How benign is citizens’ community engagement in local governance?

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Introduction

Many people “believe that democracy would be enhanced in quality and perhaps improved in efficiency if the level of participation were increased, either through existing channels of through additional ones that ought to be established” (Birch 1993: 81). The local political arena is often considered as an attractive location for increasing active citizen involvement and enhancing the quality of democratic governance. First, because in the local context it may be easier for citizens to get access to political decision-makers. Moreover, in the local context the issues are considered to be relatively simple and close to the everyday lives and experiences of citizens. Therefore, for many citizens local participation may both be less exacting and more appealing than activities aimed at more distant, abstract and complex national or international issues. It is for this reason that political theorists like Alexis de Tocqueville (1990, p. 68) and John Stuart Mill (1993, pp. 376-390) have praised local forms of civic engagement as a school for democracy. But also more recently theorists have argued for the democratic potential of civic participation in local political arenas (Dahl 1967; 1997 and Vetter 2002).

In this paper we explore the possible democratic impact of non-electoral participation in community and neighbourhood oriented forms of local civic engagement. In our analyses we will compare the effects of such community activism with the effects of party-oriented forms of local political participation. We do so by focussing using data from a survey of around 1000 citizens in a systematic sample of 54 Dutch communities.¹ On this basis we will answer the following main question:
Does the involvement of citizens in local community action have a positive effect on their democratic orientations and how do these effects compare to similar effects of party-oriented forms of local political activity?

In this paper we will first provide a theoretical discussion of the relationship between participation and democratic orientations. This will be followed by a short discussion of the research design, the analytical strategy employed and the measurement of the main variables in our analysis (the forms of local political participation analyzed and the democratically relevant orientations). Subsequently we will present the results of our empirical analyses and some conclusions will be formulated.

**Participation and democracy**

Democracy has been defined in many different ways and the term is often characterized as an essentially contested concept (Barry 1995, pp. 12-15). But it will be difficult if not impossible to find a definition of democracy that in one way or another does not stipulate the need for a more or less extensive forms of citizen participation in public governance. This is not say that there is consensus about the necessary range and level of citizen participation in a democracy. Quite the contrary. Pateman has observed that many prominent democratic theorists in the 1950s and early 1960s were rejecting the idea that democracy would imply the need for “maximum participation of all the people” (1970, p. 1). She considers Schumpeter, who defines democracy as “an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1979, p. 269), as the prototypical exponent of such a minimalist notion of democracy. In this minimalist conception of democracy, public participation is essentially limited to the opportunities for citizens to stand for elected offices (passive voting rights) and to participate in the election of these officeholders (active voting rights). In the second half of the 20th century the widespread acceptance of the minimalist view waned and gave way to democratic theories that emphasised the need for more citizen participation. Here the need for more public participation pertains to:

a) the available range of opportunities for political participation: in addition to active and passive voting rights a well functioning democracy would require a wider range of opportunities for public participation.
b) the level of public participation: as many citizens as possibly and preferably all citizens should participate.

In response to important economic and social changes the nature of democratic systems has been gradually transformed and the political opportunity structures of Western industrialized democracies have been expanded (e.g. Cain, Dalton and Scarrow 2003; Fuchs and Klingemann 1995). This democratic transformation has also had a major impact on the nature of local democracy in the Western world (e.g. Kersting and Vetter 2003; Denters and Rose 2005).

In this paper we will explore how these transformations of local political infrastructures may have affected the nature of civic engagement at the local level.

In previous contributions (Denters and Geurts 1998; Denters et al. 2011) we have already explored into the effects that the introduction of new modes of political engagement may have had on the capacity of local democratic systems to avoid representational distortions that can be the result of the under- or overrepresentation of particular groups in setting the political agenda and public decision-making (e.g. Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, pp. 463-533; Lijphart 1997; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wille 2001, 2011; Bovens and Wille 2009). In this paper we will look into another possible effect. Here we concentrate on possible developmental effects of the introduction of extended participatory opportunities in local democracy.

