

UK Local Government and Public Participation: Using Conjectures to Explain the Relationship

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Abstract

The relationship between local government and public participation is a problematic one. Despite more than 40 years of good intentions, public participation has been a peripheral activity for local government and positive outcomes have been hard to find. Whilst offering a range of plausible explanations for this state of affairs, the literature is nevertheless haphazard and under-theorised. In order to bring organisation, and borrowing from an approach developed by Klijn and Skelcher (2007), five conjectures developed from the UK experience are presented and discussed. These are the; developing compatibility; democratic incompatibility; elite rejection; corporate manipulation; and institutional constraint conjectures. Implications for policy and for research are suggested.

Introduction

Calls to 'deepen democracy' and heightened interest in democratic innovations reflect internationally widespread concerns about the ability of traditional representative structures to connect with citizens (Fung and Wright 2003). At the same time the effectiveness of these innovations remains uncertain (King, Feltey, *et al.* 1998) and 'meaningful, authentic participation is rarely found' (Yang and Callahan 2007). Whilst focus has shifted in recent years from government to governance and from institutional design to the role of civil society (Gaventa 2006) the facilitatory role of local government nevertheless remains central and its relationship with public participation remains problematic. Whilst there are many available explanations for the poor state of this relationship there is, however, no overarching theoretical framework to organise them. What is offered here, therefore, is a map of explanatory positions which can provide a more structured basis for policy debate and future research. Whilst drawn primarily from the UK experience the intention is that the framework will be applicable in a wider context.

Today in the UK, as for the last forty years, it is right to suggest that: "Like a well-established, and well loved, music hall act, participation and local government are words often found in partnership." (Bulpitt 1972) Since 1968 many policy makers have been enthusiastic advocates of this partnership and prescriptions remain as strong as ever from the top of Government downwards. A recent White Paper for example, has argued that: "Representative democracy remains central to local democracy but we believe it can be reinforced, not undermined, by direct participation of citizens – each requires the other." (*Department of Communities and Local Government 2006*) These sentiments have been followed by measures such as the Councillor Call for Action and the Duty to Involve. At the same time, the Local Government Association in England insists that local government 'has the democratic mandate to take the lead and ensure that local people can shape and influence the decisions made and the services provided across the whole of the public sector' (LGA 2007). Those in local government have continued to support participatory activity to the extent that: "The history of British local government is littered with experiments in public participation and consultation." (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2001) Indeed, the number and diversity of local government sponsored extra electoral public participation initiatives increased significantly in the first years of the Labour Government (Birch 2002) demonstrating a commitment, a sense of ownership and an

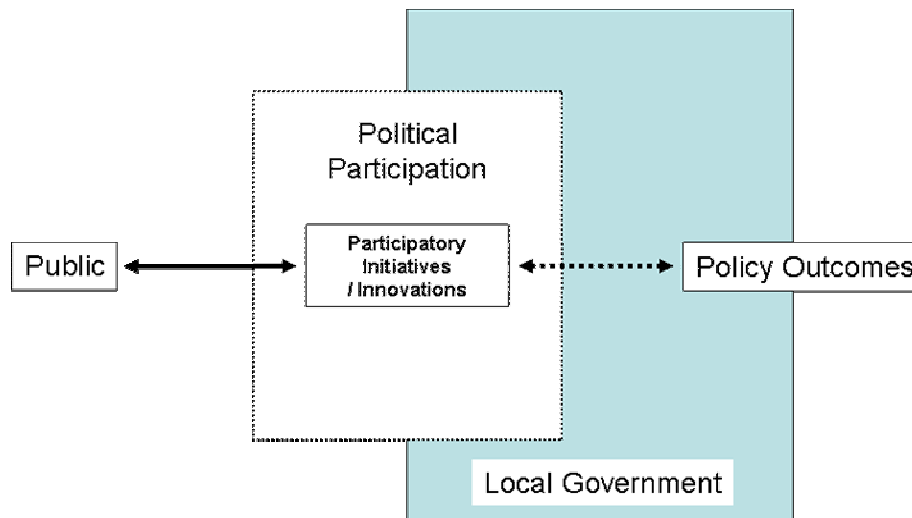
enthusiasm for innovation in respect of participation initiatives (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2001; Smith 2005).

