Local Councillors on Democratic Renewal
An Empirical Study of the Vision of Local Councillors
on Local Democracy and its Reforms in Belgium

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Abstract
This paper addresses the vision of local councilors in Belgium towards democratic renewal at the local level. First, the explorative-descriptive analysis portrays councillors’ vision on three levels. Regarding specific local government reforms, councilors seem to be rather conservative or neutral. The analysis of representative style shows the prevalence of the trustee-model, albeit softer variants dominate their more absolutist counterparts. Indeed, councilors do support forms of citizen deliberation but rather prefer to hang on to their ultimate responsibility in decision-making. In reality, however, political parties remain the key reference points in representation. When looking at the general level of local democracy as such, conceptualized as hybrid democracy, councilors prefer network democracy to the participatory and (especially) market form. Second, the explanatory-structural analysis verifies the influence of place and professionalization upon the latter conception of local democracy. Whereas scale and social professionalization don’t seem to matter, region and political professionalization do to a diversified and limited extent.

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1. Introduction

Ever since its origin, there was a need to organize local politics in some form enabling it to address the question how “to promote a common good” in society (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a: 267). In the context of local politics, this common good refers to the universal and normative notion of the local level as both an input-channel for citizen participation and an output-producer of public services with corresponding values of participation for the former and efficiency for the latter (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a: 11-14). When the appropriate balance between both is found, political legitimacy can be obtained (Scharpf, 1999). Traditionally this functionality has been organized through representative democracy and public administration and their sets of institutions and practices (such as voting, representation and in-house production), embodied in hierarchical ‘local government’ (Dryzek, 2000; Pratchett, 2004).

The past decades, however, a major transition in local democracy occurred due to evolutions in the context of local government. The upscaling of government in general (Dahl, 1994), the evolution towards governance at the local level (John, 2001) and the modification of citizenship and societies (De Rynck, 2007) altered the context of local politics and revealed the limits of traditional representative democracy in obtaining legitimacy within. This induced the need for a normative debate regarding the value of local democracy and the consequent way to organize it (Stoker, 1996). The result of this ongoing quest for legitimacy has been labeled ‘democratic renewal’ and Lawrence Pratchett (1999) proposes a threefold typology to assess it. First, it can be understood as “a set of practical responses to clearly identifiable problems” (1999: 2) that are inherent to local democracy as such caused by its failing institutions (e.g. political management problems, electoral apathy). Second, it can transgress this level of specific problems with local democracy to include broader political, cultural and constitutional change within the existing institutions of local government. Here “rekindling democratic understanding and awareness within communities” (1999: 7) lies at the focus (e.g. changing the responsibilities of citizens towards democracy). Finally, the concept can refer to a totally “new mode of local democracy, (...) suggesting a new democratic polity” (1999: 9) which involves improvements towards both effectiveness and citizen participation.

This paper considers the present debate on local democracy and democratic renewal in Belgium through the eyes of the local councillors, theoretically and formally key players in local democracy. We will seek to address this general goal by using a two-step analysis. First, on an explorative-descriptive level, we will evaluate the vision of local councillors upon the three levels of democratic renewal outlined above. In doing so, we will draw on the classification of Vetter and Kersting (2003a: 11-14).
15) to address the first level of specific reforms. The second level will be dealt with applying the analytical framework that Haus and Sweeting used in their study of European mayors (2006b) and finally, the most abstract level comprising a new order of local democracy will be analyzed based on the taxonomy of local democracy proposed by Haus and Sweeting (2006a/b). Second, on an explanatory-structural level we will scrutinize (the strength of) a group of factors that could predict the most abstract level of democratic renewal, i.e. the new mode of local democracy.

The empirical data in this paper stem from the Belgian part of a European research that describes the vision of municipal councils and councillors upon local democracy in different cultural and structural contexts. After selecting 180 municipalities on the base of a stratified random sample, the questionnaire was sent out to all local councillors of those municipalities, creating a representative sample of 4096 councillors ultimately resulting in a research population of 856 cases. The questions sounded for the councillors' personal vision upon (elements and features of) local democracy and their support for elements of democratic reform. All original questions are presented in the appendix.

Having raised the problem of local democracy in flux resulting in different forms of democratic renewal and the subsequent general questions for research, we will continue by operationalizing the three-level concept of democratic renewal in section 2. Section 3 will address our explorative research goal, describing the vision of local councillors upon the three levels of democratic renewal. In section 4 we will set out the independent variables and related research hypotheses that could predict the vision of our respondents on the third level of democratic renewal, before tackling this second, explanatory research goal in section 5. Finally, section 6 will present some preliminary conclusions.

