

An Elite Approach to Institutional Analysis of Local Government: Local Governing Codes and the Local Political Leadership Reform Process in the UK

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Abstract

As Lowndes and Wilson (2004) have observed, the implementation of local political leadership reforms in the UK was 'diverse yet limited'. Following on from previous institutional analyses that have sought to explain this outcome, this paper seeks to offer fresh insights by offering an elite approach adapted from Bulpitt's statecraft interpretation. At the heart of this approach is the local governing code concept; in other words, the rules of the game employed formally and informally by the local political elite. The paper argues that the diversity and path dependent nature of these codes goes some way to explaining the implementation trajectory of the reforms. The failure of central government to offer a viable alternative code is also significant. The paper concludes by discussing the implications for research and policy.

Introduction

Institutional analysis has become an increasingly influential means of understanding changes affecting local government. 'New institutionalism' in particular offers tools 'well suited to analysing current patterns of change and continuity in local governance' (Lowndes and Wilson 2003, p. 279). Illustrations can be found in the journal *Local Government Studies* where numerous articles have sought to use institutions as a means both to describe and to explain local government reform processes in an international context. In the UK, the local government modernisation programme of the last Labour Government and its associated meta-evaluation programme have offered up a rich source of research material and research problems (Downe and Martin 2008; Laffin 2008). This virtual laboratory has certainly provided a valuable opportunity for various institutionalist approaches to be tested. What follows represents yet another venture into this territory. Specifically, this paper offers an elite take on institutional analysis inspired by Bulpitt's statecraft interpretation. The intention is not to produce a critique of previous approaches, or to describe new evidence but rather to suggest an alternative conceptual perspective in order to offer 'new and fresh insights that other frameworks or perspectives might not have offered' (Judge *et al.* 1995, p. 3). In order to bring focus and keep the material manageable, one strand of the UK Labour government's modernisation reforms is used to illustrate the approach; the reform of local political leadership. First it is important to say a little about the nature of these reforms and why they present a challenge for researchers.

The UK Labour Government's recent local government modernisation programme sought to change both the style and the tasks of local political leadership. In terms of leadership style, the intention was to create a 'strong and individualised form of leadership', less wedded to the interests of local party politics and more concerned with the interests of the local area (Lowndes and Leach 2004). In terms of leadership tasks, the idea of community leadership captured the need for local political leaders to 'engage citizens in the determination of community priorities, provide strategic leadership and develop the collaborative potential of other local agencies' (Sullivan *et al.* 2006, p. 489).

However, despite continued pressure for change, the modernisation reforms did not have the effect intended by government. As Lowndes and Leach (2004) note, of the different options offered to local councils as a replacement for the old committee system, councils overwhelmingly chose the 'leader and cabinet' model, which meant the least change, with less than three per cent opting for the most radical model; the directly elected mayor. Furthermore, the implementation of the reforms by local councils reflected diversity both in the ways that roles were interpreted and in the tasks that were prioritised. In terms of the main provisions of the 2000 Act they conclude that: 'The impact of the legislation is neither dramatic nor uniform, despite the government's bold intent and clear vision of its ideal type (Lowndes and Leach 2004, pp. 559-559). Similarly, Gains *et al.* found that, whilst there was some evidence of change, 'many of the institutional attributes of the past system have been replicated in most but not all of the new political management structures' (2005, p. 26). Follow up survey evidence suggests further trends. First, and perhaps most significant, there appears to have been more impact upon the style of leadership than upon the tasks of leadership. Whilst the initial response to the 2000 Local Government Act was cautious, between 2002-6 the institutional changes required of local government, such as cabinet style

decision making, had led to changes that were ‘generally in the direction of stronger leadership’ (Gains *et al.* 2009, p. 81). They conclude that, overall, institutional changes ‘have had some impact upon the way that decisions are made and the strength of leadership but little influence on the issues of accountability and partnership working’ (Gains *et al.* 2009, p. 84). Further trends suggested by this research were that urban authorities were more cautious in implementing the reforms, councils where there was no overall majority were less likely to grant leaders additional formal powers and Conservative councils appeared to have been more likely to give powers to leaders. Overall, however, there was little support for the modernisation reforms among Labour councillors, let alone those from other political parties ‘who mostly responded in a passive-aggressive way’ (Laffin 2008, p. 120).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to offer an elite interpretation of why these modernisation reforms of local political leadership were, in the words of Lowndes and Leach (2004); ‘diverse yet limited’. It does this in three stages. First, the two institutional interpretations directed specifically at the implementation of the reforms are outlined. Second, elite theory, and specifically the work of Jim Bulpitt, is used to develop the framework for a third institutional interpretation which places centre stage the concept of the ‘local governing code’; in other words the rules of the game employed formally and informally by the local political elite. Whilst the governing code concept is far from new it has not, as far as the author is aware, been systematically applied before to the field of local politics. Third, this elite interpretation is set out as an alternative explanation of the implementation of the modernisation reforms. The paper concludes by briefly discussing the implications for theory and practice.