However, despite the enthusiasm for the partnership between local government and public participation in the UK, there has nevertheless been 'a mismatch in intention and outcome' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007) and this contrast between officially stated ambitions and the underachievement of participatory initiatives has been conspicuous throughout the 40 year history of the relationship (Beresford 2002). It has been argued that: "In the early 1970's there was a good deal of experiment with initiatives designed to improve the responsiveness and accountability of local authorities. But these reforms were fairly ineffective – they left the big bureaucracies and centralised patterns of decision making largely undisturbed." (Burns, Hambleton, *et al.* 1994) In the 1980's, public participation in the form of decentralisation initiatives, also had an extremely limited impact (Hoggett 1995). Similarly today, 'most elements of ... community participation have been done at the margins and not as part of the day job' (Stoker and Wilson 2004), initiatives are often superficial exercises for ticking boxes used to justify decisions that have already been made (INVOLVE 2005) and '...members, officers and citizens frequently find it difficult to pinpoint specific service or policy-related outcomes' (Wilson 1999). In summary, the evidence suggests that 'very often attempts at public participation do not influence services and outcomes in the way participants wished' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007) and that 'to date civic participation appeared not to have made a significant impact on decision-making' (Nicholson 2005).

Whilst the relationship between local government and public participation is clearly problematic, the UK local government literature does not provide a structured account of why this might be so. Whilst many explanations are offered, they are presented haphazardly and without reference to alternative positions. A failure to present critiques of positions or to enter into debates with others means that the literature feels fragmented and messy. Furthermore, theoretical assumptions are, as often as not, left implicit meaning that potential contradictions between positions are left unexplored. Finally, advice for policy makers tends to focus upon the processes of participation or the support needed for participants. Wider political, social and institutional factors have tended to be neglected as; "...a much greater interest has developed in the 'technicalities' of participation reflected in the production of a rapidly growing body of 'how to do it' manuals, courses and consultants." (Beresford 2002) This situation may be changing, however, with an increasing interest in the sociology and politics of participation becoming evident (Martin 2009).

Elements of the Relationship

Figure 1: Elements of Public Participation in Local Government



In seeking to understand why the relationship between local government and public participation might be problematic it is first useful to map its main elements. Figure 1 (above) represents the different elements of public participation in local government. Of course initiatives and innovations are only one aspect of political participation (Birch 2001) which also covers a range of different activities including voting, contacting public officials and attending protests (Brady, Verba, *et al.* 1995). However it is upon these initiatives and innovations and their impact upon policy outcomes that the focus is placed here albeit within the context of these wider aspects. The difficulties associated with two elements of the relationship, i.e. the drawing of the public into participatory initiatives and the activity taking place within the initiatives themselves, are broadly uncontroversial. In terms of the former, the 'input' side of the relationship can be characterised by increasing levels of public disengagement (Pratchett 2004) reflected in low comparative levels of electoral participation, worryingly low levels of awareness of what local government actually does (Pratchett and Wilson 1996a) and low levels of public trust. In fact; "...the public are less likely to trust their local councils than other local public sector organisations such as local hospitals or the local police force." (Lyons 2007) There is widespread recognition of the importance of social economic status, the resources, whether material or social, available to individuals, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, social capital, in determining the levels at which people will engage (Brady, Verba, *et al.* 1995; John 2007; Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2006). Institutional factors have also been found to cause significant variations in engagement between otherwise similar areas (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2006). Finally there is broad acknowledgement of the role that the perceived efficacy of participation has

in an individual's decision whether to participate (Pratchett 2004). As well as these issues associated with 'input' into initiatives, there is widespread recognition of the difficulty inherent in the 'activity' element of the relationship. This can relate to facilitating participative initiatives, the challenging nature of participative processes or the need for both additional resources and specialist support (King, Feltey, *et al.* 1998). It is at the final stage, where the participatory initiatives / innovations are expected to impact on policy outcomes, where the relationship appears most problematic and where differences of explanation in the literature are concentrated.