2. Conceptualizing Democratic Renewal

2.1. Local Government Reforms

Evolutions in the context of local politics have increasingly put the functioning of classic representative democracy and its institutions under pressure (Pratchett, 1999). Whereas participation in representative local government seems to be less inclusive than originally proposed, market mechanisms are increasingly preferred over government institutions to deliver efficient services also (Stoker, 1996). Therefore, in order for local politics to persistently fulfill its core-values in this new context, hence being legitimate, a wide range of specific reforms was introduced. In addition, as the grassroots-level being closest to the citizens, local government in particular is frequently used as “a playing ground and laboratory for reform” (Vetter & Kersting, 2003b: 333).
Caulfield and Larsen (2002: 13-20) hereby distinguish between process and structural reforms, both on an administrative and a political level. Drawing on Caulfield and Larsen, Vetter and Kersting (2003a: 14-20) discern output-oriented administrative reforms from input-oriented local political reforms. The former are composed out of territorial-functional (e.g. inter-municipal co-operation, amalgamation, decentralization) and management components (e.g. privatization, Public Private Partnerships). The latter include changes towards direct citizen participation (e.g. referenda, direct election of mayors) and changes in representative democracy (e.g. e-government, governance structures such as user boards, new roles for councillors). Steyvers et al. (2005: 20-24) confirmed the typology by differentiating between these local administrative reforms and their political equivalents, as “throughout Europe a wind of political and institutional change seems to be blowing through municipalities” (Steyvers et al., 2005: 11). Goldsmith (1996: 174) argues, however, that there is a “fundamental dichotomy involved in reconciling the competing claims of local government to be both democratic and efficient”. Thereby, the stress on either of both directions obviously depends upon the institutional settings and democratic traditions of the locality (Vetter & Kersting, 2003b: 347-349).

2.2. Citizen Participation in Representation

For centuries local democracy has been organized on the principle of representation that was meant to establish a reliable and effective link between politics, citizens and society (Dahl, 1994; Heywood, 2002: 70). David Beetham (1996: 31-33) identifies four distinctive elements of representative democracies through which legitimacy is assured. Two related aspects are authorization through elections and accountability afterwards. Citizens select other citizens to rule on behalf of them and these have to account for the policy decided upon to the non-elected citizens. On the other hand, responsiveness ensures that every opinion of society is held into account when shaping policy. Furthermore, representativeness adds to the former notions by providing each citizen an equal chance of getting elected (social component) and an equal weight in elections (political component). In this system, it is apparent that free and honest elections are at the base of local democracy whilst being the main instruments to include and educate citizens in/towards local democracy (Barber, 1996; Beetham, 1996).

As Hanna Pitkin (1967: 139) argues, representation – in the context of political studies – should therefore be conceptualized as “substantive acting for”. A politician should act on behalf of the people, in the interest of the people, and according to the wishes of the people. The main discussion stemming from this perspective is the substantial interpretation or representational style: should a councillor act on the base of a mandate or on the base of independence (van der Kaap, 2006: 61)? On
the one hand, councillors can represent the people independently based on their personal beliefs and capacities ("trustee"-model), while on the other hand, they can build on the wishes of the electorate to represent the people ("delegate"-model) (van der Kaap, 2006). Besides, representation in practice is often mediated through political parties, enhancing democratic legitimacy by harmonizing policy with public demand (Putnam, 1976) and linking people with their elected representatives (Block & Verlet, 2007). Hence a third style of representation is party-representation (Rao, 1998) ("party-soldier"-model).

Since the nineties, however, democracy is claimed to have taken a deliberative turn (Dryzek, 2000). This implies citizens turning to a variety of democratic forms of inter-personal communication about politics in the public sphere, surpassing the mere passive act of voting in traditional representative democracy (Parkinson, 2003: 180). Consequently regarding this representative variant of democracy, the older absolutist trustee-model gradually lost its ground (Steyvers et al., 2007: 17). As the delegate-model guarantees more citizen deliberation and involvement in letting representative know ones opinion, it can be subsumed as an emanation of the deliberative turn of democracy within the limits of representation. We therefore consider citizen participation within representation to be an indicator of the second-level order of democratic renewal, aimed at “changing the expectations and behaviour of citizens within the existing institutions” of local democracy (Pratchett, 1999: 8).

2.3. Hybrid Democracy

At the most abstract level, democratic renewal stretched the limits of representative democracy towards enhanced citizen participation on one side and system efficiency on the other, ultimately leading to “a new democratic order” (Pratchett, 1999: 9), in which a mix of different forms of local democracy co-exists in a hybrid form of democracy. Applying the taxonomy of Haus and Sweeting (2006a/b), we will distinguish between four elements of hybrid democracy.

Focusing on the restoration of input-legitimacy due to the emergence of post-modern citizens wanting to actively influence public policy, several reforms enhanced citizen participation in local decision-making beyond the mere act of voting. Based on these voice-seeking citizens, the deliberative turn in local democracy also surpassed the very level of representation. Whereas this process started in the 1960s with cautious attempts such as advisory boards and public hearings, real participatory mechanisms (e.g. co-decision procedures, citizen juries, websites,...) furthered citizen interaction and deliberation to a considerable degree in the 1990s (Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 1998). Consequently, according to the extent of citizen influence in practice, this form of democracy can vary from participation over interaction to direct democracy, resulting in a ladder of citizen
participation (Arnstein, 1969). Haus and Sweeting (2006a) hence refer to participatory democracy – the common denominator– as one distinctive aspect of hybrid democracy.

