

Formal institutions versus informal decision-making.
On parties, delegation and accountability
in local government
Colin Copus and Gissur Ó. Erlingsson*

Colin Copus
Local Governance Research
Unit, DeMontfort University,
UK

Gissur Ó Erlingsson
Centre for Municipality
Studies, Linköping University,
Sweden

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Abstract

It has been argued that formal institutions are weak in local government. It therefore follows that ideal-typical models of formal institutions that are supposed to regulate behavior in local government are poor at capturing what goes on in local politics. By comparing two different institutional settings – Sweden and England – we demonstrate the importance played by political parties in dominating the informal processes that influence *de facto* decision-making and actual political outcomes in local government. The high degree of informality found in such relatively different systems such as Sweden and England have troublesome implications for democratic accountability. This makes it pressing to explore to what extent citizens' and party members' control over local politics is meaningful even at the local level, where parties operate in close proximity to citizens and where public engagement and participation may be expected to perform at its best.

1. Introduction

In local government, citizens meet the practical side of politics, and local government is governed by political parties. (Hans-Erik Ringkjøb, 2004: 16, our translation)

Textbooks on local politics perhaps naturally display an idealized and simplified view on the practical workings of representative democracy (Nilsson 2001; Bäck 2006). A student of political science typically meets some version of the model below when textbooks illustrate how representative democracy operates in, for example, local government.

This model of local representative democracy begins with citizens having policy preferences, i.e. they have certain *needs* and place specific *demands* on local politics. This takes us to the left flow, *the input-side of politics*. Here we find political parties. One of their primary functions is to detect the diversity of needs and demands citizens have, and bundle these into packages of political issues and policy proposals that subsequently are debated and decided upon in the local council. After decisions are made, we move to the right flow, *the output side of politics*. Here, civil servants and the administrative part of local politics is found, whose task is to implement decisions made in council. Again, citizens are the models' base: they are placed both in the model's input side (as voters, party members, active citizens), and the output side (as users, clients and costumers).

Political parties have a key role in this system. They have historically acquired their importance by having fulfilled a number of crucial functions within

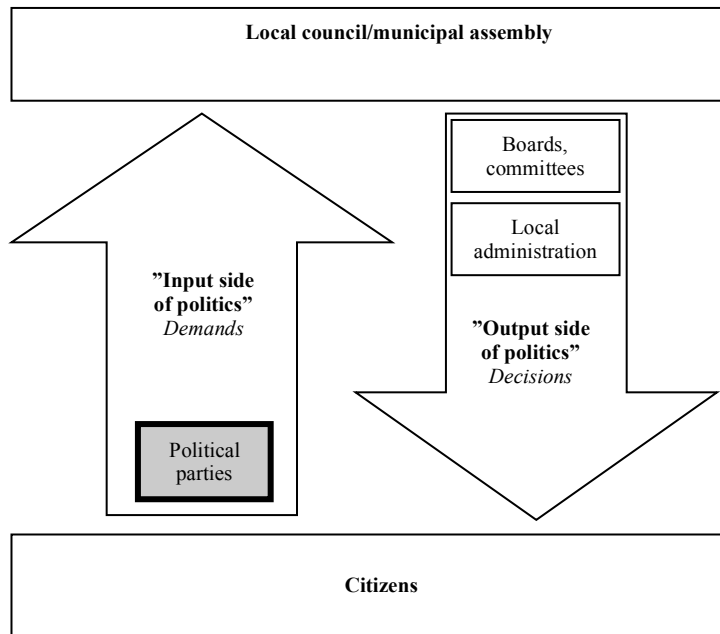
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*Colin Copus is Professor of Local Politics and Director of the Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester, England. His main research interests are: local political leadership, local party politics and the role of the councillor.

Gissur Ó. Erlingsson is Associate professor in Political Science at the Centre for Municipality Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. His research is mainly focused on political parties, populism, institutional change and public corruption.

Figure 1: A formalized view of the workings of local representative democracy



the representative system. They gather individuals with similar political ideas and provide forums for debate amongst the likeminded. They detect demands from civil society, articulate philosophies and policies and bundle these together and re-present them to the voters at elections. They select candidates for public office and provide voters with competing political platforms and political leaders from which to select. Moreover, parties provide a career structure and path for the ambitious local politician. Parties gain their legitimacy as pillars of representative democracy by being crucial links between civil society and political decision-making. Indeed, 70 years ago Schattschneider (1942) maintained that ‘modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties’. More recently, Montero & Gunther (2002: 2f) stated that ‘parties have always been ... absolutely essential for the proper functioning of representative democracy’.