The Modernisation Reforms: Two Institutional Interpretations

In seeking to explain why the modernisation reforms had such a ‘diverse yet limited impact’, Lowndes and Leach apply a new institutionalist framework to case study evidence in order to gather ‘thicker descriptions’ of the ‘relationships between structure, context and agency in local political leadership’ (Lowndes and Leach 2004, p. 560). This approach stresses the importance of; informal as well as formal institutional rules; the prevailing institutional environment, both political and otherwise; and the way in which change in institutions is mediated through the actions of individuals and is a creative, negotiated and contested process. Their interpretation highlights the importance of both local circumstances and the capabilities of individual leaders in explaining the limited impact upon political leadership behaviour of structural changes and the introduction of new formal powers. They argue that:

‘...it is in the interaction between constitutions, contexts and capabilities that explanations for particular leadership outcomes can be found. New institutions for local political leadership are emerging, but ‘rules-in-use’ tend to be creative, if pragmatic, combinations of diverse institutional elements – old and new, formal and informal. (Lowndes and Leach 2004, p. 573)

It is, then, the highly specific and unpredictable nature of institutional dynamics from one council to another that explains the failure of top down reforms to achieve intended outcomes. It follows from this that structural changes need to be accompanied by flexible institutional designs that can be adapted to suit specific circumstances and to work with those individuals and resources supportive of change. This ‘circumstance and capability’ interpretation is, however, questioned by Gains *et al.* (2009) who point both to an extensive literature on political leadership and to survey evidence to argue that institutional reforms,

such as those associated with local government modernisation in the UK, can and do generate widespread changes to leadership behaviour. Specifically they suggest that Lowndes and Leach's over reliance on case study material makes it more difficult for them to see broader trends and that the importance of institutional factors 'is pervasive and enduring; it is to be found in patterns of variation across contexts and sustained over periods of time' (Gains *et al.* 2009, pp. 77-78).

Gains *et al.* suggest an alternative interpretation that retains context and capabilities as important influences but places a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership and institutional design as enablers of change. This interpretation, also firmly located within the framework of institutional analysis, places centre stage the concept of path dependency as an explanation as to why local councils have been resistant to change. In a nutshell, path dependency, 'captures the tendency for a policy step in one direction to encourage the next step to be in a similar direction' (Gains *et al.* 2005, p. 27). The concept is given greater theoretic depth through the idea of the 'logic of increasing returns', in other words, the perceptions that institutional actors have of the benefits that follow from pursuing a particular path and, conversely, of the increasing cost of changing from it. This idea can provide a means of understanding both the nature of the resistance to change and of understanding the tipping points at which actors in individual institutions might prefer change to the status quo. Whilst system shocks may provide the necessary imperative for change this is not the only way that change can happen. Importantly, institutions are not fixed in time but are constantly being reproduced by actors and it is this process of reproduction that provides the opportunity for small changes to become embedded and developed. Where new models evolve and are seen to be successful this may create incentives for change for others who perceive that they must adapt to these new models if they are to compete with neighbours for example. Over time enough institutions may change to create a tipping point that leads to a powerful system change. For Gains *et al.* one such incentive is the perceived ability for new local leadership models to bring about improved organisational performance. They argue that 'as new models become established the forces of increasing returns will encourage a more rapid adoption of new institutional practices and forms once a tipping point has been reached' (Gains *et al.* 2005, p. 26). They speculate that evidence showing a link between stronger leadership powers and improved service performance will provide just such an incentive for councils to adopt these powers (Gains *et al.* 2009). This interpretation goes a long way to explaining the impact of the modernisation reforms. However, whilst 'the logic of apparent increasing returns does help us to understand much of the initial implementation trajectory' it does not explain everything as 'path dependency effects are not the only ones to observe' (Gains *et al.* 2005, p. 43). These effects do not explain, for example, the minority of councils that have created a genuine form of cabinet decision-making that goes beyond the simply superficial (Gains *et al.* 2005).

Both the 'circumstance and capability' and the 'path dependency' interpretations explain a great deal of why the impact of the reforms was 'diverse yet limited' yet neither are able to tell the whole story. Why, for example, was there evidence of change in leadership style but limited change in terms of leadership tasks such as the engagement of partners and the public in decision-making? Why did one in five councils appear to engage fully with the idea of cabinet style decision-making whilst the majority of councils did not? Why are there apparent differences between hung councils and those with clear majorities? Why also do there seem to be patterns of implementation associated with different parties and with urban and rural areas?

