CITIZENS, LOCALITIES AND THE STATE:
MODERNISING DEMOCRACY?

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Introduction

Local democracy in Britain faces something of a paradox. On the one hand, Britain is claimed to have a strong civic culture and a long-standing tradition of local self-government, which underpins a stable and enduring democratic system. From the ‘civic culture’ studies of the 1950s (Almond and Verba, 1959) through to more recent studies of social capital (Hall, 1999; Maloney, Smith and Stoker 1999), the apparent disposition of Britons towards joining associations is linked to high levels of democratic efficacy and stability. What is more, there is no sign of any decline in such inclinations. As Hall (1999, p424) puts it, ‘the overall levels of associational membership in Britain seem to be at least as high today, and perhaps even somewhat higher, than they were in 1959… the basic inclination of the vast majority of the British populace to join associations remains roughly the same today as it was in the 1950s.’ From this perspective the values and practices which underpin the institutions of British democracy remain as strong today as ever.

On the other hand, British local government is held to be facing a major democratic crisis (Blair, 1998; Cochrane, 1993). The symptoms of this crisis are broad, ranging from specific worries over declining turnout rates in local elections (Rallings, Temple and Thrasher, 1996) through to more general concerns with the apparent alienation of citizens from local government (Gray and Jenkins, 1999) and their declining levels of trust in its political institutions (Hill, 2000). The solutions to this crisis are equally broad, ranging from reform of the electoral process through to radical changes to the internal political management of local authorities, all aimed at putting local government ‘in touch with the people’ (DETR, 1998; Armstrong, 1999). Much of this ‘democratic renewal’ agenda is centrally led, being the product of Labour Party manifesto commitments and is being driven forward by a comprehensive legislative programme. This top-down approach is matched, however, by a strong degree of support for the renewal project within local government. Although many have resisted the detail of modernisation, local authorities of all types have been willing to experiment with a range of different initiatives in an attempt to resolve the paradox.

This paradox of political and social dissonance – in which the institutions of local democracy appear to be at variance with extant social institutions – forms the focus of this paper. In particular, this paper is concerned with local government’s attempts to ameliorate the current democratic deficit through the bottom-up development of public participation in local
politics. Drawing upon a major research project into local government initiatives to enhance public participation, it explores the extent to which these initiatives are seeking to build democratic capacity within communities. Consequently, it provides a timely study of efforts to renew local democracy.

This study offers more than simply an evaluation of local government attempts to consult with citizens. Placed within the context of current interest in concepts of social capital, attempts by local authorities to enhance public participation take on a much greater potential significance. Most political science applications of social capital have treated it as an independent variable, analysing the effect of different stocks of social capital on the performance of governments (Putnam, 1993; Whiteley, 1999). More recent work, however, has started to suggest that governments themselves can influence social capital (Maloney, Smith and Stoker, 2000). It is this latter analysis, which treats social capital as a dependent variable, that is the focus of this paper. In short, the paper explores the extent to which local authorities can release latent accumulations of social capital, or indeed, build upon them, through the development of effective public participation strategies. If such strategies can be shown to be effective then this analysis adds, both empirically and theoretically, to the debates surrounding social capital. In this respect, the analysis has potential relevance well beyond the confines of British local government. If local authorities are able to have a positive effect on the accumulation of social capital then this has implications for all those countries which are experiencing an apparent decline in their own democratic cultures.

The analysis of local government strategies to enhance public participation follows in five stages. The first section briefly sets the context of democratic renewal in British local government. The second section considers the limitations of existing concepts of social capital for analysing democratic renewal before a third section develops core propositions about the ways in which current initiatives to renew local democracy, especially through enhanced public participation in political processes, may affect the development of social capital. The fourth section uses empirical data on public participation initiatives within local government to analyse these propositions. In particular, it addresses the issue of whether contemporary initiatives reflect a genuine desire within local government to enhance local democracy, and whether such initiatives really do help to stimulate social capital. Finally, a concluding section examines the differences in approaches to public participation between
areas and reflects upon the political consequences of uneven development of social capital between these areas.

Public participation and Democratic Renewal

The democratic crisis in British local government, and the case for democratic renewal, has been extensively examined in recent years (Pratchett, 1999; King and Stoker, 1996; Pratchett and Wilson, 1996; Stewart and Stoker, 1995; CLD, 1995; Cochrane, 1993, Stoker, 1992). While there is some doubt over the extent to which this crisis is a modern phenomenon (cf. Robson, 1966; Pratchett and Wilson, 1997), there is broad consensus over the problems which are perceived to plague local democracy.

Top of the list of problems is the sense of democratic apathy that pervades most studies of local government. The vast majority of citizens demonstrate little interest in local government and most local decisions are taken without their involvement. In their recent contribution to the British Social Attitudes Survey, Rao and Young (1999) found that only 11 per cent of those questioned expressed a substantial interest in local affairs. Furthermore, only 5 per cent could correctly name the political leader of their local authority. This apathy manifests itself most clearly in the turnout figures for local elections which, as Rallings, Temple and Thrasher (1996) demonstrate, are among the lowest in Europe and are still declining. The most recent local elections (May 1999) saw an average turnout of just 32 per cent. Subsequent by-elections have been even lower, for example, averaging only 21 per cent in January 2000 (Rallings and Thrasher, 2000). This problem is compounded by the increasing tendency for many seats in local government to be uncontested. As a consequence, the interests of major sections of the community are under-represented within local political arenas (DETR, 1998). Furthermore, the decision-making structures within local government are complex and opaque, placing great time demands upon elected representatives while at the same time making it difficult for ordinary citizens to follow the process (Audit Commission, 1997).