Despite frequently recurring debates about ‘party decline’ and ‘party crisis’, few would question that parties still are the most important actors for the upholding of democratic legitimacy in representative democracies (cf Copus & Erlingsson 2012). Their presence in councils and parliaments guarantee that a political steering is established, and steering by parties – combined with the parties’ own internal (typically more or less informal) procedures for coordination, anchoring and delegation – is the condition for democratically legitimate decision-making in local government..

Although parties undoubtedly have an immense importance, surprisingly little research has been produced about their internal procedures. Several scholars have concurred that little attention has been given to questions about the inner lives of political parties (e.g. Allern & Pedersen 2007; Teorell 1998). Even more importantly, for our purposes there is with, few exceptions, almost no research conducted on local party activity (cf. Clark 2007; Soiminen & Etzler 2006; Copus 2004; Ringkjøb 2004; Buch Jensen 2000; Gezer & Saizs 1999). We argue that the want of research on the inner lives of political parties in local government is damaging for our general understanding of how local representative democracy works in practice.

1.1 Purpose

Bäck (2006) has shown that formal institutions – understood as laws and written rules – are weak in Swedish local government (cf Nilsson 2001). In fact, Karlsson (2012) goes so far as to argue that informal institutions regulate political practice in European local government as a whole. It is well known that when formal institutions are weak, as they typically are in local government, it becomes important to analyse the impact of more or less *informal* processes and the more informal institutions (for example, traditions, norms and embedded ideas) that follow from them. Hence there is a need to study how informal processes affect actual behaviour, actual decision making, political outcomes and democratic accountability. Considering the arguments found in for example Bäck (2006) and Karlsson (2012), it therefore seems pressing to study actual behaviour and informal processes if one wants to gain deeper insights in how local representative democracy operates in practice.

We claim that in local politics, parties and the councillors representing them have a central role in shaping these important informal settings in which political discussion takes place. Informal forum and processes are notoriously ill-defined in comparative studies, because they are difficult to identify, describe, codify and generalise about. Yet, most scholars acknowledge the impact ‘informality’ has on behavior and decision-making. Karlsson (2012), building on the work of Helmke and Levitsky (2004) usefully posits ‘informality’ as a series of interactions of influence between political actors: the Mayor, the Executive Board, parties and leading bureaucrats. We build on this helpful categorisation by stressing the importance of the informality of ‘settings’ and forum within which political interactions take place and the processes themselves.

Here we take the informal settings that exist behind the formal structures of the council, Copus, (1999, 313-15) employs the term ‘theatres of representation’ (a deliberate dramaturgical reference) and distinguishes between the open, formal settings that are legally convened council meetings and the closed private theatres which are the informal private party political settings. Indeed, Copus (2004) has gone as far as to call party group meetings a *formalised informality*. He does this because care is needed in distinguishing between informal settings of political interaction that have their own formal rules, regulations and proce-

dures – such as party groups; and, other informal processes of debate, discussion, influence and pressure, which take place in wholly informal settings with no rules or procedures to shape the interaction. The former settings are informal in the sense that they exist behind and parallel to the formal, electorally legitimised council structure but are not a formal part of it. The latter are informal because they lack structure, regularity and any rules of procedure – other than the unwritten rule of ‘you’ve gone too far this time’. Thus, we have a two dimensional informality of setting and processes both of which help us to understand political behaviour as it displays itself.

The high degree of informality expected to be found in local government has the potential to affect decision-making to a large extent. Idealised models, as the one in figure 1, are simply unable to capture what really goes on beyond the formal institutions. It is therefore of paramount interest to gain deeper knowledge of the internal workings of political parties – how they coordinate their politics internally, and how their anchorage and delegation of powers work in practice – if we want to be able to assess, for instance, democratic accountability in local government. With Karlsson’s formulations alongside our own conceptualisation of a two dimensional informality we can explore party political interactions with a firm understanding of the power of informal processes and influence.

The purpose of this article is then, in an explorative manner, to go beyond the formal models of representative democracy and attempt to examine the degree informality in local government decision-making. We do this by focusing on the internal workings of political parties. We compare Sweden with England¹, systems that have a different set of formal institutions and constitutional setting for local government as this enables us to discuss informality in local government and the degree of democratic accountability, in more general terms: the more similarities we find from these different systems the more generalisable will be our concluding discussion on democratic accountability in local government.

1.2 Material and methodology

We have chosen to focus on Sweden primarily, and relate these experiences with findings from England to find differences and similarities. The two settings are interesting to compare for several reasons.

Firstly, they share basic characteristics. Both have a long history of representative democracy and of strong, democratically elected local government. In both settings, local government is responsible for a broad range of services and local functions. Hence they represent a ‘northern’ type of local government, differing from the ‘southern’ type in several ways (i.e. fewer levels of government; smaller numbers of local authorities; a larger average size of councils; fewer councillors in comparison to ‘Southern type’ local government; and, councils which provide, or are responsible for, a wide range of welfare services,

whereas in the ‘southern’ type local government welfare has been a function of regional or central government).