Advocates of participatory democracy have often hailed the benign effects of the introduction of more direct forms of civic engagement (referred to as “thick democracy”; Barber 1984) either as an alternative or an addition to the traditional forms of political participation (put down as “thin democracy”; Barber 1984). Fung (2004) has identified three main traditions that all share their focus on the expected positive effects of civic engagement on the democratic skills and orientations of citizens. First, work on civic engagement – associated with the names of De Tocqueville (1990) and more recently Putnam (1993) emphasises that through civic participation individual citizens enjoy “a kind of social education in which citizens learn to trust and work with one another [which] better enables them to act collectively for common ends” (Fung 2004, p. 15). Second, pragmatists operating in the footsteps of Dewey (1954) have emphasised the positive effects of the interactions between citizens and experts in their joint efforts at coping with collective problems. Fung argues that
traditional political institutions fail to “enable citizens to organize themselves into publics capable of understanding, responding to, and directing their state in this way”. New modes of participation hold the promise of re-establishing the “reciprocal linkages” between the “spheres of the state and society” and providing “democratic guidance” to the governance of public issues that are “now largely the province of experts” (Fung 2004, p. 16). Civic participation in public governance will improve the capacity of citizens to recognize, understand and respond to problems in the public domain. Third, proponents of deliberative democracy (for an overview see; Cunningham 2002, pp. 163-183) have emphasised that citizens “may become wiser and more understanding and accepting of different views and preferences after encountering them in discourse” and “even when some participants disagree with group deliberations, they may be more easily reconciled to the outcomes because others have justified the bases of their positions in good faith” (Fung 2004, p. 17). Although participatory democrats have not always been very concrete as to how their recipes for securing a healthy democracy might be institutionalised in the large scale polities in the contemporary political world, the suggestions they do make oftentimes pertain to the implementation of forms of community and neighbourhood governance (e.g. Barber 1984; Berry, Portney and Thompson 1993 and Fung 2004). It is for this reason that in our analyses we will especially focus on such citizen-initiated, community based types of activities and compare these forms of engagement with party-oriented modes of local political participation.

Although proponents of direct forms of community engagement are convinced about the positive effects of citizen participation their optimism also has been met with scepticism. Several analysts for example have argued that the optimism about the positive effects of participation may be too simplistic. For example it has been argued that the effects of participation on political support may depend on the degree to which the participants agree with the outcome of the decision-making process (e.g. Irwin 1979; Tyler 2001; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Citizens whose demands and preferences have been met, might be more positive in their views about political decision-makers. But at the same time those whose demands have been ignored may look back in anger and will be less supportive of their local government. Likewise, the effects on the acquisition of interest, understanding, and skills may be contingent rather than general. Different forms of participation for example may have differential effects. Participation in a citizen initiated neighbourhood project might affect specific skills (e.g. understanding the points of view and life-style of residents from a
different ethnic background), whereas another type of participation – e.g. being a member of a deliberative assembly for developing a neighbourhood vision together with experts – might have quite different educational effects. Moreover, as Boedeltje (2009) has argued, even when we compare on seemingly similar modes of participation (e.g. interactive governance), the institutional make-up of such participatory arena’s may be different and such differences can very well lead to differences in the learning experiences of citizens. An open and transparent process architecture may provide a more stimulating ‘learning environment’ than a more opaque setting. On the basis of such considerations we should not all too eagerly assume that all forms of civic participation will under all conditions lead to positive effects on the democratic orientations of all participants.

**Methodology**

**Research design and analytical strategy**

In order to answer our research question we will use a secondary analysis of data from a survey of citizens in a systematic sample of 54 Dutch municipalities. The sampling design was aimed at realizing 30 interviews per municipality, but actual response rates were lower (resulting in actual complete data for a minimum of 9 and a maximum of 28 respondents per municipality).\(^4\) In terms of personal background characteristics (e.g. gender, age and size of municipality) the respondents provide an adequate representation of the Dutch adult population. The data were collected by means of a combination of personal interviews and a drop-off written questionnaire as part of the international SLDE / CID project.