Problems of electoral apathy are compounded by the lack of legitimacy accorded to local democracy. In the absence of regional government for England, local authorities in most areas are the only organisations beneath the national Parliament to be subjected to direct
periodic election. In principle, this accords them a degree of legitimacy which is absent from other government agencies at the local level (Loughlin, 1996). In practice, however, the structure and organisation of most local authority services is dictated by nationally prescribed standards and performance measures. Local authorities raise less than a fifth of their expenditure though local taxation and depend upon central government grants for the majority of their income. As a result, the opportunities for local authorities to vary their activities to reflect local needs is heavily constrained, although a considerable amount of local diversity exists in spite of such constraints (Stewart, 1995).

One effect of this declining political legitimacy is a disengagement of local government from its citizens. This disengagement is more than simply a lack of interest in local affairs. It also reflects a perception among the public that local authorities can do very little to change those aspects of life that really matter. This, in turn, has the effect of discouraging interest in local affairs and fosters a polity which increasingly looks to central government as the only legitimate institution of democracy. As the primary institution of representative democracy at the sub-national level, therefore, local authorities are dangerously disengaged from their citizens: a disengagement which may have profound consequences for broader democratic practices in Britain.

It is against this background that recent attempts to foster democratic renewal at the local level have emerged. The primary catalyst for this renewal has been the Labour government’s radical programme of modernisation (DETR 1998). Among other proposals, this programme is attempting to improve electoral registration and turnout, is introducing a clearer division between the political executive and the elected assembly and is providing local authorities with a general power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas. It is also encouraging enhanced public consultation and participation in relation to both specific service decisions (through the Best Value framework and the Beacon Council scheme) and broader policy making. This is, in effect, a top-down approach to reforming the institutions of local democracy which prescribes specific remedies to identifiable problems and requires local authorities to effect particular changes. At the same time, however, the democratic renewal process contains a strong element of bottom-up development. The policy approach is one in which central government is defining the framework for modernisation but is leaving the detail of implementation to individual local authorities. Within this approach, therefore, there is considerable room for local difference. As the government’s White Paper
on the subject acknowledges ‘each individual council will need to carry through its own modernisation process to suit its own local circumstances’(DETR, 1998, para 2.3).

It is easy to see the government’s democratic renewal programme as a discrete set of reforms, each of which can be opened up to criticism in relation to its detail (Copus, 1999). However, such criticisms, while often accurate, ignore the broader aim of democratic renewal. As well as restructuring the institutions of local democracy to make them more accessible and responsive, it is also possible to view the renewal process as an attempt to enhance democratic practice more generally. In particular, it can be seen as an attempt to rebuild citizen trust in democratic institutions and to re-engage local politics with local people (Pratchett, 1999). Such an analysis is borne out by the enthusiastic way in which many local authorities have set about enhancing public participation (Lowndes et al, 1998; Leach and Wingfield, 1999), and by the willingness of many to experiment with other aspects of the renewal programme (Filkin et al, 1998). For many authorities, the aim appears to be more than simply a modification of existing practices to fall in-line with modern visions of democracy. For some at least, the aim appears to be as much about developing democratic capacity within their communities by reaching out to those who are traditionally marginalised by local politics. In this respect, it is the initiatives developed by individual local authorities that hold out most promise for democratic renewal. Of these, the least prescribed and most diverse are attempts to enhance public participation in local affairs beyond simple participation in local elections. It is these bottom-up aspects of democratic renewal, therefore, which are of greatest interest and which form the focus of this paper.

The problem with social capital

The current debate around the development and decline of social capital provides a useful framework with which to consider the role of enhanced public participation in local government. Its emphasis upon government performance (Putnam, 1993; Boix and Posner, 1998), associational life and collective action (Jordana, 1999), and the existence of civic norms (Cohen 1999), all make it particularly pertinent to the analysis of local democratic renewal. Acceptance that there are regional and local differences in the distribution of social capital (Tarrow, 1996), and that this variable distribution can have important consequences for democratic institutions, adds to this pertinence, especially where the democratic renewal
process is bottom-up. Where the analysis also emphasises declining levels of social capital in Western democracies (Putnam, 1995; Whiteley, 1999 *inter alia*), it also has the potential to reach to the very heart of current concerns with a crisis in local democracy. In particular, it suggests a correlation between declining levels of social capital and the failure of local democratic institutions to reach out to citizens.

Theories of social capital are pertinent to democratic renewal in so far as they provide an explanation for the perceived failures in existing democratic institutions. Among other features, declining levels of trust and co-operation within civil society manifest themselves as a disenchantment or disinterest in local political affairs. One consequence is that local government appears remote and detached from its citizens. If this is the case, however, it begs the question of whether governments can do anything about the relationship between declining levels of social capital among their citizens and the impotence occurring within their institutions of democracy? The empirical aspects of this question form the focus of subsequent sections. First, however, it is necessary to explore the theoretical relationship between government and social capital, in order to understand the limits of current theory in relation to this question, and to propose some solutions to these limitations.