Secondly, we focus on Sweden and England because the parties within these countries face different political opportunity structures, which can be expected to have an impact on organisational, behavioural and procedural aspects of local politics: Sweden has an at-large list PR system for local elections where councillors are provided with what can be assumed as a clear municipality-wide mandate to govern (or oppose); while England uses first-past-the-post, simple plurality, with councils divided into electoral sub-districts known as ‘wards’ (or divisions in county councils) which elect councillors to represent the interest of that ward. Councillors then assume a municipality-wide mandate when their party secures a majority of seats. England also has a mixed system of elections where councils can hold annual elections for a third of their members, bi-annual elections for half their members or four yearly elections for all members; every year sees one sort of local election or another.

The different political opportunity structures give rise to two rather different sets of party systems. Typically more than eight parties are represented in Swedish local councils, whilst in England, we traditionally see three parties represented, even though in some cases independents or some local groups or small national parties may secure seats. Where they do however, a single party with an overall majority is still the norm. Currently, of 352 English councils only 48 do not have a single party with an overall majority of seats – and those are not all governed by coalitions as over half of the 48 have single-party minority administrations.

We explore if it is reasonable to assume that these differences will have an impact on the degree of informality, and hence accountability found in our two systems. Equally, we explore if the assumption that decision-making is expected to be more complicated and affected by informality in systems with many rather than few parties, since here, between-party negotiations behind closed doors could be thought to be more frequent as inter-party positions have to be negotiated and agreed – unlike where a single party has an overall majority.

The countries also differ in terms of the degree of autonomy their local levels have. Although the *de facto*-extent of it can be debated (see Dahlkvist & Strandberg 1999), local autonomy is traditionally described as comparatively strong in Sweden. In England, local government lacks the most basic constitutional rights, including even the right to continued existence. In addition to legislative and financial control wielded over councils by central government, local government has also been subject to judge made rules through the doctrine of *Ultra Vires*. Councils until very recently have only been able to carry out those activities for which a clear and specific statutory right exists; without legislative permission, councils’ actions can be struck down by the courts. The Localism Act 2011 however, gave English councils a general power of competence and the power ‘to do anything that individuals generally may do’ (S.O. 2011. p. 1). The general power is a new feature and is yet to be tested by councils or in the courts to see if the latter will interpret this new power in the same way that it

appears it has been intended by Parliament. The differing levels of autonomy that exist between the two systems of local government could also be assumed to see differing levels of system informality, given the nature of the political choices and powers available, with more power assuming more informality.

Thus, we compare countries that share some characteristics, but also have some important distinctive elements: much of their formal institutional scaffolding differs. The differences in formal institutions would lead one to assume that we will find differences when it comes to the degree of informality and hence accountability, where informality – given the reasoning above – is expected to be more pronounced in Sweden than in England. But, if Sweden and England show similar tendencies relating to informality in decision-making within political parties in local government, this generates insights as to how far-reaching informal processes matter for political decision-making, generally. Hence, it gives relevant information about how the degree of informality in local decision-making potentially affects democratic accountability.

The material we have used in order to answer the questions posed here, is mainly (though not exclusively) derived from secondary sources, i.e. two previous extensive literature reviews, qualitative research and case studies undertaken by the authors of this article – primarily set out in Copus (2004) and Erlingsson's (2008). This work shares a common empirical focus, and poses similar questions in the Swedish and the English context, hence, the results found in these analyses are interesting to compare.²

1.3 Outline

In this introductory section, we have outlined the premises, defined the research problem and formulated the aim of this article. We will fulfill this aim by assessing how legitimate the exercise of power in local government is through answering four kinds of questions, in section two. We ask if (a) citizens perceive that political parties (and councillors representing them) in local government are good at picking up their needs and demands; (b) to what extent non-councillors have can influence the politics formulated in councils; (c) whether or not there is a concentration of power within the council groups; and (d) where the locus of power is located between politicians and civil servants in local politics. In the third and concluding section, we present our main results and discuss the implications of our findings for democratic accountability in local government.

2. How legitimate is the exercise of power in local government?

Paraphrasing the Swedish constitution, Petersson (1990) once wrote: 'All power begins with the people – but where does it go after that?' The answer to this question is important, because it tells us something crucial about the way we choose to organise our representative democracies. As Dahl (1999) has pointed

out, representative systems are always based on a division of labour. Citizens *delegate* political power in public elections; from themselves to the political parties and their elected officials. What the ideal-type models of representative systems – such as figure 1 above – are unable to capture, is the fact that delegation of powers are extremely far-reaching in modern representative systems. A similar conclusion can be drawn about local government. The power originates from the individual citizens, who in turn vote for political parties and the candidates parties have chosen to represent them. After that, the elected council groups within each party choose which of their councilors should represent the party in various boards and committees and who becomes the local political leader. In turn, the local political elite will further delegate power to chief executives and top civil-servants within the local administration. These, then, delegate power further down in the local administrative bureaucracy, all the way to the street-level bureaucrats whose task is to implement the decisions made in the municipality. All in all, even in local government, there is a lot of delegation.