In this paper we will try to explore the actual effects of public participation on the democratic orientations of citizens. In investigating these effects we will use a strategy in which (a) we compare participants and non-participants, across (b) different modes of direct civic and political engagement.\(^5\) If the proponents of “thick democracy” rather than their theoretical opponents are right, we would expect that actual participation through various channels for direct engagement will result in positive effects on selected democratic orientations of participants.\(^6\) Moreover, a comparison of the effects of community participation with electoral and party-oriented participation will allow us to draw conclusions about the robustness of any effects of participation: are these universal or do the only occur for some forms of participation and not for others.
In principle we will use the most simple, transparent method i.e. the *bivariate comparison of democratic orientations between participants and non-participants*. But of course in drawing inferences from an analysis of such bivariate relationships caution is due. There are two main problems. First, the direction of causation may be unclear (see figure 1a). Are participants more democratic in their orientations than non-participants because they have benefitted from a learning process as participation theorists hypothesise (education effect). Or is the causation in the opposite direction: are people with strong democratic orientations more likely to participate (mobilisation or self-selection effect)?

![Figure 1: Various model specifications](image)

A: Education, mobilization or both  
B: Spurious correlation  
C: Hybrid model

Second, any bivariate relationship between participation and democratic orientations may be (partly) spurious. It is widely known that various forms of political activity are affected by a number of socio-economic background characteristics, like education, gender and age (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Conway 1991; Dalton 1998, pp. 35-73). Likewise it has been
widely recognised that political orientations – like political interest (e.g. Van Deth 1990), internal efficacy, (e.g. Denters and Geurts 1993), and political values (e.g. Scarbrough 1995) – are also correlated with such social background characteristics. In combination this suggests that a possible relation between participation and democratic orientations may be the result of their associations with these underlying factors (see Figure 1b) or at least in part be the result of such a spurious correlation (see Figure 1c).

Both these problems pertain to the proper specification of the causal model underlying the bivariate association. In part these problems can be addressed by paying careful attention to the temporal order of the variables in the model. For a causal interpretation of an association we between X (the hypothesized cause, here: participation) and Y (the expected consequence, here: democratic orientations) we will have to ascertain that the assumed cause X precedes the assumed effect Y in time. In our data we have measured the participation variables in such a way as that they pertain to people’s activities in the past (e.g. in the past two years or the last twelve months), whereas in the questionnaires we have typically asked about people’s current the democratic orientations. Although this suggests that if the relation is causal and not spurious (as in Figure 1b) – we can safely assume that it is participation is the cause of democratic orientations and not vice versa. (as is hypothesised in either Figure 1a or 1c). But even so, we should be cautious because some of the studied political orientations are relatively stable over time and have been inculcated during the formative years of someone’s childhood and adolescence. Therefore a current political orientations and the same orientation in the past may be highly correlated. For this reason we cannot firmly rule out the possibility that at least part of the correlation between democratic orientations and participation is the result from a mobilisation effect (rather than the assumed educational effects).

The spuriousness problem points to the necessity of controlling whether the association between X and Y is not the result of the effects of relevant background factors (like education, gender and age). Testing for the effects of such third factors is a standard routine in multivariate statistical analyses. In our analyses we will use multiple partial correlation coefficients as a tool to perform a check for the potential confounding effects of the background characteristics. In addition to the bivariate results we will each time also report the multiple partial correlation (after controls for the three background characteristics). We
employ these multiple correlation coefficients rather than regression coefficients to reflect our caution regarding the direction of causality. After all: correlation does not equal causation! In addition we have used two-stage-least square (2SLS) procedures (SPSS 1999, pp. 31-33) to check for the presence of a statistically significant effect of participation on the dependent variables. In our 2SLS regressions we have used education, gender, age, civic skills, attachment to the locality, and neighbourhood integration as instrumental variables. If the results of these supplementary analyses indicate that the correlation coefficient reported is not the result of a learning during the participatory process but of spurious correlation or of self-selection this will be reported.

**Measurements of local political participation**

Our main independent variables relate to various forms of active local political engagement of citizens. We have seen that participatory democrats have high hopes about the benign effects of citizen engagement in citizen-initiated, neighbourhood and community forms of civic engagement. It is for this reason that our analysis focuses on this form of political action. On the basis of our survey data we have constructed a community action index based on yes-no responses regarding the following four types of activity:

- Attended a meeting regarding an issue about your neighbourhood or municipality.
- Participated in other organised activities regarding a neighbourhood or local issue.
- Contacted a local action group, organisation or association.
- Participated in activities of an action group, organisation or association regarding a local issue.