The problem with applying concepts of social capital to the current democratic renewal project is that it casts the relationship between government and social capital in the wrong direction. In short, most studies of social capital imply that governments, especially at a sub-national level, can do very little to influence the ways in which social capital is structured or distributed: at least, not in the short term. This problem is most apparent in Putnam’s (1993) definitive work on Italy. His study emphasises the slow and differentiated accumulation of social capital in the north and south of the country, and matches this against the recent performance of different regional governments. His broad argument is that regional governance is more effective in the north because of its historical accumulation of social capital – an accumulation which has its roots in the middle ages. Treating government performance as a dependent variable, which is subject to variations in the independent variable, social capital, leaves little scope for governments to influence the accumulation or decline of social capital within their jurisdictions.

While this impoverished view of the relationship between government and social capital has attracted criticism (Tarrow, 1996), attempts to advance understanding of the relationship have
largely concentrated on structural analyses. Maloney, Smith and Stoker (2000), for example, emphasise the effect of political institutions in shaping the opportunities for associational development and for creating social capital. Their study of Birmingham argues that local government can influence the opportunities for developmental activities both directly, through hands-on attempts to preserve and enhance the roles of particular organisations, and more indirectly, through creating supportive structures for new organisations to emerge. Consequently, they observe an interpenetration of civic and political life as the basis for the development of social capital. For them, the institutions of government not only respond to different accumulations of social capital, but also shape the opportunities for its accumulation. Their contribution suggests that governments can influence the accumulation of social capital by providing the underpinning structures for associational activity to occur in civil society. Like earlier studies, however, it questions the ability of governments to intervene directly in the generation of social capital.

A second problem in applying concepts of social capital to the analysis of democratic renewal arises from its emphasis upon associational life and civil society. This manifests itself in both the theoretical propositions and the methodological approaches which predominate in the literature. At the theoretical level, social capital is claimed to be a product of the trust which inheres in relationships between individuals. General levels of trust are fostered through participation in associations, although the type of association in which participation occurs is important in shaping the norms of trust and reciprocity (Ulsaner, 1999). Social capital, defined in terms of ‘social connections and the attendant norms and trust’ (Putnam, 1995, p665), therefore, is premised upon a notion of civil society which is separate from political life. These theoretical propositions guide the methodological approaches to analysing stocks of social capital and their relationship to government performance. Several authors have turned to the World Values Surveys to analyse variations in patterns of generalised trust (Inglehart, 1999; Whitely, 1999, Ulsaner, 1999). More significantly, the range and density of associational activity in particular areas or countries have been used as proxy measures for generalised social capital (Putnam, 1993; Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Hall, 1999; Maloney, Smith and Stoker, 1999). While all authors are anxious to emphasise the limitations of these methods and to develop more sophisticated analyses of the underlying trends which such measures disguise, the conclusion is the same: it is associational activity outside of political participation which is important in building generalised trust and in imparting the norms, values and attitudes that underpin effective civic culture.
This conclusion is problematic for analysing local government democratic renewal initiatives, because it denies the state any role in enhancing local stocks of social capital, beyond that of creating broad structures and institutions which might support civil association. In this respect, theories of social capital provide a powerful explanation for democratic decline but are of very little help to those policy makers who are seeking to reverse this decline. In order to move beyond such an impasse it is necessary to redefine the relationship between civil society and political participation in a way that goes beyond the broad structural approaches adopted to date. In particular, it is necessary to consider the effects which more direct and deliberate attempts to influence stocks of social capital might have.

**Developing social capital in localities**

Foley and Edwards (1999) provide a useful starting point for such a redefinition. They draw upon sociological analyses to emphasise social structure as the primary tool for conceptualising social capital. Social capital, they suggest, inheres in the networks and relationships of individuals, rather than in the norms and values which they possess. As they put it;

> the norms and attitudes which may become social capital for an individual, in fact, do so only by virtue of the institutions or social networks in which they are embedded. Moreover, the social capital available in my neighborhood… stems not only from the subjective attributes carried around by the individuals who live there, but more profoundly from emergent and existing social infrastructures which facilitate individual and collective actions of many kinds (Foley and Edwards, 1999, p154).

Networks of relationships, therefore, are central to an individual’s social capital. These networks vary between individuals and, more importantly, between different groups in society. Consequently, they emphasise the social context as an important but often ignored factor in the study of social capital. This analysis marks an important departure from political science accounts because it emphasises network ties as the basis for understanding social capital, rather than the norms and values that develop from such ties. Social capital inheres not simply in a two-way relationship between individuals, but in a complex of connections which one individual has with several others in society. For Foley and Edwards, therefore,
Social capital is not simply measured by the access which individuals have to different networks (associational measures) but also by the potential value of that access to them (resource measures). In order for a relationship to be meaningful, in a social capital context, individuals must be able to rely upon that relationship for certain mutual benefits. It is this combination of ‘access’ and ‘resource value’ which delivers the norms of trust and reciprocity on which social capital depends.