Using Conjectures to Explain the Relationship

In order to organise the literature and to draw out distinctive strands, an original framework of analysis, which goes beyond a purely descriptive approach, is used. This approach is adapted from the work of Klijn and Skelcher (2007) who use four 'conjectures' (incompatible, complementarity, transitional and instrumental) to describe the possible relationships between representative democracy and governance networks where:

"Conjectures are tentative theories designed to offer provisional solutions to problems. The value of a conjecture is to generate fresh thinking, investigation and insight. They are more akin to informed speculations that provide a framework from which more detailed empirical and theoretical research questions can be established and investigations undertaken. The conjectures are heuristic tools to structure the discussion ... they organize the literature ... and can also be used to highlight particular themes or tensions that impact on theory or practice." (Klijn and Skelcher 2007)

In order to provide an analytical framework for explaining the relationship between local government and public participation 5 conjectures have been developed and are described below. These are the; developing compatibility; democratic impotence; elite rejection; corporate manipulation; and institutional constraint conjectures. Each is summarised in table 1.

Whilst conjectures are inspired by a reading of the relevant literature '... they are, in the first place, a construction with an internal logic' (Klijn and Skelcher 2007). Importantly, the identification of common internal elements allows comparison between conjectures to be developed and what 'binds and what divides' them to be identified. In this case four elements have been used to structure the conjectures and provide the focus for the discussion of each and are reflected in table 1. These elements are; the theoretical frame/focus; the

conception of local government; the view of the relationship between local government and the public; and prescriptions for improving participation.

Each conjecture builds from the significant evidence, positions and arguments within the literature but also provides additional new structure and theoretical modelling. Whilst there will be significant authors that provide the starting point and much of the material point for individual conjectures, their work has been added to and extended by drawing on the evidence and ideas of others. The unstructured nature of the literature means that it is possible for ideas from the same author to contribute to different conjectures without necessarily implying contradictory positions. Authors may have commented on or summarised other positions or they may have made a broad number of contributions to this subject area. In any case the boundaries between the conjectures are 'porous'; individual authors may plausibly draw elements from more than one.

The Developing Compatibility Conjecture

This conjecture argues that local government is becoming increasingly successful at enhancing representative democracy with participative initiatives. This is evidenced by the good practice that exists in many local councils (Department of Communities and Local Government 2006) and the proliferation in participative initiatives sponsored by local government over recent years (Birch 2002; Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2001). At the heart of this conjecture is; "...a concept of a representative democracy based on active citizenship built through deliberation" (Stewart 2003). Participative initiatives fill the gaps between elections, extend the deliberative capacity of representative structures (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995) and strengthen legitimacy, responsiveness and representativeness (Pratchett 1999a). They also provide a number of benefits, which are recognised by local government actors including better quality services, increased responsiveness to the needs of citizens, increased social cohesion, capacity building for communities, responsible citizens and stronger accountability (Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions 1998; INVOLVE 2005; Newman 2001; Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995). Furthermore, by strengthening local government's wider democratic legitimacy, participation gives it added authority when working in partnerships with other local agencies (Sullivan 2001).

The ineffectiveness of participation initiatives in the past can be explained by a number of major obstacles including the 'unrepresentativeness' of people brought into initiatives, the ability of initiatives to influence decision making, the capacity of participants, the relevance of the agenda to local people, the form of meetings and the attitudes of local politicians (Stewart and Stoker

1988). However, none of these obstacles are insurmountable and local government, which has shown a commitment and enthusiasm for innovation in this area, is continuing to solve the challenges associated with participation and this, in turn, has led to the expansion in the number and range of initiatives (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2001). National policy initiatives, such as the Duty to Involve, accelerate this process of change and build on the willingness of local government to improve the participation process.