For several reasons, it is important that the processes of delegation works according to democratically legitimate procedures. As Dahl (1999) argues, if this is not the case, the delegation of powers may be so far-reaching in a representative system, that it is questionable whether or not the representative system should be labeled as 'democratic'.

If we summarise and analyse previous empirical research that touch upon questions relating to informality and delegation processes in local government – is it reasonable to say that local government in Sweden and England works according to democratically legitimate principles? The way we analytically answer this question (and hence, indirectly, examine the degree of informality in local government) is to break our overarching question down to four separate ones:

- Do citizens perceive that political parties in local government are good at picking up their needs and demands, and do they trust their local politicians?
- To what extent do party members have the possibility to influence the politics that councillors formulate in local politics on a day-to-day basis?
- Is there a concentration of power within the council groups, so that so called 'lay politicians' in council have little influence over council cabinets and leaders?
- How does the balance of power between politics and public administration look like in Swedish and English local government, i.e., where is the locus of power located between politicians and civil servants?

2.1 Do parties in local government pick up preferences, demands and needs?

Do the public perceive that their possibilities to approach parties in local government with their needs and demands are good? A survey from 2004, *Jag hör av mig...* (2004) gives a negative answer: only 22 percent agree with the state-

ment ‘I believe I would be successful if I try to exert influence on local politics’. Conversely, and quite disheartening, 63 percent believe that trying to exert influence locally would be in vain. In the same investigation, 45 percent respondents state that they do not believe that local politicians would listen to citizen demands. Perhaps even more depressingly: 39 percent think that local politicians are not even interested in promoting the common good for the municipality as a whole. These results confirm the tendency found in somewhat older survey based studies (cf Möller 1999: 37ff; Bäck 2000: 11f): distrust in parties and local councillors are widespread locally. Hence, one of the more important functions of political parties – detecting demands from civil society – is not perceived by the public to work properly at the local level.

Ten years before the *Jag hör av mig*-survey, the British Social Attitudes survey (Young & Rao, 1995), asked a very similar question, with 38 percent agreeing that they could have some influence over local affairs, if only they tried. Moreover, echoing the Swedish findings, 47 percent felt that councillors lose touch with people very quickly after they have been elected; and, 36 percent felt councillors did not care much what people thought, locally. That figure rose to just over 40 percent in the 1998 survey. The 1994 survey found attitudes towards the party system in local government where fairly evenly spread with respondents split by thirds between supporting a party system, a non-party system and those that did not know. In the 2001 survey under 20 percent of respondents felt that they could influence the council to bring about some improvement to the area. In sum: a weary cynicism about local councillors and local political efficacy seems to be a common theme in both English and Swedish local democracy.

2.2 Do party members influence the politics of council groups?

In a representative system, which primarily is based on the activities of political parties, should we worry too much about dissatisfaction with political parties and councillors locally? After all, the system is based on a division of labour: voters elect their councillors to represent them in council. Besides from voting every fourth year (in Sweden), and sometime annually and every two years (in England), the primary way to affect politics in general and local politics in particular, is to engage oneself as an active member in a party represented on the local council. In fact, the system is deliberately designed in such a way that in ‘off-election democracy’, citizens are supposed to try to influence politics as party members through political parties. This has also, gradually, become the way local councillors perceive how democracy ought to work: when asked, Swedish councillors in general say that councillors should be loyal to their party – not their voters, geographical district, or their own personal convictions (Bäck 2000; Fredriksson 2003; *Sveriges kommuner och landsting* 2005). Hence, at least empirically, local democracy revolves around parties and party loyalty.

Again, in England, the results of surveys about group loyalty are very similar to the Swedish ones, with councillors overwhelmingly and across parties, expressing loyalty to their party group rather than their voters (Copus, 2001; 2004). Councilors from the Conservative and Labour Parties express the greatest

degree of party group loyalty. The Liberal Democrats, by contrast, while still expressing high degree of group loyalty, also claim that they would back their voters. Remarkably few councillors, however, had ever actually backed their voters (and not their party) in concrete instances. Councillors also clearly distinguish between where they are more likely to back their voters: that is not in formal council settings rather in informal and unobservable interactions and meetings – they also distinguish between the acts of speaking and voting when it comes to tensions with group and party loyalty and articulated community views.