A second, purely output-oriented element of hybrid democracy does exist also, referring to the adaptation of market-like standards and practices in local decision-making and the focus on citizens as users of public services. Haus and Sweeting (2006a/b) call this form user or market democracy. Indeed, especially since the 1980s elements of the New Public Management discourse (e.g. outsourcing, privatization) invaded local government. Citizens were to be treated as customers and private business standards became guiding lines for local governments in their service delivery function. The call for NPM originated from both economic constraints as they occurred in the aftermath of crisis of the 1970s and the rising expectations of citizens for localities to provide improved public services (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002: 14).

A third shift in local democracy stemmed from the evolution towards local governance which was originally based on the belief that complex problems could be solved in a more efficient way through horizontal network decision-making, i.e. the inclusion of different partners in the process of policymaking (Hovik & Vabo, 2005). Governance theorists postulate that the legitimacy of local decisions can be best assured through negotiation between actors concerned, whether those be public, private, collective or individual. Consequently the principle of representative democracy is hollowed out as the primacy of its institutions and subsequent hierarchical mode of decision-making become obsolete. Haus and Sweeting (2006a) label this form network democracy. Originally, network democracy was very much grafted upon the improvement of the efficiency of local government (Aars & Fimreite, 2005). However, Haus and Sweeting (2006a: 281) insist that this third hybridization of local democracy is rather concerned with the effectiveness of dealing with complex problems in society than with the efficiency of policy output as such. Moreover, network governance authors refer to the inclusion and participation of citizens in the decision-making process as one of the inherent benefits of this type of democracy also (Aars & Fimreite, 2005; Melo & Baiocchi, 2006: 591). As such, network democracy is situated between the extreme input-related form of participatory democracy and its output-related counterpart of market democracy.

Finally, what about representative democracy then? There is no doubt that the concept of hybrid democracy entails the representative form as well (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a: 283). From a normative perspective, there is still need for the equality of every citizen and opinion to be reflected in public policy. Furthermore, representative democracy can be useful in combination with the others forms also, functioning as the overall framework. One could argue participatory democracy needs the institutions of representative democracy to implement its decisions, hence producing efficient
outputs. And likewise, network and market democracy can’t function without the necessary accountability, responsiveness and representativeness partly provided by (the institutions of) representative democracy, ensuring democratic input. Thus, representative democracy and its institutions are still indispensable in holding hybrid democracies together and ensuring legitimacy within. Consequently, the abovementioned forms “never appear in an exclusive form” (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a: 271).

3. Descriptive Analysis: Belgian Local Councillors on Democratic Renewal

The first explorative step in our analysis of democratic renewal in Belgian local government will be to describe the vision of our research population on the three levels of democratic renewal asserted in the preceding theoretical section: specific local government reforms, citizen participation within representation and hybrid democracy as the new democratic order.

3.1. Councillors on Local Government Reforms

Before embarking on the evaluation of our respondents’ vision on specific reforms, we would like to generally consider the extent to which councillors feel the need to reform their local government system as such. Our questionnaire asked our respondents to indicate the degree to which they underscore the statement: “The need for changes and reorganization of the local government sector have been greatly exaggerated”, with scores varying from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The bulk of the respondents indicated that they do think the need to reform local government is greatly exaggerated (36,9%), or has no explicit opinion on the topic (36,8%). Consequently, only one out of every four local councillors in Belgium (26,3%) is convinced that there is a strong need to reform local government.

Moving from this general qualification to the first concrete level of democratic renewal: what is the support for a series of local government reforms? Our questionnaire included several statements that served as indicators for the classification of reform as proposed by Vetter and Kersting (2003: 15). Each category is represented by two indicators in table 1 below. Table 2 presents the mean score (and standard deviation), percentage support and dislike for each indicator. In addition, it shows the correlation between the eight indicators under study. This allows us to test Goldsmith’s claim concerning the fundamental dichotomy attached to the choice for output-driven administrative reforms on one side or input-driven political counterparts on the other. Can we perceive an administrative-oriented councillor who automatically disfavors political reforms and vice versa, or should we rather distinguish between advocates of reform as such and more conservative councillors on the other hand?
### Table 1. Conceptualization of Local Government Reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Reforms</th>
<th>Political Reforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Territorial and Functional Reforms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Changes Towards Participatory and Direct democracy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decentralization of local government (N=835)</td>
<td>• Direct election of mayors (N=831)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Devolution of responsibilities to neighborhood organizations (N=818)</td>
<td>• Local Referenda (N=835)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Management Reforms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Changes in Representative Democracy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Competition between service providers (N=830)</td>
<td>• Citizen consultation procedures (N=826)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public-Private Partnerships (N=836)</td>
<td>• Reducing the number of councillors (N=823)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2. Councillors’ Vision on Local Government Reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Administrative Reforms</th>
<th>Political Reforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Local Referenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Correlation (Pearson)</strong></td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>.354**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decentralization</td>
<td>.120**</td>
<td>.284**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devolution</td>
<td>.072*</td>
<td>.072*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce number</td>
<td>.087*</td>
<td>.075*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>councillors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen consultation</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.086*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct election</td>
<td>.215**</td>
<td>.225**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mayor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Referenda</td>
<td>.214**</td>
<td>.317**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Values 0 and 1</th>
<th>Values 3 and 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decentralization</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devolution</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce number</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>councillors</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>67.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen consultation</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct election mayor</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Congruent with the apparent overall apathy regarding local government reform as such, mean scores for specific local government reforms are rather neutral also (with the value ‘2’ representing the completely neutral opinion). Both management reforms ($X=2.07$ and $X=2.09$ with $S=.97$ and $S=1.04$) and changes towards direct participation ($X=2.19$ and $X=2.19$ with $S=1.35$ and $S=1.06$) only generate slight support. The indicators for the other categories somewhat show a different pattern, one indicator being moderately supported whilst the other is moderately disapproved of. Regarding territorial-functional reforms, decentralization of local government ($X=2.32$, with $S=.95$) seems to be quite popular, whereas most councillors resist to the devolution of responsibilities towards neighbourhood organizations ($X=1.77$, with $S=.95$). A possible explanation may lie in the difference in power and influence for councillors stemming from these reforms: whilst they keep to play a central role in decentralized government, devolution of responsibilities towards neighbourhood organizations actually takes power away from them. The results for changes in representative democracy are yet more striking. Reducing the number of councillors is the item that generates the lowest overall score ($X=1.40$, with $S=1.00$). It can not wonder that councillors themselves are opposed to such a possible far-reaching reform. On the other hand, the item on citizen consultation procedures results in the highest overall score ($X=2.70$, with $S=.81$), reflecting the importance councillors do attribute to the opinion of citizens, albeit in a softer form.