In order to try and answer these questions, and to offer new insights, this paper offers a third institutional interpretation of the modernisation reforms, one centred on the concept of the local governing code. Before describing this interpretation, however, it is important to lay its theoretic foundations and set out in particular how Bulpitt's governing code concept, previously applied to national politics, can be applied locally. That is the purpose of the next section.

The Local Governing Code: Theoretic Foundations

The local governing code is proposed as an original institutional concept borne of elite theory. Its use draws specifically on the statecraft interpretation of Jim Bulpitt although the term governing (or sometimes operating) code predates Bulpitt's work in the 80s by over 30 years. The governing code concept has its origins in international politics and has been used to analyse the responses of national political elites to foreign policy problems (see Walker 1990 for example). Bulpitt used the term to describe one of the key concepts of his statecraft interpretation of national politics. Bulpitt put forward statecraft as an alternative to suggestions that the first UK Thatcher government was driven by ideology, acting on behalf of capitalist interests or concerned primarily with maintaining policy consistency (Bulpitt 1986). Instead Bulpitt argued that the behaviour of the Thatcher government, or any national power elite, needed to be understood as a product of the need of political parties to gain and maintain power. Bulpitt described statecraft in the following way:

What is statecraft? The crude answer is that it is the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office. It is not synonymous with, though it may be related to, pragmatism or expediency. It is concerned primarily to resolve the electoral and governing problems facing a party at any particular time. As a result it is concerned as much with the 'how' as the 'what' of politics. (Bulpitt 1986, p. 21)

For Bulpitt the governing code was a core element of statecraft. It represented 'something less than a philosophy of government and yet more than a collection of specific policies. It relates to the accepted rules of statecraft as employed over time by political elites' (Bulpitt 2008, p. 70 note). The governing code can be regarded as an institution able to adapt to new circumstances and to influence the behaviour of actors over significant periods of time (Bradbury 2006). It refers to the beliefs, norms and 'rules in use' that guide the behaviour local members of the local political elite. For political elites the governing objectives, i.e. winning elections and maintaining governing competence, are fixed and can be regarded as the institutional logics that structure the rules that make up the code¹. However, unlike the governing objectives, governing codes are not fixed. They can vary according to time and space and they can continue as long as they are viable. The role of context here is crucial. Governing codes can be understood as responses to the perceived governing problems of political elites and codes can be highly sensitive to changes in the political environment.

Like Bulpitt's national version, use of the local governing code concept assumes that the elite will behave in a rationally self interested and unified way (Buller 1999, p. 695). Actors have relative autonomy to act and rationality is 'bounded' so that policy makers will 'satisfice'; choosing those options which are 'good enough' for their purposes and, at the same time, deviate as little as possible from existing routines and practices (Bulpitt 1988, pp. 185-186).

¹ This notion of institutional logics, existing independently of institutional actors is consistent with a realist understanding of institutions. See for example Leca and Naccache (2006).

However, whereas Bulpitt defined the elite as a group consisting of the main political actors and civil servants, whom he called the ‘court’, here the *local political elite* is defined primarily as those elected councillors who are members of the ruling council group either from a single political party or members of a coalition. It is of course possible to identify a local government ‘joint’, or ‘corporate’, elite, comprising of senior politicians and managers, and this is a concept that has been widely used in local government research and theory (Wilson 1989). The preference here, however, is to follow Page (1984) who equates *political* with *elected*. This type of political elite is possible at the local level in a way that is not at the national level. A local council party group would typically comprise of between 25 to 35 members which is a more manageable number than the three hundred plus members of parliament that that national elites will typically have to work with. As Frey argues, to be designated as a political actor any group must have both shared characteristics and behavioural cohesion (Frey 1985). Local political elites as ruling groups pass the test of shared characteristics easily. Elite members have a formal status not shared by others and they occupy exclusive spaces such as group meetings (Woods 1998). Behavioural cohesion is more problematic but can still be observed. Whilst internal disputes and factions are part and parcel of internal group politics in public the local political elite will act cohesively (Copus 2004).

This issue of internal dynamics is important for any elite understanding of local politics and of local political leadership. Ultimately, if the behavioural cohesion of the ruling group breaks down then it can no longer be said to be an elite group. Variations in internal dynamics may hinder the capacity of the group to act effectively or cause group preferences to change. In terms of decision making, for example, Dunleavy (1980) notes that there are two types of party group. The more collegiate, which operate on majority rule, and the more tightly managed and clique dominated. Within groups there may also be differences in the extent to which individuals subscribe to the direction being taken. Individual rebels or minority factions, where they exist, may seek to be subversive. Finally, there may also be variations in the extent to which individual councillors within the ruling group are able to align their personal role preferences to the preferences of the elite as a whole. Newton (1976), for example, notes a number of different options that individual councillors might have when interpreting their roles. These include; trustee versus delegate representation; ward versus citywide focus; policy versus casework focus; specialist versus generalist issue focus. Whilst these role preferences may be entirely consistent with the attitudes and preferences of the group, at other times there may be discord.