This conjecture recognises that achieving participation continues to be a challenging and complex activity which needs a commitment to learning and innovation as; "...no single approach can possibly be adequate to the task." (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995) However, the process is; "...one of change and development from within existing structures and institutions, and which builds on elements of participative practice that already exist." (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995) As delivering participation is within the scope of local government a 'no-change' approach is required from central government because: "There are times when it is better to do nothing and let past changes develop through experience." (Stewart 2003) In fact the practical demonstration of participation by local government is the 'best argument' for its continued development (Stewart 1989). Local government, left to its own devices will, over time, overcome the many obstacles and serious challenges that exist because: "There is a substantial body of learning within public sector organisations about how to develop more open and participative forms of governance and service delivery. The sheet of paper with which we can start to rethink citizenship practice is not, in fact, blank." (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995)

This conjecture builds upon a liberal / social democratic tradition which values local government as an efficient provider of services and as a democratic counterbalance to national government (Chandler 2008; Sharpe 1970). Local Government's importance within the national democratic system lies in its closeness to the citizenry which allows it both to engage and educate the public. Experience of citizenship provided at the local level provides a benefit for the whole political system as this is the arena where good political habits can be fostered. It makes sense, therefore, for traditional representative democracy to hold centre stage as; "...the principles which apply to it do not differ in any respect from those applicable to the national representation." (Mill 1958) More recently the role of local government has developed from a direct provider of services to an enabler and is further developing into the role of 'community government', in other words, an 'instrument of strategic governance' capable of 'governing uncertainty' in a complex environment and enabled to elaborate the framework and rules by which local partners and communities would be involved in the pursuit of wellbeing." (Sullivan 2004)

This role, which is closely linked to the government's policy of promoting the 'community leadership' role of local councils (Sullivan 2001) retains the importance of achieving local accountability through active citizenship which is 'most likely to be achieved through the development of participatory democracy' albeit within a clearly representative framework (Stewart and Stoker 1988).

Local government's relationship with the public is underpinned by a concept of citizenship which builds from Marshall's framework of legal, political and social rights which are historically variable and subject to change over time (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995). It rejects both the consumerist and republican models of citizenship; the former for its corrosive effects on social wellbeing and the latter for its inherent dangers for individual freedom. This is an 'interactive political citizenship' through which "...citizens are active contributors to collective decision making." (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995) The public, or citizenry, is viewed as a distinct sector of a plural polity which exists outside of government institutions and the relationship between local government and the public can be characterised as a partnership (Prior, Stewart, *et al.* 1995). The citizenry has a complex set of needs and identities which need to be respected and responded to by government. Rights are not abstract but historically specific so that whilst the presumption is for an active mode of citizenship, this will always be dependant on the interests and attitudes prevalent at any one time. The onus is therefore on government rather than citizens to actively promote and support citizenship.

The Democratic Incompatibility Conjecture

This conjecture argues that public participation cannot, in fact, provide an effective democratic enhancement for local government and that more participation cannot be simply equated with more democracy (Wilson 1999). It contends that the idea of a hybrid representative / participative local democracy is problematic for two reasons; firstly because participatory democracy is unsuitable for modern local government and secondly because participative and representative democracy cannot be welded together in practice. Firstly then, this conjecture contends that, whilst representative democracy is appropriate in a modern industrial society, participatory democracy is not. Local government is an institution attuned to meeting the decision making needs of a large complex society and as such it is appropriate that it follows a representative democratic structure. A number of specific factors serve to limit its effectiveness as a focus for public participation. These factors include; the unwieldy size of local government in the UK (Pratchett 2004); the fragmentation of the local polity (Pratchett 2004; Stoker 1996), increased centralisation by Whitehall and the subsequent reduction in local

government autonomy (Pratchett 2004; Stoker 1996); and an increasingly pervasive managerialist agenda (Stoker 1996; Wilson 1999). Local government has become a 'complex and arcane' institution and that this creates a barrier to engagement by the 'ordinary' public (Pratchett 2004). Even the reforms of New Labour aimed at promoting democratic renewal have done little to improve the prospects of local government as a democratic institution (Pratchett 2002; Wilson 1999). In fact recent attempts to modernise local government have only served to exacerbate the problem by introducing cabinet style government thereby creating a less open and therefore less favourable environment for participative initiatives (Wilson 1999).