Understanding social capital as ‘access’ plus ‘resource value’ places special emphasis upon particular types of relationship. Membership of a network or association is not, in itself, sufficient for developing social capital, as studies of chequebook participation have shown (Maloney, 1999). For participation to be relevant it must also be of value to individuals. Thus, the value of a network to an individual lies not only in the levels of trust and reciprocity which characterise its relationships but, also, in the broader structural position which that network occupies in society. Some networks may be characterised by strong norms of trust and reciprocity but, at the same time, be alienated or marginalised from the wider community in which they exist. The danger, here, is that alienated networks may support misanthropic interpretations of social capital, while marginalised groups may find it difficult to relate internal norms and conventions to broader political or democratic structures. The social and political context in which networks exist, therefore, structures the distribution of social capital not only by shaping relationships but also by attributing value to these relationships.

One consequence of this argument is that social capital cannot be seen as a community wide resource which shapes the political culture of an area or nation. Indeed, in arguing that social capital is a product of individual network ties, mediated by a combination of network access and resource value, there is an explicit recognition of divergent accumulations of social capital within and between communities. Different individuals within a community may have access to a different range of networks and relationships. Moreover, even where they share common access to a particular network, the resource value of that relationship may be different for different individuals, depending upon the social, economic and political context in which it is accessed. Far from instilling common norms and values, therefore, differing experiences and relationships in civil society may lead to divergent skills and democratic capacities between individuals, or more often, groups of individuals.
Uneven patterns of social capital accumulation within and between communities suggests that political and democratic capacity will follow similar patterns: in short, some groups within an area will have higher stocks of social capital than others. When linked to patterns of social exclusion this argument is particularly pertinent. Traditionally excluded groups such as ethnic minorities, young people, single parents and the unemployed have often experienced marginalisation from political processes and have been notoriously difficult to engage in civic activities (Lowndes *et al.*, 1998). Yet many (although not all) of these groups have strong internal networks of mutual support – for example, many ethnic minority groups have strong networks of reciprocity through religious or other ethnically related activities. The problem is not in the existence of networks and relationships but in translating them into relevant social and political resources which are of value beyond their immediate socio-economic context. As Verba, Schlozman and Brady’s study of ‘civic voluntarism’ in the USA concludes:

> resources are earlier in the causal chain that leads to political activity and are less likely than either psychological engagement in politics or requests for political activity to be the result, rather than the cause, of activity. Thus, focusing on resources provides a powerful and theoretically satisfying explanation of disparities across individuals and groups in the extent to which they take part in political life. And, since resources are differentially available to groups with differing needs and preferences, paying attention to resources provides an important link to our concern with political equality. (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995, p16)

The key point here is that social exclusion does not necessarily indicate an absence of networks or relationships within groups. Rather it implies an absence of resources with which to capitalise upon individual access to networks.

From the perspective of governments seeking to enhance democratic performance, therefore, the concept of latent social capital may be important. Social capital may be deemed latent where relationships and networks are in place within communities but individuals or groups are unable to realise their resource value: that is, to capitalise on their social or political utility. Different groups within a community may have well developed networks of relationships but their ability to maximise their value in the political process varies considerably. Differences in political efficacy between groups, therefore, are as much a product of the relationship between the institutions of civil and political society, as they are a reflection of particular network characteristics.
This argument has important policy implications for local authorities engaged in democratic renewal, for it suggests two potential strategies for enhancing political engagement. First, local authorities can pursue the broad structural route of attempting to build social capital in their localities by providing the institutional frameworks in which associations and networks can grow (Maloney, Smith and Stoker, 2000). The problem with this approach is that it requires a long term strategy which will only reap rewards after many years. Second, however, it also suggests that local authorities can intervene more directly to release latent social capital within their communities. Strategies that seek to bridge social capital are particularly relevant here. The focus, here, is not on enhancing the internal capacity of networks but on fostering connections between them. Thus, local authorities can develop connections to and between different networks, thereby enhancing the resource value of those network ties to individuals.

This second strategy does not seek to create new stocks of social capital within civil society by fostering new opportunities for associational activity, although there remains a role for such institutional design. Rather, this second strategy seeks to realise the potential of existing networks to foster links within and between groups. The aim, under such a strategy, would be to move existing bonds of particularised trust to more generalisable norms of trust and reciprocity. This requires initiatives which bring isolated and marginalised groups into direct contact with more mainstream social and political activities, bridging the divisions between them. It involves more than simply empowering particular groups by devolving specific decisions or managerial responsibilities to them: indeed, if anything, is the opposite. Empowerment, in this context, would involve finding ways of encouraging groups to make the links between their own internal networks and the broader political processes that are available. It is only in this way that the resource value of network membership will be released, leading to a development of generalised trust across the various groups which constitute a community. From a local government perspective, this means managing the relationship between groups in order to encourage positive experiences from participation in political processes.

Enhanced opportunities for public participation are the key to unlocking latent social capital. It is only through carefully constructed and managed participation opportunities that the potential dynamics of internal networks can be released into the wider polity. This involves a two way process. On the one hand, it means providing a range of opportunities for
traditionally marginalised groups to articulate their needs and enter into mainstream political processes. On the other hand, it also means managing such opportunities so that groups increasingly come together in constructive ways in order to move beyond parochial concerns towards a consensus over community-wide benefits.