Electoral Strategies and Power Models

As Bradbury notes, part of the value of Bulpitt’s work is the fact that he ‘promoted an innovative language for analysing how state actors would manage socio-spatial dilemmas’ (Bradbury 2010, p. 327). In the same way the local governing code concept presented here comes with a language for describing the different strategies that local political elites might pursue. These options, which are set out as variables of the code in *table 1* below, can be plotted against the electoral strategies and the power models that elites might adopt. Whilst developed from the literature, the variables of the local governing code are an original construction.

Table 1. Variables of the local governing code

Electoral Strategy Decisions	
Party Politics	Partisan / Apolitical
Electoral Target	Constituency / Catch All
Electoral Arena	National / Local / Community
Power Model Options	
Centre Relationship	Collaboration / Autonomy / Acquiescence
Council Services	Delegation / Direct Management / Devolution / Disposal
Governance	Autonomy / Strategic / Alliance

The first set of code variables refer to the electoral strategy, as the problem of how to win the next election is a primary concern for local political elites. When devising such strategies, which may or may not be written down, elites will take into account local circumstances, their beliefs about the local electorate and their own political preferences. Whilst the detail of electoral strategies will be highly localised the broad options will be the same across councils. These options can be illustrated by the portraits of local political parties provided by Stoker (1991) whose terms to describe political types are the ones used in italics (a summary is provided in *table 2* at the end of this paper). There are three main decisions for elites to make. First, local political elites may wish to consider the role of party politics in their electoral strategy. More traditionally local politics has tended to be ‘anti politics’ and local elites may consider that the public still finds this kind of campaigning distasteful. As Dunleavy suggests, local political leadership can be either ‘...cued into the development of non local adversarial politics and partisan ideologies, or bent on depoliticising issues and developing administrative- bureaucratic solutions’ (Dunleavy 1980, p. 144). This reflects a preference to exclude issues that are outside the mainstream of party politics and cannot be used to highlight differences between parties. Second, elites must decide who should be the focus of their strategy. In the post war period up to the 1980s a constituency focus was the norm with elites seeking support from their most obvious supporters by ensuring that council policies met specific interests and by vigorously pursuing casework. So, for example, the Conservative *traditionalists* kept rates low and the *municipal socialists* invested in public housing. More recently elites have taken more of a ‘catch all’ approach and to seek to demonstrate good management and efficiency in public service in a way that will have the widest appeal, whilst at the same time avoiding the kind of radical political gestures that might out off some potential voters. The Labour *urban managerialists* Conservative *suburban managerialists* are both examples of this approach.

Third, local political elites must decide in which political arena they wish to pitch their electoral message. Whilst the dominant influence of national politics will lead some to believe that campaigns on local issues do not make a big difference, others believe that locality, or even neighbourhood issues, issues may still be decisive in the minds of the voters (Stoker 1991, p. 53). So, some, for example the Conservative *urban ideologues* or the Labour *urban left* have pitched themselves very much into the national political arena seeing themselves either as trailblazers for central government policies or as campaigners against them. Elites may instead place importance on the local arena, campaigning on their record in improving local services and conditions, and will be at pains to show that they are first and foremost defending the local area and its interests. The Labour *urban managerialists* or the Conservative *traditionalists* are examples of this. Finally, some, such as the ‘Focus’ liberal democrats, pay greatest attention to fighting campaigns at the community level (Stoker 1991).

The second dimension of a local governing code after the electoral strategy refers to the power models that the elite choose to adopt in order to address their perceived governing problems. The term ‘power model’ is borrowed directly from Bulpitt who used it to describe four possible centre governing codes reflecting different approaches to centre–periphery relations. Bradbury summarises them like this:

First, he suggested a central autonomy model, which resulted from successful peripheralization to local collaborators of what the centre considered to be low politics to allow it to concentrate on what it considered to be high politics. Second, he conceived a model of capital city bargaining in which centre governing had to accept that peripheral interests were stronger and had penetrated the centre, resulting in the need for constant negotiation. Third, he suggested the central authority model in which the centre has achieved considerable voluntary acquiescence. Finally, he proposed a coercive power model, in which the centre can only govern through continuous intervention and threats. (Bradbury 2010, p. 327)

Of course the same set of models cannot be applied to local governing codes, as the governing problems at the local level are fundamentally different. Whilst Bulpitt’s power models are concerned with the centre-periphery relationship as a governing problem, there are three governing problems facing local political elites; the relationship with the centre; the relationship with the local authority as a service provider; and the relationship with those aspects of local governance that do not fall under direct local government control. Each will be considered in turn.