Linked to these arguments about the form that local government needs to take in a modern capitalist society are observations about contemporary political culture and the fact that an 'indifferent and disinterested citizenry' (Pratchett 2004; Wilson 1999) is perfectly willing to accept a decline in local democratic practice and the reducing role of local government (Pratchett and Wilson 1996b). These arguments about the prevailing political culture echo Schumpeter's assertion that widespread participation is undesirable for modern society (Lowndes 1995; Schumpeter 1950) and the findings of Almond and Verba that only a small section of the citizenry is likely to be actively participating in local politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Pratchett 2004). Further to this, participation acts to destabilize and undermine democratic practice as it privileges sectional interests and tends to reproduce patterns of social inequality with the more articulate and wealthy better able to further their own interests through participatory initiatives (Leach and Wingfield 1999; Lowndes 1995). The realities of modern society lead logically to a division of labour between the citizenry, who can get on with daily life undistracted by politics, and elected representatives who are able to immerse themselves in the pursuit of solutions to complex policy problems albeit with the appropriate checks and balances. Whilst there is a role for participation it is principally limited to its educative value (Lowndes 1995).

At the heart of this conjecture is the argument that representative and participative forms of democracy are built upon fundamentally different assumptions. Whilst representative democracy is instrumental in character and seeks to ensure that the preferences of citizens are aggregated, participative democracy is substantive, an ideal state which seeks to transform the views of citizens through deliberation (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Newman 2001). Ultimately these fundamental differences reflect alternative conceptions of citizenship and this conjecture reflects a conception of citizenship that is instrumental, rational and bounded and observes that the contemporary citizenry are passive and disinterested (Pratchett 2004). As predicted by public choice theory, narrow economic interests dominate within

the local political arena so that: "Democracy may be a highly regarded and laudable concept in principle, but for most voters, it appears, it is considerably less important than a low council tax and efficient service provision." (Pratchett and Wilson 1996b) The perceived inefficacy of local government further contributes to a culture of political disaffection and many participation initiatives may actually contribute to this culture by providing participants with bad experiences (Pratchett 2004).

The second argument against the compatibility of local representative government and participative initiatives rests on the very challenging practical problems that arise when attempts are made to join the two together. Building on democratic theory, and particularly the work of Beetham (1996), it is argued that participatory enhancements to representative local government cannot achieve the key principles of responsiveness and representativeness. Whilst there are no single types of participatory initiative that are able to enhance both principles, the possibilities of constructing a democratically coherent programme of different types of initiative are fraught with difficulty. How, for example, can quantitative survey evidence from a citizens' panel be balanced against the qualitative outcomes of deliberative exercises such as citizens' juries? Furthermore, the results of these different mechanisms could easily be contradictory. It is for these reasons that: "Initiatives to enhance public participation, therefore, may exacerbate existing problems with democratic institutions rather than help overcome them." (Pratchett 1999b) The sponsoring role of local government for participatory initiatives is a further problem. The very fact that local government exercises control over the focus, process and outcomes of participation undermines its effectiveness (Hoggett 1995; Newman 2001; Pratchett 1999b; Stoker 1996). At best this limits what participation can achieve and at worst means that initiatives are superficial public relations exercises (Pratchett 1999b). The enhancement of accountability through participatory initiatives is also problematic. Different actors are subject to different 'accountability' rules and those participants who are not elected or employed effectively enjoy no responsibility for the decisions they are contributing to (Callanan 2005). Standards of transparency, accountability and responsibility which can be maintained within a representative structure will only be weakened, therefore, when participatory initiatives are added. It is these substantial difficulties that arise when practitioners try to marry two fundamentally different forms of democracy that explain the lack of impact that participatory initiatives have on policy processes. From a democratic perspective local government is incompatible with increased public participation and this is why participation initiatives may ultimately be 'an exercise in chasing shadows' (Wilson 1999).