As a result we can, for now, take these premises for granted:

- Citizens, in general, do not think that parties and councillors have a sensitive ear to citizens' needs and demands and distrust parties and councillors.
- Councillors are, first and foremost, loyal to their political parties.
- In the representative system citizens primary chance to affect politics off-election time, is as members of political parties.

If accepted, these premises make it analytically motivated to take a step inside the local party organisations, and ask whether or not parties have well-functioning procedures for delegation and anchoring, i.e., that decisions made at the top of the party local organisation are perceived as legitimate among grass-root members. As Gidlund & Möller (1999: 67) point out, since most of what happens in party meetings is about what goes on in the municipality's politics, there is always a risk that meetings are dominated by councillors who have had the time and resources to familiarise themselves with the questions that are being debated at member meetings. Thus, 'ordinary members' (i.e. non-councillors) are less able to influence council decisions – in much the same way as the frustrations expressed by the voters to earlier surveys. It cannot be assumed however, that party members are inarticulate, shrinking violets that refrain from robust party interaction – if that were the case, why join in the first place? But, given the power and resource imbalance between councillors and party members decisions made by councillors are grounded in a one-sided debate and discussion with party members, let alone with members of the public

The conclusions found in Montin (2004: 65) support this view. The policies put forward by a party in the council are generally formulated by the politicians in the party council groups. The links between the council groups and party members are weak. Input from party members on actual decision-making in the council group is scant (cf Montin & Olsson 1994: 45; Leach 2006). As Nilsson (2001: 18) concludes: it is the councillors, especially those leading council groups, who decide which issues are on the political agenda in local government. At least in part, this concentration of power in local politics may well have to do with the citizen's growing lack of interest in organised party politics. Local party organisations have continually reported difficulties recruiting members to stand as candidates (Gidlund & Möller 1999), and parties' membership figures have dropped drastically throughout the past 20-30 years (Petersson 2005; Karlsson & Lundberg 2009).

In England, during the 1980s, the situation was fundamentally different. During what was termed by the national press as the ‘Loony Left’ domination of Labour groups by a particular type of urban, professional, left-wing and minority focused party activist, some English council Labour groups gave speaking and voting rights to delegates elected from the local party to attend group meetings. Thus party members not holding formal elected office and therefore unaccountable to the public, were able to take part in making council decisions in the informal setting of the group meeting. Moreover, an image was created – which did not on occasions match reality – of local government trade union representatives being among those unelected party members attending group meetings. These party members were seen to be only pursuing the interests of council workers. While much of the media focus on external influence on councillors was exaggerated the pressure generated led to a reaction against excessive member interference in council affairs – party members, after all were precisely that: just members – *not* elected councillors. Party rules today have become much stricter about the role of non-councillors attending group meetings, who do so as observers without voting rights. But, by speaking in debates, party members may of course influence the final decisions taken in group meetings, which are then made as formal decisions in formal council meetings.

Here, it is important to note that there is a fine line between healthy, open, inclusive debate, among party colleagues, whether councillors or not, and elected members being pressurised by sectarian forces within parties to adopt a particular line and if failing to do so face possible de-selection as a candidate at the next election. Therefore, lack of member influence on the policies of elected councillors should not automatically be seen as something negative or undemocratic but something which reflects a difference of political status between voluntary party workers and their fellows who have been elected to office and hold a position sanctioned through the public vote. This is an integral part of the division of labour that is necessary in a representative democracy.

Within representative democracy party members have an advantage over the ordinary, non-active voter. They are close to councillors and interact with them on a regular basis; they meet and work with them in various party meetings (many of which are formally constituted by party rules, but which are not part of the formal council decision-making processes) in which political issues are considered and local policy debated and within which decisions begin to be formulated. Party members interact with councillors in social, pleasure, business or other informal settings in which social ties are strengthened, political capital accumulated and expended and influence wielded. The ordinary voter lacks these opportunities, typically being able to influence the councillor only at election time or through formal council consultation processes.

Thus, limitations on the ability of party members to influence through informal settings and process the activities of councillors merely redress a balance for the ordinary voter who is not a party member. A professionalisation of local politics that distances local political leaders from party members may be frustrating for members. But, given that only a membership fee and political interest

separates members from non-members, some limitation on member influence does not necessarily undermine the functioning of democratic party politics; rather opens parties up to the need to communicate with a wider group of voters, or suffer further decline.