The relationship with the centre provides both opportunities for influence and risks for local political elites. They may adopt a centre collaboration model, particularly if their party is in power, and seek to gain influence, or potential future influence, by proactively collaborating with the centre and implementing national policies. Such collaboration, as illustrated by the *urban ideologues*, for example, may win special concessions from national government or even national roles for members of the local elite. It is the other side of what Bulpitt described as the ‘centre authority’ model with local politicians acting as ‘unofficial field agents of the centre’ (Bulpitt 2008, p. 64). Alternatively local elites may adopt a local autonomy model and seek to insulate themselves from the top down control of central government. This may mean greater freedom to pursue local electoral strategies or the ability to exercise greater influence in their locality due to the increased credibility that an independent stance can bring. Both the conservative *traditionalists* and the *urban left* are examples of this approach. Naturally the centre will be happy with this position if it adopts Bulpitt’s ‘centre autonomy’ model as long as areas of ‘high politics’ are unaffected. If the centre adopts a different view, however, this may lead to conflict. Finally, local political elites may decide that there is no advantage to be gained by either collaborating with, or working against, central government and that influence is more likely to be gained by directing energy elsewhere. In this case local political elites will simply remain passive and follow a local acquiescence model. In some ways this is the other side of Bulpitt’s ‘central coercion’ model although, as Bulpitt suggested, the centre does not really have the capacity to force its will upon local political elites unless they remain passive. The last centre power model proposed by Bulpitt was the ‘capital city bargaining model’. The local corollary of this might be a ‘centre bargaining’ model; however, local political elites appear to have neither the intention nor the capacity to follow this route.

The second governing problem that local political elites must address is their relationship with the local authority as a service provider. Just as Bulpitt describes the way in which the centre can seek to gain autonomy from problems of 'low' politics, so local political elites may adopt a delegation model in respect of council services. Conservative *traditionalists* and *municipal socialists* provide examples of this approach. They wish to retain overall control but the day-to-day running of services is seen as a distraction and best done by council officers. Others, however, such as *urban* and *suburban managerialists* may adopt a direct management model. Day to day involvement in council services can provide a source of legitimacy and influence for councillors who take on the role of elected managers (Copus 2006, p. 5). Another strategy, favoured by the *urban left* and some liberal democrat councils, is to devolve responsibility for some services down to community level allowing greater control for councillors in their local communities. One advantage of this strategy is to lock down influence over services in areas which may be party strongholds thereby providing a base for influence even if overall control of the councils should change hands. This strategy may be particularly appropriate in closely contested councils that regularly change political control. Finally elites, such as the Conservative *urban ideologues* may follow a disposal model. This means moving services as far as possible out of public sector control and ensures that the day-to-day problems of running services are at full arms length from the elite.

The final governing problem is that of local governance. For some the local council will be the only legitimate source of influence in a local area and will not seek to dilute this through a broader local government role. This reflects an 'insistence on the local authority's monopoly of legitimate action concerning services it administers' (Dunleavy 1980, p. 147). They prefer local government to remain autonomous and distinct. Others, such as the *suburban managerialists*, see an opportunity in local government working more strategically and may see partnerships as potential arenas for extending influence. This is a model of leadership that recognises that there is 'great diffusion of responsibility for collective service provision' and that 'effective collaboration with other agencies—public, private, and nonprofit—through various kinds of local partnerships to achieved shared ends' is a necessity (Hambleton and Sweeting 2004, p. 482). Local political elites can also decide to extend their influence by forming alliances through local networks with local interest groups. These can fall under a number of categories including burgher networks of magistrates, senior party members and associated social elites, business networks and community interest groups possibly including trade unions (Dunleavy 1980). As part of this strategy the local council can be used as a platform for building wider political campaigns as was the case with the *urban left* for example.

The Modernisation Reforms: An Elite Interpretation

Using the local governing code concept, a third, elite interpretation of the modernisation reforms can now be attempted. This interpretation explains the 'diverse yet limited' impact of the reforms in four ways. First it points to the diversity of local governing codes that makes uniform local government reform very difficult. Second it suggests that the path dependent nature of the local governing codes can explain some of the limited impact of the reforms. Third it suggests that the idea of community leadership, found at the heart of the reforms, does not offer an attractive enough alternative model for local political elites. Finally it highlights the way in which local political elites will understand the reforms within an explicitly political context and consequently treat them with suspicion.