The scale score was computed as the mean score for responses regarding the four types of activity. In cases where one or two of the item scores was missing the other item scores and a number of instrumental variables were used to impute the missing score for the index. The scale was then transformed into a 0 – 100 range.
We will contrast our findings with regard to the effects of this form of community based action with a more party-oriented mode of local political engagement. Are there differences in the democratic effects of these two modes of participation? In order to answer such questions we have constructed an index for local party-oriented activism based on yes-no responses regarding:

- Political party membership
- Participation in activities of a local political party.
- Contacted a local political party.

The scale score was computed as the mean score for responses regarding the three types of activity. In cases where one of the item scores was missing the other item scores and a number of instrumental variables were used to impute the missing score for the index.

**Measurements of democratic orientations**

In our analysis we will focus on four possible civic education effects of public participation. Although the catalogue of benign effects claimed for civic participation by advocates of ‘thick democracy’ is probably longer than this, we will here concentrate on a number of possible benign democratic effects of participation.

First, it is often claimed that participation will result in the development of politically relevant competences and will therefore also increase the sense of political competence of citizens. Therefore we will see whether participation in community activities will make a difference for citizens sense of local political competence. This variable is measured by a composite index based on a the mean score of responses to four questions, the first three of which are the following agree-disagree items:

- I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in local politics.
- I feel that I could do as good a job as a member of the municipal council as most other people.
- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing my municipality.

The fourth questions is the following:
• How well informed do you feel you are regarding that which happens in municipal politics? Would you say that you are very well informed, well informed, somewhat informed, only slightly informed, or not at all informed?

All questions were recoded so high scores reflected high efficacy.

Second, it has been argued that the prevalent model of ‘thin democracy’ and the development of the modern welfare state have eroded citizens concern for the public weal and has degenerated citizens into mere consumers in the public domain. Habermas (1994) for example has claimed that the development of the welfare state may have contributed to a privatization of citizenship where citizens will primarily see the state (and its local branches) as providers of goods and services. Likewise it has been argued that citizens increasingly evaluate policies and governments primarily on the basis of functional criteria regarding the quality, quantity and efficiency of problem-solving. Against this backdrop we will explore whether non-electoral, community-based forms of civic activism will go hand-in-hand with a **less consumerist and more activist civic orientation**. In keeping with Denters, Gabriel and Rose (2011) we have measured consumerist orientations towards local government by asking them about their ideas of what they considered as important for **good local governance**. In this context citizens were asked to what extent they think it is important that:

• The municipality is effective in solving local problems
• The municipality provides services and facilities that are well suited to the needs of the resident
• The municipality seeks to provide services and facilities as cheaply as possible.

Likewise we have measured more activist orientations by asking citizens how important they think it is that:

• All residents have ample opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are taken
• Residents participate actively in making important local decisions
• The municipality seeks to involve residents, voluntary organizations and private business in finding solutions to local problems

For both dimensions we have constructed a scale. Scale scores were based on the mean score for the response of the relevant three items. We then subtracted the two scale scores. A negative score indicates that citizens have a stronger inclination towards consumerism and a positive score on the measure indicates that people have a predominantly activist orientation.
Finally, it has also been argued that civic engagement might contribute to the development of virtuous circles, through which citizens will develop mutual social trust that facilitates collective action aimed at solving collective problems and enhances government performance, which in turn is also likely to increase public trust in governments (e.g. Putnam et al. 1993). Therefore we will also look into the relation between community engagement and citizens’ social trust and confidence in local government.

Social trust will be measured by a composite index based on the mean score of two items (see below). The items were borrowed from a set of three items proposed by Rosenberg (1956) that is widely used for measuring generalized social trust and reflects both perceptions of trustworthiness and helpfulness. The two items (where people could indicate their opinion on a scale between 0 and 10) were:

- Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted (10) or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people (0)?
- Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful (10) or that they are mostly looking out for themselves (0)?

The index was based on the means score for both items and was subsequently rescaled such that the theoretical range varied between 0 and 100.

Finally, political confidence was measured by a composite index based on a total of seven questions reflecting three different sub-dimensions – perceived integrity, competence and responsiveness of elected representatives. Two questions tapping perceived integrity were as follows:

- How often do you think that elected representatives in this municipality set their personal interests aside in making local political decisions?
- If you consider the situation in the municipality where you live, how many of the elected representatives do you think misuse their power for personal gain?