There are two competing hypotheses to explain an obvious concentration of power in local government. The first that we are moving from ideologically cohesive mass parties (where member involvement once, allegedly, was great) to a more catch-all oriented, electoral professional party model where the few remaining members are not that active or even particularly interested in influencing politics (Panebianco 1988). The public do not want to be party members and those who do, are not interested in becoming active (i.e. standing as candidates, attending meetings etc.). Indeed, many politicians themselves perceive the problem of power concentrated into the hands of few (cf Buch Jensen 2000). The reverse hypothesis turns the causality around: it is because of the concentration of power within parties that people no longer want to engage in party politics, since it does not matter what they do: the party elites do not listen or want their involvement (cf Soinen & Etzler 2006: 70; Nielsen 2001: 69, 74; Håkansson 1995). Indeed, one of the authors of this article, as a party member, was once told when moving to a new area that the local party was 'full up' and that it did not require any new members!

2.3 Concentration of power *within* the council groups?

Previous research has shown that party members have very little, if any, influence over the day-to-day politics that councillors carry out in council and other institutions of local government (boards, committees, cabinets). How do things, then, work *within* the individual council groups? A rather large body of evidence indicates that even here, among councillors, we find considerable delegation of power. What is often referred to as 'lay politicians'/backbenchers delegate power to a small 'elite' of councillors to represent the party group in boards, committees, informal negotiations with external bodies – in other words to provide local political leadership.

If we look at the formal statutes in Sweden, The Swedish Local Government Act states that the municipal council (*kommunfullmäktige*) is *the* highest decision making body in the municipality. Almost all of the councillors in the assemblies are 'lay politicians'/backbenchers of the kind described above (about 97 percent of the circa 13 000 local politicians do not get paid for their political activity, merely reimbursed for salary lost as a consequence for their involvement). Since the mid-1960s, however, scholars and public commissions of inquiries have repeatedly argued, and also criticised, that most important decisions in the municipalities are *not* made in the municipal assemblies (cf Wergenius 1966; SOU 1993:90; SOU 1996:169; SOU 2001:48; see also Montin 2006). A survey with councillors from 2005 (*Sveriges kommuner och landsting* 2005) supports this assertion. In general, councillors agree with this way of portraying decision-making in local government. Council is described as stripped from power, and

perhaps depressingly from a democratic point of view, most of the ‘lay politicians’/backbenchers do not feel that they can influence local politics.

Studies have indicated that lay politicians’/backbenchers’ perceived lack of influence is related to the fact that in Sweden, there is a concentration of power in the hands of the few part-time and full-time councillors, i.e., the local leadership (SOU 1996:169; SOU 2001:48). About half of all local councillors state that full-time politicians have too much influence over local politics (SOU 2001:38:140). Many claim that the concentration of power in local politics is a serious democratic problem, which, drove the Swedish *Demokratiutredningen* (SOU 2000:1: 150) to conclude that local politics must be ‘broken’ evidenced by important decisions *not* being made in the democratically legitimised forum of the municipal council meeting. The real and important decisions are made in the municipal board, in committees, and perhaps most damaging for democratic legitimacy – in informal negotiations behind closed doors, particularly in the private meetings of party groups (see also Andersson & Eck 2005; Wrenne 1997).

While in England the full council is still, in theory, the prime body of the municipality, the introduction of local cabinet government via the Local Government Act 2000 has seen a shift of power toward executives. Council cabinets are limited to 10 seats – whatever the size of the council membership. So, Birmingham City Council an elected body of 120 councillors and nearby Cannock Chase Council with 42 members, both have the same 10 member cabinet limitation. Council cabinets have formalised the previously informal system where service committee chairs would often meet and act as a nascent cabinet – with no formal executive powers. It is clear from surveys that councillors recognise the concentration of power in the cabinet (Stoker, *et al*, 2003).

Even before the 2000 Act introduced cabinet government to English councils, the Widdicombe Committee (1986) recognised the trend for councillors to be able to become ‘full-time’ making a living from their council allowance. Today, in England, councillors receive a basic allowance and a special responsibility allowance depending on the council positions they hold. It is not unheard of for council leaders and cabinet members to be part-time and to be in full-time employment; equally, many back-bencher councillors will be full-time and not in work outside of the council.

2.4 Is the locus of local political power in hands of politicians or civil servants?

We know that there is little grass-root anchoring of the decisions made in Swedish or English local government. Moreover, power is generally concentrated in the hands of a small political elite. That trend is consistent between the two countries. A crucial question from a democratic point of view is – although power seems concentrated in the hands of a small local elite of politicians – does the locus of power rest with the elected *politicians*, or do local civil servants have much political initiative and power.

No doubt, politicians' dependence upon civil servants is far-reaching in local government. In the beginning of the 1990s, Blom (1994) concluded that the relationship between higher civil servants and local politicians was unbalanced in Sweden, i.e. that civil servants had considerable influence over the political agendas and actual policies. In *Sveriges kommuner och landsting* (2005: 11), the authors argue that since executives within the local bureaucracy typically have university degrees and long work experience, they have a huge advantage vis-à-vis politicians. Their relative influence is further strengthened by the fact that they (depending on which policy area they are working within) often have the ability to refer to written law and other public authority instructions that regulate local government. In addition, there is no formal institutional regulation giving guidelines as to where the politicians responsibilities end, and the civil servants begin (see Wetterberg 2004), which gives higher civil servants considerable room for maneuver to take own initiatives.