As noted above, whilst still limited in their options, local political elites have a number of strategic choices to make when deciding how best to achieve their governing objectives and address their governing problems. When multiplied out, these choices imply a large number of plausible governing codes and it is this diversity that goes some way to explaining the diversity of responses that there were to the reforms. Some sense of the extent of the diversity of the codes can be gained by making an assessment of the number of likely variations. In terms of electoral strategies, whilst the majority will now choose a political over an apolitical strategy and a catch-all over a constituency strategy, the choice of whether to prioritise a national, local or community arena remains a real one. The power models open to local political elites also still present real choices. In terms of the relationship with central government, whilst local political elites have been less willing to pursue proactive autonomy, and whilst 'passivity and deference towards the centre is the norm' (Laffin 2008, p. 116), active collaboration remains an option, particularly where it is the party of the local political elite that is in power nationally. Turning to possible power models in respect of council services, whilst the preference over the past ten years has been for direct management, the delegation, devolution and disposal models have all remained as credible options. Finally, in terms of responses to the 'governance problem', both strategic and alliance models can be widely observed and even the autonomy model remains an attractive option for many councillors. Taking all of these options together it is possible to make a crude calculation. When the three electoral strategies, two centre power models, four council services power models and three governance power models are multiplied together that gives a total of 72 possible and quite plausible combinations of strategic choices that make for differentiated local governing codes. Whilst in reality the majority of local governing codes will resemble that of the *urban* and *suburban managerialists*, the scope for variation is clear. One further source of diversity is the variable nature of the internal dynamics of local political elites discussed earlier in this paper. Differences in decision making and in the internal cohesion of local political elites will also have contributed to the diverse impact of leadership reforms.

As the evidence shows, the impact of the modernisation reforms on political leadership was not just diverse but also limited. From an elite perspective this can be explained by the way in which highly path dependent local political elites were able to adopt aspects of the reforms into the detail of local governing codes without altering their fundamental strategic decisions. So, whilst the reforms have led to changes 'generally in the direction of stronger leadership' (Gains *et al.* 2009, p. 81), this could reflect local party leaders being established as figureheads for elites to bring a perceived electoral benefit. Another example is the provision for area committees and area forums in the Local Government Act 2000. For those local political elites already operating a devolution power model in respect of council services, such a provision could easily have been incorporated. In these instances full area committees, giving local councillors influence over service decisions at the local level would have been a support for the local governing code and could have been set up in a meaningful way. For those elites operating a direct management power model, the less formal area forum arrangement may have been preferred as a mechanism which offers a degree of consultation with residents but where decision making is retained centrally. Local political elites may have also chosen to adopt reforms superficially, making only minor changes to their local governing codes. This process has been widely observed in the way in which cabinet style decision making has been adopted by the majority of councils but on the surface of, rather than instead of, traditional group decision making processes. This argument builds on the concept of path dependency put places it in a very specific political context. Again, the local governing code concept allows the limited impact of the reforms to be understood in

a very particular way; in terms of the electoral and influencing strategies of local political elites.

Another reason why the impact of the reforms was so limited was that the idea of community leadership, at the heart of the reforms, simply did not offer a credible alternative code for local political elites to adopt. As the 'path dependency' interpretation suggests, the logic of increasing returns can be broken either by system shocks, by the accumulation of small changes over time or by the appearance of more attractive models of institutional behaviour. From an elite perspective, community leadership did not offer such an attractive alternative model. The expectation of the reforms, in so far as they sought to change the behaviour of local political elites, was simply unrealistic in a number of important respects. Here is a summary of those expectations:

The vision was of a strong and individualised form of leadership, where the leader's responsibilities were more transparent than under the previous system, with an associated heightening of accountability. In relation to leadership tasks, there was to be a new emphasis on setting strategic policy direction and a corresponding retreat from policy implementation, where greater delegation to officers was encouraged. The vision implied a more outward-oriented 'community leadership' role, involving leaders to a greater extent in external networking and partnerships and to a lesser extent in the management of internal council politics. The ideal type implies that party politics, in the traditional adversarial sense, would play a less prominent role, freeing leaders to seek the best interests of the authority (and the area) rather than narrow party based interests, and reducing the need for a constant 'reference back' of decisions to party groups. (Lowndes and Leach 2004, pp. 557-558)

To be adopted voluntarily by local political elites this 'community leadership code' needed to offer benefit to electoral strategies and credible solutions to their perceived governing problems. On these terms it seems evident that, whilst some aspects of community leadership were in step with existing codes, the package as a whole was problematic. So, in terms of electoral strategies, community leadership implied a catch all approach, pitched to the local electoral arena and these are extremely common approaches for local political elites. At the same time, the implication that party politics should be less prominent, whilst not without precedent, harks back to an earlier age of local politics which predates the nationalisation of party politics and is in many respects far from modern. This would also have presented something of a discord for local party activists having to fight local elections apolitically and national elections under party political banners.