Any serious attempt to address the democratic deficit in local government must deal with the underlying problems of differentiated social capital within and across communities. It is only in this way that the dual principles of popular control and political equality (Beetham, 1996, 1999) can be addressed within a democratic renewal programme. The remainder of this paper evaluates current local government attempts to enhance public participation from this perspective. In particular, it analyses both the extent to which local authorities are genuinely attempting to unlock latent stores of social capital within their communities, and the implications of differences between local authorities. Where local authorities are genuinely attempting to bridge latent social capital, this can be seen to be good for democratic renewal (at least from a normative point of view). However, where participation initiatives are simply paying lip-service to such strategies then the consequences could be very different. More than just failing to renew democracy, such initiatives may actually entrench patterns of particularised trust and further isolate groups within a community. The analysis which follows, therefore, is not simply an empirical investigation of the theoretical propositions made about direct intervention into social capital, it is also an evaluation of the current democratic renewal programme in British local government.

Theory and practice in public participation

Since the mid-1990s, British local authorities have become increasingly interested in finding new ways of engaging with citizens and enhancing public participation in local political activities. In part, this interest reflects the Labour government’s desire to drive forward its modernisation programme, but many of the more innovative experiments pre-date the election of Labour in 1997 (and its democratic renewal programme) and demonstrate a clear ownership of the initiative within local government. This section analyses recent innovations in public participation both generally, as an evaluation of bottom-up democratic renewal, and more specifically, as a study of local authority attempts to address differentiated stocks of social capital within their communities.
The data analysed here is drawn from a comprehensive survey of local authority initiatives and strategies to enhance public participation. The research involved a survey instrument sent to every English local authority, which asked a series of closed questions about specific initiatives, and a combination of ranked and open questions in relation to broader participation strategies. This instrument was backed up by detailed case studies in 11 contrasting local authorities, involving interviews with individuals within local government (both elected and appointed) and focus group work with a range of citizens. The research provides a rich source of information on local government’s approach towards citizen engagement as part of a bottom-up process of democratic renewal. The raw data from this research is reported elsewhere and does not require detailed repetition here. There are, however, three key findings which are relevant to this analysis and which help set the context of the specific analysis which follows.

First, concepts of public consultation and participation are not new to local government. Local authorities have a long history of engaging with their citizens, especially in relation to specific decisions such as land use and development planning (Byrne, 1983). Overall, the survey found that, on average, local authorities use around nine different methods for engaging with the public, and that each of these may be used many times a year. These methods range from the traditional tools of consultation documents and public meetings through to more customer-oriented methods which address the concerns of citizens as consumers of services. Chart 1 shows the extent to which different tools are used by local authorities. These tools are used to address a variety of issues, from detailed problems within a specific neighbourhood through to broad strategic policy making activities. The point that many respondents emphasised, however, is that participation, at least in the form of consultation, is entrenched within the practice of local government, and has been for many years. Innovations in public participation build upon this practice rather than replace it.
Chart 1 - The use of different forms of participation
Second, there is considerable variation in both the extent to which particular tools are used, and the issues to which they are applied. Chart 2 illustrates the variation by showing the distribution of initiatives by authority. Each bar shows a different number of initiatives, from 1 to 17, and the number of authorities using that amount. The distribution of initiatives is surprisingly broad. While the mean across all authorities was nine, the modal average was lower at eight, with a standard deviation of almost four (3.87). This demonstrates a wide level of variation across local government in the use of different methods. While most of the traditional methods (public meetings, consultation documents and so on) are common to all authorities, their willingness to experiment with newer modes of engagement varies considerably. A standard deviation of four is an illustration of just how wide the gap is between those authorities that actively seek to encourage public participation, and those that are indifferent towards it. Those authorities at the extremes of chart 2 further illustrate this gap. At the left hand end of the scale (the low participation end) is a London Borough: a relatively large urban authority with a population of more than 250 000 in an area of less than 85km². This authority claimed that its only structured contact with citizens was through a Borough-wide complaints/suggestion scheme, related specifically to the council’s service provision. This authority, and others like it at this end of the scale, did not even hold public meetings or issue consultation documents. At the other end of the scale were two urban authorities (one metropolitan and one city council) that operated an impressive array of 18 different forms of public participation, including some innovative methods which were new to the research. Analysing this gap between those authorities that are enthusiastic supporters of public participation and those that are indifferent, or even apathetic towards it, is central to this analysis.
Finally, in concentrating upon innovations in public participation, the research found a significant distinction between consultative and deliberative methods of engagement. For the purposes of the research, consultative innovations were defined as those methods which survey the opinions of large sections of a population, normally using some form of remote questioning. Innovations in this category include the use of local referendums, the development of interactive web-sites and the operation of citizens’ panels. By contrast, deliberative innovations were defined as those methods which seek to engage with citizens in some form of dialogue. Innovations in this category include the use of focus groups to explore the interests or concerns of particular groups, the use of ‘community planning’ or ‘visioning’ exercises to develop understanding and consensus across communities, and the application of citizens’ juries to complex policy problems. The research found a strong divergence in the development of consultative and deliberative mechanisms in different authorities. While many authorities are actively experimenting with a range of different participation methods, the research clearly shows a preference for some types of methods in some authorities. For example, large counties are much more likely to concentrate innovation upon consultative methods such as citizens’ panels while urban areas are more likely to experiment with deliberative mechanisms such as citizens’ juries. Indeed, this
pattern extends more generally to a division between urban and rural authorities, although there are some exceptions to this generalisation. This divergence reflects the different circumstances of local authorities and, more importantly, the different role and status of public participation in these authorities. While consultative methods may enhance the responsiveness of authorities to citizens’ needs and preferences, they do little to encourage a dialogue with citizens that is capable of developing political capacity. On the other hand, deliberative innovations not only enhance responsiveness, they also engage citizens more directly in the political process, providing opportunities for consensus to be built across communities (Smith and Wales, 2000). While all of these innovations provide the possibility of enhancing political responsiveness in local government, it is the deliberative methods that offer the greatest opportunity to cut across community divisions and to unlock latent social capital. It is only through deliberative methods that citizens can relate their own network access and resources to broader community goals. It is only in such settings, therefore, that latent social capital can be unlocked.