In the beginning of the 1990s, many scholars found that the locus of power had moved from politicians to civil servants, and that most of the important decisions were initiated from within the public administration (e.g. Pierre 1995). This, one can argue, is the logical consequence of a process that started when large scale amalgamations of municipalities took place between 1962 and 1974. The bureaucracies in municipalities grew, the number of civil servants increased and public administration became more professionalised. The hypothesis, that civil servants have become more politically powerful at the expense of politicians, receives support in empirical research. For instance, councillors perceive that civil servants have a stronger influence over the budgetary process throughout 1980-1993 (Bäck 2000). Montin (2004) maintains that being a 'lay politician'/backbencher entails participating in assemblies to vote yes or no to proposals written by civil servants. In the survey *Sveriges kommuner och landsting* (2005), 58 percent of the councillors express the view that their role in local decision-making is to react to proposals made by civil servants, and almost half think that civil servants are often making decisions in areas that should be the reserve of elected politicians.

In England, Leach (2010) provides a suitably nuanced view of the interactions between politicians and chief executives in local government. He describes a fine balancing act between chief executives, who by the very nature of advising also influence councillors, but do so from an understanding of what the elected members wish to achieve. While that balance can be maintained, it works, but should chief executives be too closely identified with a particular party or leadership and should the controlling party or leader change, or leaders and chief executives reach a policy impasse, the chief executive can face enormous pressure to leave his post. It is difficult for councillors to formally remove chief executives (as, for example, the newly elected mayor of Leicester City has found) – so, more subtle techniques (or not so subtle) are required to encourage the chief executive to move on. What is clear is that while officers wield considerable influence and power over local affairs, they cannot push too much against the wishes of the elected councillor. Council cabinets have gone some way to

redressing any imbalance between the appointed and the elected official, but while any councillor – cabinet member or not – receives advice and information from only one source – their officers – that source will remain one of considerable power – albeit unelected and unaccountable to the voter. Indeed, part of the councillor’s job must be to hold the appointed bureaucracy to account.

3. Conclusions and implications

Formal institutions tend to be weak at the local level (Karlsson 2012). Hence informal processes – typically dominated by parties and the councillors representing them – are expected to have a significant impact on decision-making and therefore a large effect on actual political outcomes. We have argued that if enough interesting patterns can be found between Sweden and England – countries that have different formal institutions regulating local government – this would make it possible generalise on the democratic legitimacy of decisions in local government. If decisions are made, and policy determined, away from the gaze of not only the public, but also most grass root party members and given formal decision-making structures such as executive boards and cabinets, even away from backbenchers and full council meetings, then the transparency, visibility and legitimacy of local democracy is undermined.

To explore informality in local government, we posed four specific questions, if: (a) citizens perceive that political parties (and the councillors representing them) are good at picking up their needs and demands; (b) non-councillors can influence the politics formulated in councils; (c) there is a concentration of power within the council groups; and (d) where the locus of power is located between politicians and civil servants in local politics? We also recognise that political informality is two dimensional: processes of debate, discussion, deliberation and interaction are one dimension within which political actors operate; settings, places, locations or theatres of representation are the second dimension, but that one – debate, exists in the other - place. These two dimensions can be used to explain the power of informality within local politics.

Despite differences regarding formal institutions, interesting patterns and similarities emerge between the Swedish and the English experiences. In neither country does the public perceive that political parties and the councillors representing them are particularly good at detecting and articulating their demands and needs. In Sweden and England, the parties’ council groups are detached from party organisation and grass-root party members and particularly in England party groups are a decision-making setting which runs parallel to the council’s own formal structures. In general, the issues represented by councillors, and the decisions they make are not well anchored among the parties’ grass-roots. Within the group of councillors representing each party, there is tendency towards a concentration of power in the hands of a small local party elite where backbencher influence is reduced accordingly.

Looking beyond the formal institutions regulating local government, and the ideal-type, simplified models over the functioning of representative democracy

(such as figure 1 in the introduction), our findings make it obvious that there is considerable delegation of mandate and power. This is true even in local government, in both Sweden and England, where parties, their members and elected councillors, operate in close proximity to each other and somewhat removed from local citizens. Furthermore, survey evidence suggests that the most important decisions are *not* made in formal arenas or formal meetings (such as the council, itself), rather in informal party group pre-meetings or through negotiations among top-politicians – all of which takes place behind closed doors. Informality, then, seems to be the rule rather than exception when it comes to decision-making in local government.

