘unrepresentative’ because, councillors interpret ‘representative’ to mean (amongst other things) ‘elected’. Thus, as citizen engagement in politics is not a result of an election, they can be held, when convenient, to be not or ‘un’ representative. Thus, any citizen engagement can be rejected in the same vein if citizens’ views conflict with the views of the local political *elite*. As key players in local politics and democracy, councillors can either promote or hinder the effectiveness of citizen participation. In England at least, it is clear that councillors prefer local democracy to remain representative in nature so as to ensure continued *elite* control of local politics, and, that citizen engagement beyond elections, can be tolerated in so far as it does not pose a serious challenge to that continued *elite* control.

ⁱ Young, K., 'Local Government and the Environment' in R. Jowell, and S. Witherspoon (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1985 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985, pp. 149-176.

ⁱⁱ Copus, C., *Party Politics and Local Government*, Manchester University Press, 2004, Copus, C., 'Community, Party and the Crisis of Representation', in N. Rao, (editor), *Representation and Community in Western Democracies*, MacMillan, 2000, pp. 93-113.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sartori, G., *Democratic Theory*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1962. Schumpeter, J.A., *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, Unwin, 1974.

-
- ^{iv} Bulpitt, J.G., *Participation and Local Government*, in G. Parry (ed), *Participation in Politics*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1972
- ^v Putnam, R., *The Beliefs of Politicians: Ideology, Conflict and Democracy in Britain and Italy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973
- ^{vi} Parry G., *Citizenship and Knowledge*, in Birnbaum, Lively and Parry (eds), *Democracy, Consensus and Social Contract*, Sage, 1978.
- ^{vii} ODPM, *Vibrant Local Leadership*, 2005
- Detr, *Local Leadership: Local Choice*, 1999.
- Detr, *Modernising Local Government: Local Democracy and Community Leadership*, 1998 (a)
- Detr, *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*, 1998 (b)
- ^{viii} Gyford, J., 'Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy' in Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Vol. IV, Aspects of Local Democracy*, London, HMSO, 1986, pp.106-131.
- ^{ix} Parry, G., G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992
- ^x Dahl, R.A., *Who Governs?*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961
- ^{xi} Boaden, N., M. Goldsmith, W. Hampton, and P. Stringer, *Public Participation in Local Services*, Harlow, Longman, 1982. Cochrane, A., 'Community Politics and Democracy', in D. Held and C. Pollit, (editors), *New Forms of Democracy*, London, Sage, 1986, pp. 51-77.
- ^{xii} Copus, C., 'Community, Party and the Crisis of Representation', in N. Rao, (editor), *Representation and Community in Western Democracies*, Macmillan, 2000, pp. 93-113. Copus, C., *Party Politics and Local Government*, Manchester University Press, 2004
- ^{xiii} Rees, A., and T. Smith, *Town Councillors: A Study of Barking*, London, The Acton Society Trust, 1964. Jones, G.W., *Borough Politics: A Study of Wolverhampton Borough Council 1888-1964*, London, Macmillan, 1969. Parkinson, M., *Liverpool on the Brink: One City's Struggle against Government Cuts*, Berkshire, Policy Journals, 1985.
- ^{xiv} Muchnick, D., *Urban Renewal in Liverpool*, Occasional Papers on Social Administration, the Social Administration Research Trust, London, Bell & Sons, 1970. Batley, R., 'An Explanation of Non-Participation in Planning', *Policy and Politics*, 1 (2), 1972, pp. 95-114. Lambert, J., C. Paris, and B. Blackaby, *Housing Policy and the State: Allocation, Access and Control*, London, Macmillan, 1978.
- ^{xv} Blondel, J., and R. Hall, 'Conflict, Decision-Making and the Perceptions of Local Councillors', *Political Studies*, 15 (3), 1967, pp. 322-350. Glassberg, A., *Representation and Urban Community*, London, Macmillan, 1981.
- ^{xvi} Hampton, W., *Democracy and Community: A Study of Politics in Sheffield*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- ^{xvii} Marsh, A., *Protest and Political Consciousness*, London, Sage, 1977. Young, K., 'Local Government and the Environment' in R. Jowell, and S. Witherspoon (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1985 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985, pp. 149-176. Young, K., 'Political Attitudes', in R. Jowell, and C. Airey (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1984 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1984, pp. 11-45. Bloch, A., and P. John, *Attitudes to Local Government: A Survey of Electors*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1991.
- ^{xviii} Kavanagh, D., 'Political Culture in Great Britain: The Decline of the Civic Culture', in G.A. Almond, and S. Verba (editors), *The Civic Culture Revisited*, London, Sage, 1989, pp. 124-176. Heath, A., and R. Topf, 'Political Culture', in R. Jowell, S. Witherspoon, and L. Brook (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1987 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1987, pp. 51-69. Young, K., and N. Rao, 'Faith in Local Democracy', in J. Curtice, R. Jowell, L. Brook, and A. Park (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The Twelfth Report*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1995, pp. 91-117.
- ^{xix} Young, K., and N. Rao, 'Faith in Local Democracy', in J. Curtice, R. Jowell, L. Brook, and A. Park (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The Twelfth Report*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1995, pp. 91-117. Hart, V., *Distrust and Democracy: Political Distrust in Britain and America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.
- ^{xx} Lowndes, V., G. Stoker., L. Pratchett., *Trends in Public Participation: Part 2 – Citizens' Perspectives*, *Public Administration*, Vol.79. No.2., 2001, pp. 445-455.
- ^{xxi} Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Vol. II, The Local Government Councillor*, Cmnd 9799, London, HMSO, 1986.
- ^{xxii} Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Vol. II, The Local Government Councillor*, Cmnd 9799, London, HMSO, 1986.
- ^{xxiii} Burns, D., R. Hambleton and P. Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, Macmillan, 1994.