To understand the extent to which local authorities are seeking to address latent stocks of social capital and to build political capacity within their communities, it is necessary to concentrate particularly upon deliberative innovations. The survey instrument at the heart of this research explored both existing practices in relation to innovation, and the aspirations of participation strategies in individual authorities. Existing practice is reflected in the degree of innovation that individual authorities are engaged in. Aspirations are reflected in the broader strategies that underpin innovations and guide their application in particular circumstances. Each of these factors will be examined in turn.

*Degree of innovation*

The degree of innovation provides a proxy measure of the extent to which local authorities are actively seeking to engage with citizens and to respond to their needs. At this point it is important to distinguish between conventional methods of participation and more recent innovations. Local government has always used public meetings and the like for consulting citizens from time to time. In some instances (for example, in relation to planning applications) there is a legal requirement for local authorities to have consultation methods in place. In other instances, these and other traditional methods of consultation are seen as being a necessary part of effective local government. While there are exceptions, therefore, it
can be assumed that the majority of authorities are familiar with, and use, traditional methods, at regular intervals: indeed, this is confirmed by the high levels of use for such methods shown in chart 1. Although these methods are valid in the contexts in which they are used, they are problematic for this analysis in so far as they assume political equality to be commensurate with equality of access. These conventional modes of participation are premised on the assumption that all individuals have equal resources to participate and will do so when they feel the need: political equality is achieved by ensuring that all citizens have the opportunity to participate if they want. As the earlier discussion of social capital indicates, however, such assumptions are fundamentally flawed. Political resources are unequally distributed within communities and local authorities need to do more than simply offer equality of access to achieve a measure of political equality. It is for this reason that the focus of this analysis is upon innovations, rather than the full range of participation methods employed by local authorities.

![Chart 3 - Degree of innovation](image)

Chart 3 summarises the degree of innovation by analysing the number of new initiatives that each authority has in place. Over 80 per cent of authorities have experimented with at least one innovative method of participation, and 56 per cent have more than one new initiative in
place. Indeed, the top quartile of authorities have adopted three or more of the innovative methods. This finding shows a surprisingly high level of innovation in local government. The vast majority of authorities are not simply operating conventional participation mechanisms but are also developing new ways of engaging with the public. On its own, however, this finding is not sufficient to reach any conclusions on the extent to which innovation is linked to an attempt to build political capacity within communities. This measure combines both consultative and deliberative innovations, and as argued earlier, consultative methods do little to enhance political ability among participants. The analysis, therefore, needs to be adapted to focus more specifically upon deliberative modes of engagement.

Chart 4 plots the degree of deliberative innovation against the general pattern of innovation shown in chart 3. Some interesting divergences emerge from this analysis. To begin with, the number of inactive authorities increases from 17 per cent to 25 per cent when the analysis focuses exclusively upon deliberative methods. Furthermore, those with only one innovation are also greater in this respect (32 per cent of authorities). Overall, therefore, only 43 per cent of authorities can claim two or more deliberative innovations within their repertoire of
public participation methods. Indeed, when deliberative innovations are focused upon the graph is notably skewed to the left, emphasising the divergence between those authorities that are developing consultative approaches towards public participation, and those that are concentrating more upon deliberation.

The rapid tailing-off of deliberative innovations is important not only because it shows this divergence but also because of the nature of deliberative participation more generally. If deliberation is to be used to reach into traditionally excluded groups and to build bridges across politically differentiated networks, then different deliberative exercises will be needed for different circumstances. Each form of deliberative innovation has its own strengths and weaknesses, making each one more or less valid for particular occasions. Choosing the right method of engagement to suit both the topic under investigation and the needs of potential participants is an important pre-requisite to successful participation initiatives (Lowndes et al, 1998b). Consequently, those authorities that recognise only one form of deliberative innovation are unlikely to be able to make such distinctions. For this reason, they can be discounted in this analysis. It is the remaining 43 per cent of authorities that operate two or more deliberative innovations, which have the potential to unlock social capital in their areas. Indeed, from this criterion, it is the 18 per cent of authorities operating three or more deliberative innovations that have the most potential.