If we then consider the percentages of councillors in support of each item, generally one out of every three councillors appears to have no straightforward opinion on local government reforms. Differences in support and dislike thus evolve mainly in line with the mean scores discussed above. Yet two items do stand out in terms of general support or polarization. First, an overwhelming majority of local councillors in Belgium (67.1%) supports citizen consultation procedures. Furthermore, only 7.8% are opposed to them. Second, the most polarized item in the analysis is the direct election of the mayor. The group of undecided councillors regarding this item is substantially smaller compared to the other items (19.3%), indicating the relevance of the debate as such. A majority of the respondents favours the direct elections of mayors (45.6%), while also 35.1% disapproves.

Finally, looking into the correlations of the scores presented in table 2, we do not perceive a strong and significant dichotomy between input-related reforms and output-oriented counterparts. On the contrary, most scores for administrative reforms correlate strongly and significantly to scores for both political reforms and other administrative reforms, and vice versa. Where correlations are yet weaker, this is due to one particular item that generates a substantial higher or lower score than on average. Consequently we would rather distinguish between progressive reform-oriented councillors on the one hand as opposed to more conservative counterparts on the other.
3.2. Councillors on Citizen Participation in Representation

The second level of democratic renewal is the level of citizen participation within traditional representative democracy. As stated in the preceding theoretical section, this notion can be conceptualized by looking into the representative style, fluctuating between the trustee principle and its delegate counterpart. Applying the framework of Haus and Sweeting (2006b), we therefore asked our respondents to indicate their support on a 0-4 scale for 5 statements, representing the strong variant of the trustee (S1) and mandate model (S2), and their respective softer versions (for trustee: S4; for mandate: S3 and S5). Consequently, if we consider the 5 statements ascending, we can perceive a growing degree of citizen involvement in the concept of representation, reflecting the general idea of the deliberative turn in democracy within the limits of representation. The statements were formulated as follows:

- Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people. (S1)
- Apart from voting, citizens should not be given the opportunity to influence local government policies. (S2)
- The results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining municipal policies. (S3)
- Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives. (S4)
- Council decisions should reflect majority opinions among the residents. (S5)

Table 3. Councillors’ Vision on Citizen Participation within Representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values 0-1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values 3-4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 presents the mean score (and standard deviation) for each statement, the percentage of support (3 and 4) and dislike (0 and 1). Two general conclusions can be inferred. First and contrary to theoretical considerations, the trustee-model still seems to prevail over the delegate-model. For the strong variants, councillors find it more important to take decisions completely independently
(X=2.17, with S=1.06) than to only consider the mere act of voting (X=1.37, with S=1.09). Regarding the softer variants, councillors agree more with the statement that citizens should have the opportunity to make their views known before they still ultimately decide (X=2.88, with S=.79) than with the statements that the very results of the election should be the most important factor in local policy (X=2.69 , with S=.96) or council decisions should reflect the majority opinion of the citizens (X=2.78, with S=.88). So councillors rather want to represent the people independently on the base of their personal skills and expertise than on the base of a mandate granted by their constituents.

Second, the weak principles clearly generate more support than the stronger ones. Whilst only 41.3% and 15.3% support the strong trustee and strong delegate principle, some 60 to 70% of the research population agrees with the softer variants. This in turn does imply councillor support for the deliberative turn in local democracy, referring to the growing attention to consider (the opinion of) citizens in local politics within the limits of representation.