One question tapping perceived competence was the following:

- Imagine a situation where two persons (A and B) are discussing municipal politics and they present the two viewpoints below. Please indicate whether you are most in agreement with the viewpoint expressed by A or that expressed by B.
A) Most of the elected representatives in this municipality are competent people who usually know what they are doing.

B) Most of the elected representatives in this municipality don’t seem to know what they are doing.

Four questions tapping perceived responsiveness were two agree-disagree items and two other questions.

- Local councilors do not care much about the views of the people in this municipality.
- Political parties in this municipality are only interested in our votes, [and] not in our opinions.
- How much do you feel that having elections makes the municipal council in this municipality pay attention to what the people think. Would you say not at all, very little, somewhat, quite a bit or very much?
- Generally speaking how much attention do you feel the mayor and aldermen [council representatives] in this municipality pay to what the people think when they decide what to do? Would you say not at all, very little, somewhat, quite a bit or very much?

Responses to all questions were recoded so that high scores reflected high confidence, and the index was constructed in a two-step procedure where first three sub-indices were computed (based on average scores) and were rescaled to give them with a theoretical equal scale ranging from 0 to 100. Subsequently confidence was computed as the mean score for the three sub-scales. This procedures was selected to make sure that each of the sub-dimensions would carry an equal weight in computing the overall score.
Results

Patterns of participation and non-participation
In this section we will present the results of our analyses. Before we address our central research question we will first have a closer look at the two modes of participation that are central to our analysis.

![Figure 2: Percentage of citizens involved in community activism (N=1010) and party-oriented activism (N=1005).](image)

In Figure 2 we can see that the involvement of citizens in community activism is much more widespread than part-oriented forms of activism. In our sample 44 percent of the respondents (N=1010) have engaged in one or more forms of community activism. Only 19 percent of the respondents (N=1005) Dutch citizens have been active in relation to political parties. Our data also indicate that there is a considerable proportion of citizens (30 percent; N=1002) who are active in community action but not in party-related activities. This group is far larger than the proportion of citizens who are active in relation to parties and who do not engage in community activities (5 percent; N=1002).\(^{11}\)

When we consider both types of participation in terms of the personal backgrounds of the participants Table 1 indicates that both types of participation are characterized by well known representative distortions. First, we find that men are somewhat overrepresented amongst the
activists in both types of civic participation. Second, we find that people with the highest levels of education are also somewhat overrepresented amongst the participants. Finally we find that, for both forms of participation under study the activists are – on average – a few years younger than inactive citizens.

Table 1: Representative distortions with regard to gender, education and age for community activism and part-oriented activism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community Activism</th>
<th>Party-oriented activism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not-active</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% male</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% high education</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>53,1</td>
<td>50,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 26-39</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 40-64</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Age 65+</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The marginal totals (N) vary for the six cross-tabulations used to compile this table. Chi-square tests showed that for both types of participation there were statistically significant differences between participants and nonparticipants for all three background characteristics.

When we compare these representative distortions between the two types of participations we see that the differences between participants and non-participants are essentially in the domain of educational. For both gender and age we find that the representative distortions are somewhat larger in the case of party-oriented activism than for community activism. The gender gap in the case of party-oriented activities was 16 percent (62-46%), whereas is was only 7 percent for community activism (53-46%). And whereas part-oriented activists were on average almost six years older than non-activists (52,9-47,2) the age difference between activists and non-activists in the case of community activism was limited to less than three years (53,1-50,3).

When we look at the age differences we can furthermore observe that the nature of the age gap also differs between both types of participation. For both types of participation we see that the oldest age bracket (the retired) are underrepresented amongst of the participants. But
for community activism there is a substantial overrepresentation of age-group of people between 40-64 amongst the activists and about equal representation of the 26-39 age group. In the case of party-oriented activism, however, the 26-39 age group is clearly overrepresented and we find more or less equal representation of the 40-64 age bracket. This might have to do with the personal and the family situation of the 40-64 age group. When we compare the people in this age with the younger age group (26-39) there are relatively many homeowners and people who have a family with children in school age. Homeownership and having children in school age are typically factors that enhance one’s personal interest in the immediate neighbourhood and provides incentives for engaging in actions aimed at improving or securing the neighbourhood’s livability.