Examining the characteristics of this more advanced 18 per cent reveals some important features of the most innovatory authorities. First, despite the existence of considerably more rural than urban authorities in Britain, it is the urban authorities that are far more active in relation to deliberative innovation. More than 60 per cent of this top group were cities or suburbs of cities. At the same time, only a small proportion of two-tier authorities are included in this top group: only six English counties (out of 34) and 16 English districts (out of 238) are counted. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that attempts to unlock social capital occur overwhelmingly in urban or semi-urban, single-tier, local authorities. Second, political control is clearly an important factor affecting deliberative innovations. Two-thirds of this top group were Labour controlled authorities, compared with only seven per cent Conservative and five per cent Liberal-Democrat controlled. To some extent, this distribution reflects the dominance of the Labour party in local government at the time of the survey, so it is important not to attach too much weight to this finding. Of possibly greater significance, however, is the general absence of hung authorities. Altogether, 62 per cent of
responding authorities were controlled by one of the three major parties but, collectively, they account for almost 80 per cent of authorities in this most advanced group. This suggests that an absence of political control tends to reduce the capacity for innovation and limits the opportunity for deliberative methods to reach out into the community.

Examining the practice of public participation reveals significant patterns in innovation. A concentration upon those authorities that have implemented three or more deliberative innovations reveals that nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) of all authorities have the potential to unlock latent social capital within their communities. Of this 18 per cent, the majority of them are urban or suburban, single-tier authorities. The evidence also suggests that the presence of clear party political control is an important factor in encouraging deliberative innovation. This, in turn, suggests that for most authorities deliberative democracy is seen as complementing, rather than augmenting, political leadership.

Aspirations

While existing practice provides a useful indication of the potential for local government to build political capacity within its community, examining the aspirations of authorities provides an alternative perspective on current practice. The research instrument asked a series of questions about local authority strategies towards enhancing public participation. These included some ranking questions that addressed the main purposes of these activities, and some open questions that addressed such issues as social exclusion. Analysing the findings from these questions provides a powerful insight into the aspirations of authorities in relation to their public participation strategies.

Respondents were asked to rank the main purposes of public participation initiatives, from a closed choice of six alternatives. Chart 5 summarises their responses in relation to the three purposes that shed light upon this analysis. The first category, to develop/empower local communities, is that most closely aligned with the aim of building political capacity and unlocking latent social capital. Altogether, 14 per cent of authorities saw this as being the main purpose of participation, while 37 per cent placed it in the top three of rankings. The second category, to increase citizen awareness, has some potential to contribute towards capacity building but only in a very passive way. It is not as strong an indicator of capacity building as the previous category. Only 4 per cent of authorities saw this as a primary
purpose, although more authorities (44 per cent) ranked it in the top three. The third category, to gain information on citizen views, suggests an emphasis upon organisational responsiveness rather than capacity building. In many respects, it is the antithesis of the first category, looking inward towards the organisation’s needs rather than out towards the needs of the community. This category emphasises citizen consultation rather than citizen engagement. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, to find that a third of all authorities see this as the main purpose of participation, while in total, 82 per cent placed this category in their top three. To some extent, the overwhelming emphasis on this purpose explains the limited take-up of deliberative innovations among most authorities. If the main purpose of participation is to gain citizen views on particular topics then consultative methods are much more efficient and effective than deliberative methods. The key message from chart 5, therefore, is that while a substantial minority of authorities do see community development and empowerment as a primary goal of participation initiatives, the vast majority do not. Indeed, for most, the primary purpose is one of consultation, not engagement.

![Chart 5 - The main purposes of participation](image-url)
The other main aspiration that casts some light on the goals of local government participation initiatives, is the extent to which local authorities recognise, and attempt to address, issues of social exclusion within their initiatives. Respondents were asked, in an open question, whether they had experienced problems in involving particular groups. Less than a third (30 per cent) of authorities recognised this as a problem. This is significant, because it not only implies that the majority of authorities (70 per cent) are disinterested in building capacity within and between traditionally excluded groups but, also, that they do not recognise patterns of social exclusion as being a problem for their participation initiatives. Such recognition would appear to be the first step in moving towards participation strategies that address latent social capital. Only 30 per cent of authorities have even made this first step.

Within the 30 per cent of authorities that acknowledged issues of social exclusion, it is interesting to note the different groups that presented the most difficulties for engagement. Chart 6 summarises the distribution of issues within that 30 per cent. Young people and citizens from ethnic minorities are by far the most difficult groups to engage with, although there are some other groups that were also noted. The predominance of these two groups, however, emphasises the limited focus, even, of those who are concerned with issues of
social exclusion. It suggests that even where authorities are seeking to develop strategies for empowering communities, their initiatives are likely to be focused at a relatively narrow group of excluded citizens, rather than at the full range of non-participating citizens. While such strategies are better than none at all, their ability to bridge networks and unlock latent social capital is limited.

So far, the analysis has highlighted a relatively small group of authorities that are experimenting with a range of deliberative innovations; a similarly narrow group that are seeking to empower their communities; and a slightly larger minority group of authorities that are attempting to address patterns of social exclusion, or at least, who recognise such issues as being problematic to participation. This begs the question of whether it is predominantly the same authorities that are represented in each instance? The answer, in short, is that there is some correlation between these three factors but that this is not at a satisfactory level of statistical significance. Of the top 18 per cent of authorities (those operating three or more deliberative innovations), over half of them (55 per cent) claimed empowerment to be one of the main three purposes of participation, compared with 37 per cent of the wider population. Indeed, a quarter of these leading authorities identified empowerment as the main purpose, compared with 14 per cent of the wider population of authorities. Clearly, those authorities that are most advanced in their use of deliberative innovations are more likely to develop a community empowerment focus than those that are not using such methods. However, it is also significant that a substantial proportion (45 per cent) of these same authorities did not consider empowerment to be an important feature of their participation strategies.