Whilst incompatible with local government, participatory initiatives can nevertheless be regarded as valid democratic mechanisms in their own right, in a diversity of forms, operating within a mixed democratic economy. Local government may even have a role as an enabler in this respect 'acting as the catalyst for democracy at the local level and the focus for political activities in the localities' (Pratchett and Wilson 1996b). Neither is a relationship between local government and public participation ruled out entirely. If it is to exist, however, it will be mediated through intermediary organisations, such as the media, issue and community groups (Pratchett 2004). Ultimately, however, it is the expectations of policy makers that may have to be lowered. Institutions may need to be; "...more selective in the way in which they engage the public, and to have more realistic expectations about the levels of political participation that exist." (Pratchett 2004)

The Elite Rejection Conjecture

The thesis of the elite rejection conjecture is that local political elites will reject citizen engagement when it comes into conflict with their own interests. It is the operation of party politics and the associated desire for political power at the local level that lie at the heart of this conjecture. 'Elite rejection' manifests itself in three main ways. Firstly, the local political group demands loyalty from Councillors in a way that citizen engagement is unable to challenge (Gyford 1991). Whilst exceptions may be found, what will be observed is that:

"... in most local authorities, most of the time, the content of what the party group representatives (for example, committee chairs) say in public arenas has been largely predetermined at a group meeting of one form or another, as has the way the group will vote. Anything that threatens the authority of the group is invariably suspect! And public participation, particularly if the results are seen as binding... is clearly one such threat." (Leach and Wingfield 1999)

Group loyalty has an important influence on the individual councillor so that when the demands of the party group and of the community come into conflict, the councillor experiences a 'crisis of representation' (Copus 2004) and will generally side with the party group, something which is likely to become more common as participation initiatives become more widespread (Copus 2001).

Secondly, 'elite rejection' manifests itself through a clearly expressed preference for representative democracy with the elected councillor at its heart. Public participation, whilst occasionally tolerated and promoted

superficially, cannot be genuinely embraced by the local political elites who are embedded to this system of representative democracy and feel threatened by participation (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Leach and Wingfield 1999; Wilson 1999). As Copus argues:

“...citizen engagement in local politics and democracy generates a participatory tension within a representative system... Councillors prefer local democracy to remain representative in nature so as to ensure continued *elite* control of local politics, and, that citizen engagement beyond elections, can be tolerated in so far as it does not pose a serious challenge to that continued *elite* control.” (Copus 2007)

The effect of this preference for representative democracy can be observed in a number of different ways such as the roles politicians choose, the lack of support for initiatives whilst they are ongoing and the failure to reflect the outcomes of participatory initiatives in the formal decision making process (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). Where councillors do engage directly in participatory initiatives their influence can have negative effects. (Fung and Wright 2003; Newman 2001). In summary, where participatory initiatives are undertaken a ‘jarring’ between the ideals of participatory democracy and the realities of representative democracy’ can be observed (Bickerstaff and Walker 2005).

A third aspect of ‘elite rejection’ flows from the defensive position that councillors take as they seek to demonstrate their competence as ‘elected managers’ (Copus 2004). Participation is perceived to undermine the expertise of councillors both in terms of the management of services and in terms of their role representing the views and concerns of the public in respect of those services. Councillors wish to demonstrate their utility to the public and this is done in the context of public service delivery as the ‘service’ function of local government is significantly more important than the wider political role and it is on day to day management and performance issues that councillors spend most of their time. The implication is that: “Such immersion in public services draws councillors away from a purer political role, as a representative or governor, and places them in a defensive political relationship with the citizenry – particularly if from the majority group.” (Copus 2006)