All in all these results suggest that:

- community activism is a more popular mode of local citizen involvement than party-oriented activism
- community activism as compared to party-oriented activism, in terms of both gender and age, is characterized by somewhat smaller participatory distortions.

Especially because of its popularity it will be interesting to see whether this form of local political activism functions as a school for democracy. In the next subsection we will turn to this issue.

**The educative effects of local political participation**

In this subsection we will turn to our main research question, pertaining to the educative effects of participation. Our main findings are presented in Table 2 and 3. The results for community activism are presented in the first of these tables. In the upper half of this table we have presented the results for the democratic effects of citizen community activism.
Table 2: Educative effects of community activism on subjective political competence, consumerism / activism, social trust and political confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subjective Competence</th>
<th>Consumerism / Activism</th>
<th>Social Trust</th>
<th>Political Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean value activists</td>
<td>2,19</td>
<td>-0,17</td>
<td>6,03</td>
<td>56,01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0,88</td>
<td>0,73</td>
<td>1,52</td>
<td>20,27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean value non-activists</td>
<td>1,67</td>
<td>-0,29</td>
<td>5,83</td>
<td>56,65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0,77</td>
<td>0,72</td>
<td>1,64</td>
<td>21,94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-value difference means</td>
<td>93,98</td>
<td>6,30</td>
<td>4,14</td>
<td>0,21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance F</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,012</td>
<td>0,042</td>
<td>0,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>957</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>937</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Multiple Partial Correlation (MPC)</th>
<th>Significance MPC</th>
<th>N</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0,31</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0,12</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0,07</td>
<td>0,018</td>
<td>994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0,02</td>
<td>0,287</td>
<td>923</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Result 2SLS              | + significant                     | + significant    | + significant | insignificant   |

When we inspect the upper half of the table we can see that for three of the four democratic orientations we can first of all observe that there are a number of significant differences between participants and non-participants (first row). Citizens who have engaged in community action are more convinced about their political competence than non-participants. Moreover these community activists are also less consumerist in their democratic value orientations than less active members of the community. Although for all citizens there is a tendency to consider functional criteria (regarding government performance in policy making and service delivery) to be more important than democratic criteria (regarding active citizen and community involvement in local governance), we see that this inclination is clearly less pronounced amongst community activists than amongst the less activist members of the community. Finally, we also find that participation in community action goes hand in hand with more positive views regarding the trustworthiness of fellow citizens. The table also indicates that for political confidence there is not a comparable difference between participants and non-participants. Citizens’ confidence in their local government is
even slightly lower among activists than among non-activists (although the difference is not statistically significant).

Of course we must ask whether it is warranted to assume that these differences in democratic orientations are the result of a learning process that participants experience when being active, as proponents of participatory governance expect. As we have indicated before we have to check for potential alternative explanations (self-selection and spuriousness). In the table we have represented the results of additional analyses to consider the possibility that the observed differences may not be the result of a participatory learning process but are produced by self-selection and confounding effects of third factors. As can be easily observed from the results presented in the table, we see that the multiple partial correlations indicate that the relationships between participation and citizens’ subjective political confidence, activist / consumerist civic orientations and their trust in fellow citizens are not spurious when we control for effects of gender, age and education. Moreover, the results of the 2SLS regressions also suggest that the relationship is to a significant degree the result of participatory learning (rather than to self-selection / mobilisation).

In Table 3 we have presented the results for party activism as a second form of local political engagement. When we go through the results in this table the similarities with community activations are striking. All the major observations we made regarding community participation are reproduced for party activism:

- There are differences between activists and non-activists for subjective competence, civic activism / consumerism and social trust, but not for political confidence
- These differences cannot be accounted for by third factors (gender, age and education) nor is there evidence that they can be completely accounted for by self-selection.