Local councillors in Belgium thus certainly value and consider citizen input, albeit they ultimately want to retain decision-making responsibility themselves. These results are in line with the conclusions of the European Mayor-research from Haus and Sweeting (2006: 158): “(...) most political leaders, while supporting an element of participation in decision-making, want to retain decision-making capability.” However, how do these normative ideals on representation relate to concrete political practice? In order to address this question, an additional question in our research widened the scope of representation by including the aspect of party politics and exceeding the level of general principle to concrete political practice. The question sounded “If there should be a conflict between a member’s own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters, how should, in your opinion, a member of the council vote?” (N=822).

Table 4. Councillors’ Focus in Political Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Vote according to own opinion</th>
<th>Vote according to opinion party group</th>
<th>Vote according to opinion voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that the abovementioned democratic principles loose considerable ground when it comes down to political practice. If there would be a conflict between the opinion of the voters, the party group or the personal politician, only 9,2% of the councillors indicated one should follow the opinion of the voters. Hence also in practice, the delegate model gives in to the trustee model (42% of the councillors thinks one should follow his own opinion). However, the majority of the councilors indicated councillors should vote according to the opinion of the party group (48,8%), confirming the
notion of Belgium as a ‘party government’. This puts the discussion on democratic renewal in the framework of representation into perspective: when it comes down to concrete policy, political parties are still the most influential actors and principal reference points in the decision-making process, albeit trustee-based representation scores (surprisingly) quite high as well.

3.3. Councillors on Hybrid Democracy

Finally, which conclusions can be drawn about the vision of local councillors upon the most abstract level of democratic renewal, hybrid democracy? The conceptualization of hybrid democracy revealed that the limits of representative democracy are gradually being stretched towards participatory democracy on the input-side and market democracy on the output-side of local politics. Network democracy is claimed to uphold features of both, albeit originally being situated at the output-side also. We asked our respondents to evaluate three concrete statements representing these three elements of hybrid democracy (Table 5). Score varied from 0 to 4. Table 6 presents mean scores (and standard deviations), percentages support and dislike, and mutual correlations.

Table 5. Conceptualization of Hybrid Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participatory Democracy</th>
<th>Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions (N=837)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network Democracy</td>
<td>Political decisions should not only be taken by representative bodies but be negotiated together with the concerned local actors (N=832)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Democracy</td>
<td>There are many benefits from contracting out or privatizing services in the municipality (N=838)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Councillors’ Vision on Hybrid Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participatory Democracy</th>
<th>Network Democracy</th>
<th>Market Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlation (Pearson)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Democracy</td>
<td>.261**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Democracy</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 0 and 1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value 3 and 4</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results indicate that network democracy ($X=2.62$, with $S=.92$) is clearly preferred over participatory democracy ($X=2.33$, with $S=.88$) and especially market democracy ($X=1.80$, with $S=1.09$). Almost two out of every three councillors (64.1%) strongly supports the statement that political decisions should be negotiated together with concerned local actors. Moreover, only 13% is strongly opposed to it. Scores for participatory democracy are also moderately positive but more diffuse: whilst there are far more councillors in support of the active and direct participation of citizens in important local decision-making (42.3%) than there are opposed (15.6%), an equally large group of the respondents is still undecided on the topic (42.1%). The results for market democracy show the adverse picture. A strong majority of the respondents (41.4%) doesn’t agree that there are many benefits from contracting out or privatizing services in the municipality. Councillors who do support the statement (29.7%) and those who are yet undecided (28.9%) keep each other in balance.

In accordance with theoretical considerations, the main actors in Belgian local democracy – the local councillors – do rather emphasize the input-side of local government (personalized in participatory democracy) than the output-side (represented by market democracy). Still it is the third feature, network democracy, that generates the strongest support. How can this be interpreted? One way is to rather classify network democracy with input-related variants of democracy. As the theoretical overview elucidated, citizen participation and democracy are indeed essential and often underestimated (and overlooked) aspects of network governance. Beside, a second possible explanation may lie in the position and influence of the councillors themselves in these features of democracy. Whereas the concepts of participatory and market democracy imply transferring governmental power to respectively citizens and private actors, councillors – formally – retain much more power in network democracy, involving mere negotiating with other actors. Furthermore, this interpretation is in line with the vision of local councillors upon the other feature of hybrid democracy as described above, the representative form. Indeed, councillors still appeared to prefer the trustee principle to the delegate variant, reflecting the desire to remain key players in the local decision-making process, albeit in its softer form – valuing citizens’ opinion in the process of decision-making along.

Finally, is there a dichotomy between input-related forms of democracy and output-related counterparts? Correlations firstly show a strong and significant positive relation between participatory and network democracy ($X^2=.261$). Moreover, both participatory and network democracy are negatively (but not significantly) related to market democracy ($X^2=-.35$ and $X^2=-.39$). These results seem to confirm the these proposed above, stating that councillors do classify network democracy rather on the input-side of hybrid democracy. Consequently, a dichotomy
between input-related variants and the output-related form does emerge, albeit not being strongly significant.