In terms of power models, the 'community leadership code' implied autonomy towards the centre, something that 'nationalised' local political elites have been less keen to pursue in recent years and something that the UK Labour government itself made more difficult to adopt through its use of central controls. Community leadership also suggested a delegation power model in respect of council services and yet, as noted previously, the increasingly technocratic nature of local politics has made it more attractive for local political elites to behave as 'elected managers' (Copus 2006). As well as providing one arena where local councillors can exercise formal influence, engaging directly with services in this way provides a valuable source of content for election campaigns as elites are able to demonstrate their value to the electorate who they perceive as being primarily interested in the quality of the services they receive. The community leadership code, in seeking to remove this source of political benefit was unable to offer anything better in its place.

In terms of the third governing problem, that of governance, community leadership reflects a development of the strategic power model with an emphasis on partnership working and networking within the community. Whilst reasonable in principle, these aspects of the reforms nevertheless meant risks for local political elites without the certainty of greater influence and its adoption is therefore problematic. In terms of working through local strategic partnerships, Goss (2005, p. 13), reporting on a government sponsored national evaluation project, for example, found a very mixed picture of political leadership. Whilst there were examples of ‘enlightened political leadership’, there were also ‘negative behaviours’ and a growing ambivalence about the role of local strategic partnerships. Copus (2010, p. 585) observes that councillors in these new settings are behaving in essential traditional ways: ‘What we see is a continuation of established patterns of representative and political leadership behaviour extended to new settings for the purpose of securing elite policy preferences’. It seems reasonable to suggest that partnership working did not offer strong enough opportunities for influence and were perceived in many ways as a threat by councillors. The new requirements for partnerships did not include formal roles for local politicians although some roles, such as partnership chair, could be allocated to councillors as a matter of local discretion. This meant that local political elites did not have the assurance that formal influence could be wielded in these partnership arenas. At the same time working through these partnerships had the potential to undermine the legitimacy of elected local councillors and, furthermore, achievements delivered by working through partnerships are more difficult for elites to claim as their own during election contests. In terms of citizen engagement this does offer some benefit for local political elites but perhaps not in the way that the community leadership idea implies. Whilst local political elites have shown a willingness to sponsor a proliferation of participation initiatives over recent years, these initiatives have had a very limited impact on local policy and decision making (Lowndes *et al.* 2001). The explanation might be that local political elites believe that the public are more likely to vote for parties that they seen to be listening to their concerns and so will be happy to endorse initiatives. At the same time local political elites are concerned that citizen engagement will reduce their own influence unless it is consultative in nature and councillors have the final say (Copus 2007). As Copus (2011) observes, councillors also carry their community engagement credentials into governance settings although as a source of legitimacy without this engagement necessarily shaping their policy preferences.

One further reason for the limited response to the reforms was that local political elites, seeing the world through a political lens, were always unlikely to take the reforms on face value. Worried about their own electoral strategies and governing problems, they would be fully aware that central elites would have parallel concerns. Nor would a cynical response have been unreasonable. Community leadership was an opaque concept and one possible interpretation of it was as ‘an “expedient device”, which will ultimately diminish local government’ (Sullivan 2007, p. 158). The reforms could also be regarded as a reflection of disputes within the Labour Party and as such considered as ‘fundamentally political’ (Laffin 2008, p. 121). In this context local political elites would have been cautious about adopting reforms that they suspected to be concerned in reality with furthering the objectives of the centre at their expense.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to add value by offering the local governing code concept, with its associated language of electoral strategies and power models, as an original frame of analysis that can contribute to the institutional understanding of change processes in local governance.

More broadly the intention has been encourage greater interest in elite approaches to local politics. Whilst elite theory has been discredited in recent years, if the term is used carefully and limited to groups who are ‘holders of power’ the concept may still have explanatory power (Scott 2008, p. 28). Whilst the local governing code concept has been used here in a particular national context the hope is that it can have a wider application. One use would be to add conceptual depth to analyses that refer to local political elites as, with the exception of Woods (1998), the theoretic aspects of this term are usually undeveloped. Another use would be to contribute to broader institutional analyses of the policy process. To this end it supports the call by Peters *et al.* (2005) to pay greater attention on political actors, as opposed to an overemphasis on bureaucrats, in policy making.