A similar pattern emerges in relation to issues of social exclusion. While those authorities operating three or more deliberative innovations demonstrate a higher awareness of the problems associated with involving traditionally marginalised groups (45 per cent of authorities in this group compared with 30 per cent of all authorities), the correlation is not as strong as might have been expected. Indeed, only one tenth of these authorities cover the full spectrum of both empowerment and social exclusion.

These findings are both disappointing and encouraging. They are disappointing in so far as they suggest that only a small percentage of local authorities in Britain have both the capacity and the understanding to address the problems of latent social capital within their
communities. It is encouraging, however, for precisely the same reason. The existence of a core group of local authorities that are capable not only of developing innovatory modes of participation, but also of using these innovations to build democratic capacity within their communities, offers the potential for others to learn from their experiences. While the level of capacity building may not be as great as the overall figures on public participation initiatives at first suggest, it nonetheless provides great scope for further enhancements.

Conclusions

The problem facing local democracy in Britain is one of not only rebuilding adequate political institutions at the local level but also, crucially, of enhancing social capital and political capacity. By recasting the relationship between social capital and government in terms of network access and resources, this paper has argued not only that political capacity is unevenly distributed across communities but, also, that such distribution can be directly influenced through local government participation strategies. In particular, it has argued that those authorities that have developed a wide repertoire of deliberative modes of citizen engagement have demonstrated the most potential in this respect. The research evidence analysed here suggests that a small core of authorities does meet this criterion, and are actively seeking to bridge community divisions and to unlock latent stocks of social capital. However, the vast majority of authorities remain ambivalent towards such ambitions. This ambivalence has important implications not only for local democracy but also for the broader democratic practice.

The empirical evidence has demonstrated widespread differences between authorities in terms of their overall approach towards public participation and, indeed, in the specific arrangements that they have in place. Some authorities are clearly much better positioned to unlock latent stocks of social capital in their communities than others. These most advanced authorities may be better able to bring previously marginalised groups into mainstream political activities, to address divisions across the community and ultimately, to build a more politically competent citizenry. They can achieve this by using deliberative participation initiatives to add resource value to existing social and political networks within their communities. For these leading authorities the opportunity is there for them to unlock latent social capital in order to build political efficacy throughout the community.
For the majority of authorities, however, this opportunity does not exist because their approach to public participation is insufficient to achieve such ambitions. For many, participation is focused around learning from citizens and responding to the broad messages received from them. While such responsiveness may well be laudable, it does nothing to influence the underlying democratic capacity of citizens. For still others, public participation is an optional extra within a predominantly representative mode of government. For these authorities, there is no desire, let alone ability, to change democratic behaviour within communities.

The danger of this division between the leading authorities and the rest is that this process of bottom-up innovation may lead to highly fragmented and differentiated polity in which only a few localities will have the resources and abilities to make effective contributions to political life. The leading authorities are primarily urban or suburban in their nature, concentrating particularly around the principal cities in Britain. Effective democratic developments, therefore, may increasingly be focused within these core cities, leaving the other towns and more rural areas to suffer declining political capacity.

If, as Putnam and others argue, government effectiveness is a factor of high stocks of social capital, then democratic renewal needs to focus particularly upon how to unlock social capital within communities. This, more than any of the attempts to reform the formal institutions of local democracy, is the key challenge facing democratic renewal. As the evidence presented here shows, however, only a very few authorities have the capacity or willingness to address this challenge. The consequences of this variation in approaches to democratic renewal could have consequences that reach far beyond local government, and which strike to the very heart of local democracy.
Notes

1 The research was conducted by Vivien Lowndes, Gerry Stoker, David Wilson, Steve Leach, Melvin Wingfield and the current author, for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). I am grateful to my colleagues, and to the DETR, for their permission to use the data here, although the interpretation placed upon it remains my own.

2 In Scotland and Wales, this position was modified in 1999 by the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, both of which are subject to direct periodic election, although the powers exercised by the different bodies varies significantly. In London, the creation of a directly elected mayor and assembly will also change this position in May 2000. However, the remainder of England, which accounts for over 80 per cent of local authority areas in Britain (354 out of 441), has no intermediate elected tier and no immediate prospect of regional governance.

3 Details of the methods used, and the full findings from the research, are reported in Lowndes et al (1998). Much of the key data is also summarised in Lowndes and Pratchett (forthcoming).

4 Citizens’ panels are a relatively recent innovation in local government. Panels are made up of a statistically representative sample of citizens whose views are sought at regular interviews, normally through some form of survey instrument.

5 Citizens’ juries are an equally recent innovation but operate in stark contrast to panels. They bring together a small group of citizens who hear evidence from expert witnesses as part of a deliberative process, before making a final recommendation on a specific issue. For a more detailed discussion of these and other methods, see Pratchett (1999), Audit Commission (1999), New Economics Foundation (1999) inter alia.

References


Audit Commission (1997) Representing the People: the Role of Councillors London: Audit Commission