4. Independent Variables: Place and Professionalization

Having conceptualized the three-leveled concept of democratic renewal and illuminated the councillors’ vision upon these three levels, our next step is to determine which independent factors could predict it. In this paper the analysis will be confined to the third, most abstract level of hybrid democracy. First, we assume that the vision of local councillors upon hybrid democracy is determined by the macro-political context of their locality, i.e. place. Especially since the work of Dahl (1989), the link between scale and democracy is ample and much discussed (Melo & Baiocchi, 2006: 588). Urbanization, albeit having longstanding historical roots, is considered to be one of the most dramatic evolutions in local government during the last fifty years (Denters & Rose, 2005). Based on the principle that larger local government units are capable of rendering public service delivery more efficient, a gulf of amalgamations swept the European continent (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a: 16). In Belgium, the last round of amalgamations goes back to 1976, reducing the number of municipalities from 2,586 to its current number of 589 (De Ceuninck & Valcke, 2007: 51). Hence, bigger cities should be better equipped to perform their output-function than small communes. However, whereas urbanization may enhance the output-legitimacy of local government, it threatens to weaken the input-legitimacy alike (Haus et al., 2005). Regarding local democracy, it could thus be expected that larger local government units would rather benign forms of market democracy to the detriment of participatory democracy, which expresses itself best at a smaller scale. Network democracy, being a typical phenomenon of urban regimes (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a) would also rather prosper in larger local government units. So our first hypothesis states that councillors from larger municipalities will tend more towards market and network democracy, and less towards direct democracy.

A second determining feature of the macro-political context could be the region of the municipality. Belgian local governments, as one of the Southern-type local government systems, usually stressed democracy as their core value (Steyvers, 2007). However, since the 5th state reform of 2002 which transferred principal local government legislation to the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital), Flemish reforms are much more administrative and efficiency-driven, whilst Walloon reforms are rather politically directed in order to improve democracy (Block et al., 2007; Pilet, 2008). Network governance seems to flourish especially in Flanders also (De Rynck & Voets,
Consequently, our second hypothesis states that Flemish councillors will tend more towards market and network democracy, and less towards direct democracy.

In contrast with this macro-political context, we assume that a set of factors at the individual micro-level will clarify councillors’ vision upon hybrid democracy also. We will subsume them under the header of “professionalization”. It is claimed that traditional qualities and principles of representative politicians (voluntary base, legal equality and amateurism) are given up in favour of ‘new-style councillors’ who perceive their mandate in terms of career or even profession (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). This trend is related to the altered context of local politics as these new-style councillors are expected to lead their community in the context of local governance on the base of their technical qualities and expertise (Davis & Geddes, 2000). The concept of “professionalization” implies both a social and political component (Cotta & Best, 2000: 22). On a social level, it refers to the increasing social selectivity, i.e. the presence of highly educated citizens (often men) from liberal professions. The growing importance of experience and political parties constitute the political aspect (Steyvers et al., 2007: 17). In addition, it is generally acknowledged that the ultimate form of professionalization can be found in the executive where local politics becomes something of a true profession (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002: 17). Based upon this concept, we postulate our third hypothesis: councillors who are professionalized will tend more towards network and market democracy and less towards participatory democracy. Education and profession will thereby serve as the social component of professionalization, experience and mandate will reflect the political component.

5. Explanatory Analysis: Do Place and Professionalization Matter?

The second step in our analysis is to move from the general exploration to the underlying level of explanation, verifying the predictive value of a set of independent variables expounded above upon councillors’ vision on hybrid democracy. More precisely, we will use a binary logistic regression analysis to predict the influence of ‘scale’ and ‘professionalization’ on participatory, network and market democracy, testing our three research hypotheses. Table 7 below presents the odds ratio (Exp(B)) and corresponding significance (Sign) for a positive score on the variables ‘scale’, ‘region’, ‘education’, ‘profession’, ‘experience’ and ‘mandate’ resulting in a positive score on the variables ‘participatory’, ‘network’ and ‘market democracy’. Beside individual scores for each variable, the table offers a general indicator of the strength of the model (the combination of independent variables) in predicting the scores of the dependent variables, reflected in the Nagelkerke R² score (with corresponding significance).
Table 7. A Binary Logistic Regression Analysis on Councillors’ Vision on Hybrid Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Participatory Democracy</th>
<th>Network Democracy</th>
<th>Market Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>Exp(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populous</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalization</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Talking/Brokerage</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandate</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, whilst all three models are highly significant (Sign=.00), only market democracy is relatively strongly predicted by the set of independent variables in the model (R²=.13). The strength for both participatory and network democracy on the other hand is rather weak (R²=.05).

Second, which variables concretely predict local councillors’ vision on hybrid democracy? Our first hypothesis assumed that size matters. Scores for size, however, are not significant. Moreover, whereas the hypothesis stated that councillors from bigger municipalities would favour market and network democracy to the detriment of the participatory form, results are just reversed. Councillors from bigger municipalities tend more towards participatory democracy (Exp(B)=1.35, with Sign=.06) than to network (Exp(B)=.78, with Sign=.12) and market democracy (Exp(B)=.92, with Sign=.62), leading us to reject hypothesis one.

Does region matter then? Councillors from Flanders do indeed tend more towards the output-related market democracy (Exp(B)=2.10, with Sign=.00) to the detriment of participatory democracy (Exp(B)=.82, with Sign=.21) as the hypothesis postulated. However, they also tend less towards network democracy (Exp(B)=.73, with Sign=.06). Furthermore, only the score for market democracy is significant, so we can only partly accept hypothesis two.