Finally, when we compare the results in the two tables there is no evidence that the democratic learning effects of one form of civic engagement are clearly stronger for one form of engagement than for the other.
Table 3: Educative effects of party-oriented activism on subjective political competence, consumerism / activism, social trust and political; confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subjective Competence</th>
<th>Consumerism / Activism</th>
<th>Social Trust</th>
<th>Political Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean value activists</td>
<td>2,55</td>
<td>-0,07</td>
<td>6,15</td>
<td>56,50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0,90</td>
<td>0,71</td>
<td>1,52</td>
<td>22,70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean value non-activists</td>
<td>1,74</td>
<td>-0,27</td>
<td>5,86</td>
<td>56,31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>0,78</td>
<td>0,73</td>
<td>1,61</td>
<td>20,66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-value difference means</td>
<td>149,25</td>
<td>11,99</td>
<td>4,90</td>
<td>0,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance F</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,001</td>
<td>0,027</td>
<td>0,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>1004</td>
<td>936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Partial Correlation (MPC)</td>
<td>0,38</td>
<td>0,10</td>
<td>0,05</td>
<td>-0,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance MPC</td>
<td>0,000</td>
<td>0,001</td>
<td>0,056</td>
<td>0,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result 2SLS</td>
<td>+ significant</td>
<td>+ significant</td>
<td>+ significant</td>
<td>insignificant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

In democratic theory proponents of participatory democracy (e.g. Barber 1984; Pateman 1970; Berry, Portney and Thompson 1993; Fung 2004) have claimed that engagement in non-electoral modes of civic engagement would have benign educative effects, resulting in increased democratic competences and dispositions of citizens. Especially local, community oriented forms of citizen action are thought to provide such positive democratic effects. Against this backdrop the central question in our paper was:

*Does the involvement of citizens in local community action have a positive effect on their democratic orientations and how do these effect compare to similar effects of party-oriented forms of local political activity?*
Our conclusion, based on an analysis of citizen survey data on local political participation in a systematic sample of 54 Dutch municipalities, was that both forms of citizens’ local political engagement activism appeared to have some benign educative effects:

- There are differences between activists and non-activists for subjective competence, civic activism / consumerism and social trust, but not for political confidence
- These differences cannot be accounted for by third factors (gender, age and education) nor is there evidence that they can be completely accounted for by self-selection.

Our findings clearly indicate that the civic education effects of participation appear to be limited to the citizens orientations towards him- or herself and his / her fellow citizens. We found effects for citizens personal local political competence, civic orientations (less consumerist, more activist) and for citizens’ trust in fellow citizens. At the same time we did not find evidence that participation leads to increased confidence in local government. This latter finding contradicts expectations of those who expect that participation as such will result in performance satisfaction and increased confidence in (local) government. As sceptics (e.g. Irwin 1979; Tyler 2001; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Boedeltje 2009) have argued the effects of participation on political satisfaction and political confidence are likely to be (partly) dependent on contingencies like the actual substantive outcome of the participation process (the content of the collective decision made) and the institutional make-up of participatory arenas and actual proceedings (in terms of openness, transparency and fairness). In subsequent analyses it may be rewarding to investigate under what conditions participation is likely to result in increased confidence.

In other important respects, however, our findings do lend support to the case that participatory democrats make for the benign effects of civic engagement on subjective local political competence, civic orientations (less consumerist, more activist) and social trust. Such effects however, are not only limited to neighbourhood and community oriented forms of citizen action but also occur for party-oriented forms of local political engagement. Nevertheless, the relative popularity of community activism (in which about 40 percent of citizens engage; as compared to the mere 19 percent participation level for party-oriented activism) still makes this form of local political activism an important domain where civic education can take place. This is further underlined by the fact that according to our findings participation in community oriented activities is not as vulnerable to representative distortions
(with regard to gender and age) as party-oriented activism. In conclusion: where the likes of De Tocqueville and J.S. Mill have praised local government as the school of democracy, our evidence suggests that many citizens receive their practical training in civics in the local context when engaging in community and neighbourhood oriented forms of citizen action.
REFERENCES


SPSS. 1999. SPSS Regression Models 9.0 Chicago: SPSS.


forms of social connectedness (Miller and Shanks 1996) that could provide participatory motives. Important resource for participation (in the case of civic skills; see Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) or as incumbents or satisfaction with policies).

and value orientations and do not refer to attitudes of citizens towards the current political situation (e.g. trust in civic participation.

helping each other with practical matters. Answer categories were: often, sometimes, rarely and never.

and compare this to local party oriented forms of political participation. In a later version of the paper we hope to broaden the scope of the analysis in order to include also other forms of local civic engagement.