The central argument of this paper has been that the ‘diverse yet limited’ impact of the local political leadership reforms in the UK can be explained in large part by the existence of local governing codes. This elite interpretation builds on previous institutional approaches and retains much of the ‘context and capability’ and ‘path dependency’ interpretations. Where it digresses is in suggesting first, that it is the diversity of local governing codes and variations in elite internal structures that lie at the root of the diverse responses of local political elites to the reforms, and second that the notions of path dependency and of the logic of increasing returns can be understood in explicitly political terms. This interpretation suggests that changes in national policy will tend to be adopted and adapted by local political elites only so far as they are perceived to support electoral strategies or to help solve governing problems and so far as they are not simply seen as being to the advantage of the centre. This was not the case with the government’s prescriptions for community leadership. As Copus has found from extensive survey evidence, the responses of councillors to local government modernisation have been remarkably consistent regardless of party ideology and the ability for local political elites to maintain stable belief systems in the face of change should not be underestimated (Copus 2010, pp. 586-587). New modes of elite behaviour will only be adopted if they are consistent with these belief systems. This is not to say that the behaviour of local politicians is necessarily cynical. Rather to suggest that the structure of local democracy in the UK, tied to the nationalisation of local politics, creates an environment where it is those elites who have the most effective electoral strategies, and who are able to deal most competently with the governing problems in front of them, that will survive and prosper. It is this principle of electoral selection that overrides all other personal and ideological preferences. In other words local councillors make their own governing codes but not in circumstances of their own choosing.

In the absence of new evidence the ultimate test of this elite interpretation is plausibility. The explanations it presents are consistent with available research and provide credible answers to the questions posed about the implementation of the local leadership reforms. There is, however one outstanding problem. As Gains *et al* (2005) point out, there were a significant minority of councils that adopted the new cabinet model of decision making and the associated separation of powers in a meaningful way. This is more difficult to explain as, from an elite perspective, it seems to undermine the principle of behavioural cohesion. It may be that these were examples of ‘centre collaboration’ with Labour councils seeking to enthusiastically implement government policy or it may reflect a genuine undermining of the group system. Further research into these cases would be a useful test of this elite interpretation. Indeed, all of the claims in this paper should be testable. As Buller (1999) suggests, governing codes, understood as institutions made up of beliefs, norms and rules, can be subject to empirical research and this also applies to local governing codes and their effects.

In terms of future policy making this interpretation implies a clear choice. Central government, when seeking to change the behaviour of local political elites, might either decide to work with the grain of local politics and design reforms which are consistent with local governing codes, allowing local political elites to construct credible electoral strategies and power models. Or they must seek to actively break the local governing codes. This might be done by building strong alliances with officers. As Laffin (2008) has pointed out, this approach has a long history and is how Corporate Performance Assessments were successfully introduced by the Labour government. Or it might be done through fundamental organisational or legislative changes. As Gains *et al* (2009) suggest, in order to encourage partnership working and community engagement into political leadership, the government may need to focus on the role of parties or introduce a direct link between individual leaders and the electorate. Looking forward, it may be that the UK Coalition Government's emphasis upon localism means that there will be fewer attempts to influence the behaviour of local political elites. Of more interest will be the impact of the reductions in local government grant, particularly affecting the urban areas, and whether this might lead to new types of local governing codes. If these codes are of a more aggressive nature it may be that the government will take a greater interest once again in changing the behaviour of local political elites.

Table 2. Portraits of local political parties adapted from Stoker (1991)

Traditionalists (Conservative)	Rural social elite. Defend the local area and interests. Provide paternalistic care of the less well off. Localist – resent central intervention. Trust officers to make decisions. Anti ‘party politics’. Seek low rates
Municipal Socialists (Labour)	Working class. Seek expanded range of services for local government. Paternalistic. Seek best public provision to those who elected them. Set policy guidelines, find resources and look after individual concerns. Look to officer structure to ‘run the machine’
Urban Ideologues (Conservative)	Promote new managerialism in council business. Openly disagree with traditionalists. Believe in narrow role for local government delivering only what private sector can’t – no strategic role. Have disrespect for all officers. Want to contribute to national debates rather than talk to local issues.
Urban Left (Labour)	Campaigning role for local government to challenge national government /established interests. Involvement of a wide range of community interest groups. Less willing to pass over management to officers. Decentralising. Professional status with working class links e.g. with trade unions
Suburban Managerialists (Conservative)	Take a direct hand in managing council business and giving oversight to council affairs. Will shake up structures and bring in new talent. Loyal to officers who go along with reforms. Believe in the strategic role of the council. Clearly labelled as conservatives. Some anti centralism.
Urban Managerialists (Labour)	Similar background to urban left. Local government has a wider economic / tackling poverty role. Seek customer friendly service delivery. Gradual reform with good management and efficiency. Business and voluntary sector partners. Less interested in radical political gestures and campaigns

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