The third hypothesis stated that professionalized councillors would tend more towards network and market democracy, and less to participatory democracy. The social component of professionalization, represented by the variables ‘education’ and ‘profession’, does not prove to have any significant impact at all though. ‘Experience’ on the other hand, representing the political
component, does indeed result in lower scores for participatory democracy (Exp(B)=.67, with Sign=.02) but also in lower (but not significant) scores for network (Exp(B)= .76, with Sign=.13) and market democracy (Exp(B)=.85, with Sign=.40). The other indicator of political professionalization, ‘mandate’, provides the most explanatory power. Executive councillors do indeed value participatory democracy to a lesser (but not significant) extent (Exp(B)=.76, with Sign=.13), whilst acknowledging the value of market democracy to a significantly higher extent (Exp(B)=1.54, with Sign=.03). However, they significantly tend less towards network democracy as well (Exp(B)=.60, with Sign=.00). Consequently hypothesis three cannot be accepted either.

Summarized, which conclusions can be drawn about the vision of our respondents on democratic hybridization? It is clear that no straightforward and univocal results have come up. Whereas scale and social professionalization (education and profession) don’t seem to matter whatsoever, region and political professionalization do, but not in a clear-cut way as predicted in the theoretical overview and subsequent hypotheses. Indeed, councillors from Flanders tend more towards input-oriented market democracy to the detriment of input-related participatory democracy. However, they also tend less towards network democracy. These same findings can be applied considering the variable ‘mandate’. ‘Experience’ on its turn seems to negatively predict all forms of democratic hybridizations. This may not come as a surprise, however, for it could well be expected that experience is related to age, and the older one gets, the lesser one is likely to welcome reforms in general.

6. Conclusion

Traditional representative democracy, the dominant emanation of local democracy in Western societies, has been increasingly claimed to fail to assume the core functions of local politics, i.e. channeling citizen participation and providing public services, in a legitimate way due to evolutions in the context of local politics. The proliferation of postmodern citizens claiming an active voice on the input-side, the rise of governance altering the process of policy-making, and the increasing scale of government directed to policy output, confronted (the institutions of) local government with its limits. Hence political legitimacy, both in terms of participation and efficiency, diminished. Consequently, a diverse and extensive package of democratic renewal on three levels was introduced to remedy this pressure: specific local government reforms were combined with new ways of connecting citizens to local democracy and a new order of local democracy in general.
The goal of this paper was to assess the vision of Belgian local councillors – which are formally and theoretically considered to be key players in local democracy – on these three levels of democratic renewal. In doing so, we took both an explorative-descriptive and an explanatory-structural approach. First, on an explorative level, we sought to map out the councillors’ general vision upon local government reforms, citizen participation within representation and hybrid democracy.

Councillors’ visions on local government reforms indicated that they seem to be quite undecided and indifferent on renewal at the most concrete level. Yet some items do seem to evoke controversy. Not surprisingly, councillors rally against reducing the total number of councillors. Decentralization of local government and citizen consultation procedures are remarkably popular on the other hand. The most polarized item is the direct election of the mayor, where a majority of respondents supports the reform. Finally, no dichotomy between administrative-oriented councillors and politically-driven counterparts emerged. Rather we could distinguish between progressive councillors and conservative ones on the other hand. So in contrast with Dahl’s claim (1994) concerning the permanent and delicate trade-off and tension between input-related and output-driven reforms as such, councillors’ attitudes towards the latter seem to be more of a personal matter, reflecting a conservative or progressive nature.

With regard to the second level of democratic renewal, citizen participation within representation, the analysis of representative style revealed the prevalence of the trustee-principle over the delegate-model. This points to the desire of councillors to remain key actors in local decision-making. However, softer variants dominated their stronger counterparts, reflecting a support for the deliberative turn in local democracy also, giving voice to citizens in the process of public policy-making. In addition – and in spite of these principles –, when it came down to actual voting, political parties appeared to be to principal reference points.

Results for the general level of hybrid democracy confirmed the abovementioned conclusions in a double way. First of all, the clear prevalence of input-related participatory democracy over output-related market democracy reflects the councillors’ acknowledgement for democracy’s deliberative turn as such. However, both forms generate far less support than the third alternative, network democracy, in which councillors devolve less direct power to other actors in decision-making. So generally, Belgian local councillors seem rather reluctant towards democratic renewal as they prefer to remain key actors in local decision-making themselves. However, they do leave room for citizen input as long as it is embedded within the traditional framework of representative democracy also.

The second step in the analysis was to look for deeper-rooted factors underlying the vision on the threefold hybridization of local democracy. As the analysis revealed, however, results could not be
fitted into the models and hypotheses proposed, as only few – and differentiated – significant results came forward. Whereas scale and social professionalization do not matter, place and political professionalization do. Flemish and executive councillors tend more towards market democracy, whilst experienced councillors tend less to participatory democracy and executives tend less to network democracy.