The index was based on a survey question where citizens were asked to indicate, their score was computed as the mean score on the relevant items. The index was subsequently rescaled such that the theoretical range varied between 0 and 100.

1 The arguments provided for the need of such an extension of participatory rights differ. In an instrumentalist view of democracy this necessity may be motivated by the need for citizens to be able to influence the political agenda and hold public officeholders to account during the inter-election stages of the electoral cycle (Denters, De Jong and Thomassen 1990, p. 37-38). In a developmental view of democracy this necessity may be motivated by the opportunities that non-electoral forms of political participation offer for the acquisition of political skills and democratic attitudes (e.g. Berry, Portney and Thompson 1993, pp. 5-6).

2 The arguments for the desirability of a high level of public participation again may come form two sources. From an instrumentalist view of democracy widespread and preferably universal participation is desirable because it reduces the dangers of representational distortions, due to the under- or overrepresentation of particular groups in setting the political agenda and public decision-making (e.g. Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, pp. 463-533; Lijphart 1997). From a developmental point of view it might be argued that selective participation implies that some categories of citizens are not benefitting from the benign educational effects of civic participation.

3 The questions regarding local political involvement were for the most part included in a drop-off questionnaire that people were asked to complete after the personal interview. This asked for a substantial extra effort on the part of respondents resulting in lower response rates for this part of the survey.

4 We repeat that in this version of the paper we will only concentrate on one form of community-based activism and compare this to local party oriented forms of political participation. In a later version of the paper we hope to broaden the scope of the analysis in order to include also other forms of local civic engagement.

5 In the formulation of this expectation we have assumed a dichotomous participation variable. In fact our participation variables, however, are ordinal rather than dichotomous and we therefore expect that the more active a person is, the more likely he/she is to have acquired democratic orientations.

6 This is typically the case for symbolic (as against non-symbolic) attitudes as Krosnick (1991) and Sears (1995) have called such orientations. Such symbolic orientations oftentimes pertain to the respondent’s self conception and value orientations and do not refer to attitudes of citizens towards the current political situation (e.g. trust in incumbents or satisfaction with policies).

7 The selection of the three additional instrumental variables was based on their expected theoretical relevance as important resource for participation (in the case of civic skills; see Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) or as forms of social connectedness (Miller and Shanks 1996) that could provide participatory motives.

8 The 2SLS procedure asks for quantitative data for both the dependent and the independent variable. In our case both the dependent and the independent variable are ordinal (SPSS 1999, p. 31). Therefore we have decided not to report 2SLS effect coefficients and merely treat the 2SLS results as indicative.

9 In the main text of this section we will not deal with the measurement of the control variables. Age was based on a survey question pertaining to the respondents reported year of birth. Gender was also based on a related survey question and scored 0=male; 1=female. Education was based on a three category variable: 1= primary and lower secondary school; 2= upper secondary school; 3= college/university/postgraduate. Local attachment was based on is a composite index based on the mean score of responses to a question asking them to indicate, using a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means “No attachment at all” and 10 means “Very strong attachment”, their sense of attachment to: a) the neighbourhood or village in which they lived and b) The municipality in which they lived. The civic skills index was based on a survey question where citizens were asked to indicate whether – as part of their activity in organisations or their occupation – they a) participated in decisions at a meeting b) planned or chaired a meeting c) prepared or gave a speech before a meeting d) wrote a text other than a private letter at least a few pages long. Answer options were “a few times a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, or never or almost never”. Finally neighbourhood integration was based on three items pertaining to neighbour-oriented activities: a) talking with neighbours about neighbourhood problems b) visiting each other c) helping each other with practical matters. Answer categories were: often, sometimes, rarely and never. The index score was computed as the mean score on the relevant items. The index was subsequently rescaled such that the theoretical range varied between 0 and 100.

10 This is based on a cross-tabulation of both variables. This analysis also indicates that 51 percent of our respondents (N=1002) is engaged in neither of these of activities. Finally, 14 percent is active in both ways.

11 In the table we have not included the youngest age group (people younger than 25).