-
- ^{xxiv} Mabileau, A., G., Moyser, G., Parry, and P., Quantin, (eds), *Local Politics and Participation in Britain and France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- ^{xxv} Pinkney, R., 'An Alternative Political Strategy? Liberals in Power in English Local Government', *Local Government Studies*, 10 (3), May/June, 1984, pp. 69-84. Pinkney, R., 'Nationalizing Local Politics and Localizing a National Party: The Liberal Role in Local Government', *Government and Opposition*, 18, 1983, pp. 347-358.
- ^{xxvi} Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, *Model Standing Orders for Liberal Democrat Council Groups*, Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, 2000, up-dated 2003.
- ^{xxvii} Copus, C., The Local Councillor and Party Group Loyalty, *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 27. N0.3 1999, pp. 309-324.
- ^{xxviii} Crow, A., Councillors Attitudes' Towards Participation: Kidderminster General Hospital: A Case Study, *Local Governance*, Vol.28 No.2, 2002, pp.115-124.
- ^{xxix} Copus, C., *Leading the Localities: Executive Mayors in English Local Governance*, Manchester University Press, 2006
- ^{xxx} Stoker, G., *Council Tax Consultation: Guidelines for Local Authorities*, ODPM, London, 2002
- ^{xxxi} Copus, C., *Party Politics and Local Government*, Manchester University Press, 2004

References

- Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, *Model Standing Orders for Liberal Democrat Council Groups*, Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, 2000, up-dated 2003.
- Batley, R., 'An Explanation of Non-Participation in Planning', *Policy and Politics*, 1 (2), 1972, pp. 95-114.
- Bloch, A., and P. John, *Attitudes to Local Government: A Survey of Electors*, York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1991.
- Blondel, J., and R. Hall, 'Conflict, Decision-Making and the Perceptions of Local Councillors', *Political Studies*, 15 (3), 1967, pp. 322-350.
- Boaden, N., M. Goldsmith, W. Hampton, and P. Stringer, *Public Participation in Local Services*, Harlow, Longman, 1982.
- Bulpitt, J.G., Participation and Local Government, in G. Parry (ed), *Participation in Politics*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1972
- Burns, D., R. Hambleton and P. Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, Macmillan, 1994.
- Cochrane, A., 'Community Politics and Democracy', in D. Held and C. Pollit, (editors), *New Forms of Democracy*, London, Sage, 1986, pp. 51-77.
- Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Vol. II, The Local Government Councillor*, Cmnd 9799, London, HMSO, 1986.
- Copus, C., *Leading the Localities: Executive Mayors in English Local Governance*, Manchester University Press, 2006
- Copus, C., *Party Politics and Local Government*, Manchester University Press, 2004
- Copus, C., 'Community, Party and the Crisis of Representation', in N. Rao, (editor), *Representation and Community in Western Democracies*, MacMillan, 2000, pp. 93-113.
- Copus, C., *Party Politics and Local Government*, Manchester University Press, 2004
- Copus, C., The Local Councillor and Party Group Loyalty, *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 27. N0.3 1999, pp. 309-324.
- Crow, A., Councillors Attitudes' Towards Participation: Kidderminster General Hospital: A Case Study, *Local Governance*, Vol.28 No.2, 2002, pp.115-124.
- Dahl, R.A., *Who Governs?*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961
- Detr, *Local Leadership: Local Choice*, 1999.
- Detr, *Modernising Local Government: Local Democracy and Community Leadership*, 1998 (a)
- Detr, *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*, 1998 (b)
- Glassberg, A., *Representation and Urban Community*, London, Macmillan, 1981.
- Gyford, J., 'Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy' in Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, *Research Vol. IV, Aspects of Local Democracy*, London, HMSO, 1986, pp.106-131.
- Hampton, W., *Democracy and Community: A Study of Politics in Sheffield*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970.