It will now be up for further research to impregnate the explanatory analysis to the first two levels of democratic renewal also and/or to refine the hypotheses and classifications used in this paper, creating a coherent and all-encompassing view on local councillors’ vision on democratic renewal. For instance, it could well be argued that variables such as representative style (based on a trustee-delegate distinction model) and ideology (linking traditional liberal principles such as direct citizen participation and market mechanisms with councillors’ vision on renewal) would influence councillors’ vision to a significant extent also. Furthermore, democratic renewal as discussed in this paper is often directed towards the empowerment and inclusion of voice-seeking citizens. It could be as worthwhile to involve the activation of citizens choosing the exit-option in the analysis as well.

7. References


8. Appendix: Original Questions

- ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The need for changes and reorganization of the local government sector has been greatly exaggerated’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

- ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Decentralization of local government is necessary to involve citizens in public affairs’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

- ‘Below you find a number of reforms that have been introduced in municipalities in different European countries. Irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality how desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms: Devolution of responsibilities to neighborhood organizations’; scores from 0 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable);

- ‘Below you find a number of reforms that have been introduced in municipalities in different European countries. Irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality how desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms: Direct election of mayors’; scores from 0 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable);

- ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Local referenda lead to high quality of public debate’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree);

- ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Competition between service providers facilitates citizen choice in public services’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree);

- ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Public-private partnerships are more effective in solving problems than public administration and representative bodies’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree);

- ‘Below you find a number of reforms that have been introduced in municipalities in different European countries. Irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality how desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms: Citizen consultation procedure, where citizens are informed about and can support or criticize municipal proposals’; scores from 0 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable);

- ‘Below you find a number of reforms that have been introduced in municipalities in different European countries. Irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality how desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms: Reducing the number of members of the Council’; scores from 0 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable);

- ‘People have different ideas about how local democracy should function. Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are’; scores from 0 (Not important at all) to 4 (Of utmost importance):
- Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people.

- Apart from voting, citizens should not be given the opportunity to influence local government policies.

- The results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining municipal policies.

- Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives.

- Council decisions should reflect majority opinions among the residents.

• ‘If there should be a conflict between a member’s own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters, how should, in your opinion, a member of the council vote?’ Vote according to his/her own opinion; Vote according to the opinion of the party group; Vote according to the opinion of the voters.

• ‘People have different ideas about how local democracy should function. Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are; scores from 0 (Not important at all) to 4 (Of utmost importance): Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.

• ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Political decision should not only be taken by representative bodies but be negotiated together with the concerned local actors’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

• ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? There are few benefits from contracting out or privatizing services in the municipality’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).
9. Endnotes

i In addition, the throughput-function referring to the “qualities of the rules and procedures by which binding decisions are made”, translated in the value of transparency, can be added as a third criterion for political legitimacy (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007: 44).

ii The research, Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance (MAELG), includes data from fifteen European countries.

iii The total population of Belgian municipalities (589) was grouped in 62 strata on the base of three selection variables: population, region and socio-economic character. The strata were aimed to be internally as homogenous as possible, whilst being externally maximal heterogeneous. Then, three (or exceptionally two) municipalities out of each stratum were selected at random, resulting in a total of 180 selected municipalities. Mayors and aldermen were also addressed as they retain their seat in the council whilst being an executive. The questionnaires were sent out June 2008. Afterwards, two moments of follow-up (September 2008 and December 2008) increased response to 21%.

iv The collusion of parties and government may become so strong, however, that some traditional representative democracies end up being “party governments” (Haus & Sweeting, 2006: 153). Belgium, for instance, is often labeled as such a party government (Dewachter, 2003: 268).

v This –originally negatively phrased- variable was recoded into the reverse statement by altering the values. Consequently, the results could be interpreted as the degree of support for market democracy, in tone with the other two indicators in the analysis of democratic hybridization.

vi ‘Populous’ represents the third of respondents of the biggest municipalities in terms of inhabitants and was created by the authors based on the respondents’ municipality (N=284 or 33.7%);

vii ‘Flanders’ represents the respondents being councillor in a municipality from the Flemish region and is constructed by the authors based on the respondents’ municipality (N=565 or 66.5%);

viii ‘University’ represents respondents with University/college or equivalent as highest completed education (N=543 or 64.3%);

ix ‘Talking/brokerage’ represents the professional categories Professional politician, Civil servant, Business manager, Teacher and Liberal profession (N=439 or 52%);

x ‘Experienced’ represents the third of respondents with the highest experience as local councillor, i.e. > 13 years (N=285 or 33.6%);

xi ‘Executive’ represents respondents who presently hold or previously held a mandate as a Member of the executive board (N=277 or 33.3%)

xii ‘Participatory Democracy’ represents respondents who gave a score >3 to the statement ‘People have different ideas about how local democracy should function. Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are: Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions’; scores from 0 (Not important at all) to 4 (Of utmost importance) (N=354 or 42,3%);

xiii ‘Network Democracy’ represents respondents who gave a score >3 to the statement ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Political decision should not only be taken by representative bodies but be negotiated together with the concerned local actors’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) (N=533; 64,1%);

xiv ‘Market Democracy’ represents respondents who gave a score >3 to the recoded statement ‘How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? There are many benefits from contracting out or privatizing services in the municipality’; scores from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) (N=249 or 29,7%).