Extensive delegation from citizens to parties, from party members to councillors and from councillors to groups of political leaders has far-reaching implications for local accountability and democracy. In the survey research, we have seen that even in local government – where decision-making is made close to the citizens affected by the decisions – delegation of power is extensive. At the end of the day, citizens, party members and ‘lay politicians’/backbenchers become rather detached from the most important decision-making, whilst a small political-administrative elite of councillors and chief-executives/top civil servants have the power to make the overarching strategic decisions – again, behind closed doors. It is clear that in local government, unelected chief executives/top civil servants can and do exert political influence and are able to shape the agendas and policies of the council to a large degree.

How should these findings be judged from a normative perspective? An advocate of some version of Schumpeterian *elite democracy* (Schumpeter 1942, also Sartori, 1962) would, perhaps, not worry too much about the extent of distance placed between representatives and represented and between senior and back-bench councillors in local government. An adherent of this model of democracy does not have to care too much about citizens’ or grass root-party members active involvement in collective decision-making outside of elections. Competitive elitism requires that the voter only participate when choosing their governors and even apathy has been defended as it results in those with no interest or knowledge of politics refraining from involvement in that which they do not understand (Morris-Jones, 1954).

But, today citizen apathy and disengagement is seen as undermining democracy and the legitimacy of elected representatives – more so the closer those representatives are to the public as in local government. Thus, an advocate of some version of *mass party based* – or *participatory democracy* (cf. Pateman 1970) – should be troubled by the findings reported here. Moreover, central governments have also focused on the disengagement of the citizen from local government as a way to pressure local government in to changing its practices, but also as a way of further drawing powers up from localities to the centre. The way in which local political decision-making has become detached from communities and citizens should make proponents for grass-root involvement argue for reforms so that citizens can be more actively involved in local democracy outside election times.

But are moves towards participatory forms of democracy required to strengthen the legitimacy of local decision making the way to go? Some tentative findings, at least from the Swedish context, tend to give a negative answer. Evaluations of reforms towards more participatory forms of democracy have been far from successful. Indeed, opinion polls have shown that most Swedes prefer representative democracy over forms that demand their active involvement in decision-making (cf Gilljam & Jodal 2002; 2005; see also Erlingsson 2008: 18). Instead of more unsuccessful attempts to make citizens more active and involved in municipal affairs, perhaps politicians should embrace the fact that, to strengthen local representative democracy political parties need to be revitalised as arenas for participation and debate. Energy and resources should be directed towards rebuilding and strengthening political parties, making them more attractive for people to join and become active within them. .

Still, the similarity of our findings from two different systems of local government in Sweden and England stress the importance for local politics of informal processes and settings over the formal. Political behaviour is shaped by setting and process and informal interactions between councillors and party members far outweigh the role of formal democratic structures and procedures. Thus, through informality a culture of secrecy and exclusion can develop within local politics. As much local political debate and decision-making takes place through our two informal dimensions of politics away from the public gaze, serious questions are raised about the legitimacy, accountability and of course the transparency of local government. It is likely that local politicians and their parties will always seek to conduct business through informal and more or less secret settings and processes, in whatever nation they are located. The response from councillors and local political leaders as to whether such informality is a necessary process vital to the conduct of politics, or merely habitual behaviour that damages legitimacy and accountability, will continue shape the nature of local politics for some time to come.

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Notes

¹ The focus here is on English, not British government, as since devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1998, a process from which England was excluded; there are differences between the systems of local government that make a 'British' comparison inappropriate. Scotland and Wales, for example, have all unitary, single tier councils, while England has a mix of unitary and two-tier council areas; the local voting system in Scotland is the single-transferable vote, while England retains simple plurality voting. Local government in Scotland and Wales deals directly with their devolved regional chambers, while local government in England must deal with the British central state.

² The case study material in Erlingsson (2008) is built on interviews with centrally positioned politicians within the two largest parties (Social Democrats and the Moderates) in two Swedish municipalities: one rather small with ca 10 000 inhabitants (where a center-right majority ruled and a Moderate was the chairman of the municipal board), and one fairly large with ca 50 000 inhabitants (where a left-green majority ruled and a Social Democrat was the chairman of the municipal board). In Copus (2004), much the same approach as taken: cabinet members from the largest party in two English councils were interviewed. The first a small council (comparatively speaking as English councils are some of the largest units of local government in Europe) with a population of around 35,000 inhabitants and controlled by the Conservative Party. The second council was Labour controlled with a population of just under 75 000. Besides from the case studies and literature reviews carried out in these two studies, this article is also based on a review article of research on parties in local government (Copus and Erlingsson, forthcoming).