-
- Hart, V., *Distrust and Democracy: Political Distrust in Britain and America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.
- Heath, A., and R. Topf, 'Political Culture', in R. Jowell, S. Witherspoon, and L. Brook (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1987 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1987, pp. 51-69.
- Jones, G.W., *Borough Politics: A Study of Wolverhampton Borough Council 1888-1964*, London, Macmillan, 1969.
- Kavanagh, D., 'Political Culture in Great Britain: The Decline of the Civic Culture', in G.A. Almond, and S. Verba (editors), *The Civic Culture Revisited*, London, Sage, 1989, pp. 124-176.
- Lambert, J., C. Paris, and B. Blackaby, *Housing Policy and the State: Allocation, Access and Control*, London, Macmillan, 1978.
- Lowndes, V., G. Stoker., L. Pratchett., Trends in Public Participation: Part 2 – Citizens' Perspectives, *Public Administration*, Vol.79. No.2., 2001, pp. 445-455.
- Mabileau, A., G., Moyser, G., Parry, and P., Quantin, (eds), *Local Politics and Participation in Britain and France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Marsh, A., *Protest and Political Consciousness*, London, Sage, 1977.
- Muchnick, D., *Urban Renewal in Liverpool*, Occasional Papers on Social Administration, the Social Administration Research Trust, London, Bell & Sons, 1970.
- ODPM, *Vibrant Local Leadership*, 2005
- Parkinson, M., *Liverpool on the Brink: One City's Struggle against Government Cuts*, Berkshire, Policy Journals, 1985.
- Parry G., Citizenship and Knowledge, in Birnbaum, Lively and Parry (eds), *Democracy, Consensus and Social Contract*, Sage, 1978.
- Parry, G., G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992
- Pinkney, R., 'An Alternative Political Strategy? Liberals in Power in English Local Government', *Local Government Studies*, 10 (3), May/June, 1984, pp. 69-84.
- Pinkney, R., 'Nationalizing Local Politics and Localizing a National Party: The Liberal Role in Local Government', *Government and Opposition*, 18, 1983, pp. 347-358.
- Putnam, R., *The Beliefs of Politicians: Ideology, Conflict and Democracy in Britain and Italy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973
- Rees, A., and T. Smith, *Town Councillors: A Study of Barking*, London, The Acton Society Trust, 1964.
- Stoker, G., *Council Tax Consultation: Guidelines for Local Authorities*, ODPM, London, 2002
- Young, K., 'Political Attitudes', in R. Jowell, and C. Airey (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1984 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1984, pp. 11-45.
- Young, K., and N. Rao, 'Faith in Local Democracy', in J. Curtice, R. Jowell, L. Brook, and A. Park (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The Twelfth Report*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1995, pp. 91-117.
- Young, K., 'Local Government and the Environment' in R. Jowell, and S. Witherspoon (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1985 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985, pp. 149-176.
- Young, K., 'Local Government and the Environment' in R. Jowell, and S. Witherspoon (editors), *British Social Attitudes: The 1985 Report*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985, pp. 149-176.