Whilst operating within a wider liberal and social democratic frame, this conjecture places the *local political elite* concept at the centre of its analysis. Elite theory seeks to; “... examine the structure of power in communities, to see whether it is in the hands of a cohesive, self conscious minority, to test

whether it is inevitable or a merely contingent development and in doing so to illuminate the question of the nature of 'power.'" (Parry 1969) The central concern, therefore, is to focus on the 'holding and exercise of power' and on the role of collective agency in this regard (Scott 2008). Importantly power can be exercised in a number of different ways, both formally and informally (Scott 2008) and in a number of different forms, for example agenda setting, legitimising and decision making (Newman 2001) so that local political elite rejection of participation needs to be understood both in the formal arenas of power, for example the council chamber, and within informal settings where strategies of influence need to be used. The importance of power has long been recognised by proponents of participation. Arnstein (1969), for example, argued that; 'citizen participation is a categorical term- for citizen power'.

Local government within this conjecture can be understood politically as a vehicle for national political parties to exercise power locally, not as a genuinely democratic body in its own right. Parties 'dominate all facets of local government decision making', they 'exclude and constrain political activity and the expression of political opinion', they squeeze out non-party politics and the 'politics of the locality' and have only 'the most tenuous link to the citizens and communities they claim to represent and govern' (Copus 2004).

The local political elite have a difficult and sometime contradictory relationship with the public. On the one hand councillors are regarded as the only legitimate decision makers and citizens are seen as existing in a 'natural state of apathy' (Copus 2004). On the other hand councillors know that their holding and exercise of power is closely bound up with the preferences of the local electorate. This influence goes well beyond the local Council election, however, as the 'vote casts a long shadow in front of it' (Beetham 1996). It does not necessarily matter that the public are not consciously aware of their influence or seek to act upon it, what matters is that the local political elite is driven to present itself to the public in a way that the elite considers will meet with approval. This uneasy relationship provides the context for the way in which participatory initiatives are often supported in rhetoric but rejected in practice.

If local government is to become a genuine vehicle for public participation there are a number of ways that this might happen. Firstly any solution implies significant institutional redesign with a new role for elected politicians (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). Also required is a radical change to the culture of political parties or the introduction of powerful legal measures which will enable citizens to challenge the power of local political elites as it is 'only an end to the dominance of local politics by the political party that will

bring about citizen re-engagement' (Copus 2004). Such legal measures might include the right to remove individual councillors and whole councils through recall elections; and the right to trigger referenda through petitions on existing council policies or on new topics determined by citizens (Copus 2006). Ultimately what may be required is a new constitutional settlement between central and local government (Copus 2006) and a substantial reworking of democratic institutions in line with principles of citizen governance (Box 1998; Sullivan 2001).

The Corporate Manipulation Conjecture

The corporate manipulation conjectures states that public participation is used cynically by local government as a means of managing the urban population. It is one 'tender' instrument which operates alongside 'tougher' corporate management approaches (Cockburn 1977). As well as providing important intelligence about the local population, participation allows local government to shape public perceptions and can be utilised as a public relations vehicle which seeks to engineer support for pre determined policies, as tokenistic 'window dressing' or as a way to divert attention from unpopular policies (Arnstein 1969; Lowndes and Wilson 2001). Communication in participatory processes can be seen as 'flowing one way' - from the administrative professional to the citizen with information 'managed, controlled, and manipulated' (King, Feltey, et al. 1998). In the same way that business corporations need to influence and manipulate their customers, so local government needs to engage with the people that it governs: "Whereas the firm tries to reduce market uncertainty by controlling demand, by intelligent advertising and judicious product-design, the state uses participatory democracy and 'the community approach'." (Cockburn 1977) As Beresford observes:

"Participatory initiatives frequently serve to obstruct rather than increase people's involvement, being used to tokenise and coopt people, delay decisions and actions and to legitimise predetermined agendas and decisions. This seems to have been particularly true of consumerist approaches to participation, where data collection rather than empowerment is the primary aim. To date it has been this approach to participation that has dominated and this may help account for the widespread distrust of and disillusionment with participation that has developed." (Beresford 2002 p279)

Whilst the rhetoric of participation suggests empowerment, participatory initiatives are in fact; "... more or less compatible with traditional top-down

decision-making processes and in their current form can be interpreted as part of a system of domination rather than emancipation.” (Bickerstaff and Walker 2005)

Participation, along with community development initiatives, also helps local government to manage protest (Hampton 1991) even if it cannot neutralise it entirely so that; “...conflict is moderated and converted, wherever possible, onto a style of governance.” (Cockburn 1977) Small amounts of conflict can help support the status quo both by defusing situations that might otherwise become more serious and by creating the impression that democracy is a legitimate forum for protest. For this conjecture the mismatch in intention and outcome for participation in the policy process is ‘designed in’ as a ‘confidence trick’ which aims to provide legitimacy for government (Arnstein 1969; Cockburn 1977).

Authors such as Cockburn link locate the manipulation of participation within an explicitly Marxist analysis of the state which places political relationships within the context of the class relationships of a capitalist society. At the heart of this analysis is the idea that the provision of collective public services such as housing, social services and leisure services, which ‘service’ the working class in the interests of capitalism, gives rise to a conflict of interest between the state and the urban working class. The state will seek, particularly in times of economic crisis, to reduce the cost of such services and this will lead to the urban population becoming “... increasingly dissatisfied over local Council services that they receive at home – as well as being increasingly militant at work.” (Cockburn 1977) The liberal idea of governmental neutrality is rejected as the role of the state is “...to create the conditions for capital accumulation through the production of profit” and that it is “...engaged in the continuing struggle between classes which forms the dynamic of social change.” (Hampton 1991) Local government is characterised as the *local state* as it acts as an extension of the national state, sharing its work and operating as part of a unified whole albeit with a specialised role (Cockburn 1977). The idea that local government is a ‘convenience’ of national government can also be found outside of Marxist arguments (See Copus 2006 for example).

For this conjecture, consistent with its role of urban management, local government operates within a culture of enmity toward more political forms of participation. This is reflected in a deeply embedded managerialism which places emphasis upon consultation rather than deliberation and ‘consumerist’ rather than ‘citizen’ discourses with the former often tending to exclude the latter (McAteer and Orr 2006). This can be found in the attitudes of bureaucrats, many of whom are ambivalent about utilizing public input and

'the potential tension between the public's desire for greater involvement and the prerogative of public managers to act as the authoritative voice should be acknowledged' (Callanan 2005). At the same time administrators have also been identified as adversaries by citizens (King, Feltey, *et al.* 1998).

Unsurprisingly prescriptions for public participation within local government are limited within this conjecture. From a Marxist perspective participation is not, however, all bad for the urban working class as "...capital needs our participation, yet we use these openings in way that can threaten capital." (Cockburn 1977) In other words participation initiatives can be a way of voicing demands and of building collective protest. Participation and community development initiatives have 'not always worked out in the best interest of Councils' and, as a result of these initiatives, many community workers and other council employees have 'gone native' and sided with the local working class against the local council (Cockburn 1977). For the local state public participation may at times be necessary but it is nevertheless a high risk strategy.

The Institutional Constraint Conjecture

This conjecture argues that the institutions found within and across public bodies act to constrain the operation of participative initiatives even where strong policy imperatives exist. The effectiveness of participatory initiatives is delimited by existing institutional frameworks such as 'strong professional norms (based on the power of expertise), political norms (buttressed by the power of institutions based on representative democracy), and organizational norms (supported by "strategic" actors with interests in retaining decision making power at the corporate centre)' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2004). New norms of public involvement, service user empowerment and local deliberation do not displace these 'old' institutions but rather are overlaid on top of them (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2004). These existing frameworks foster processes of 'institutional deflection, accommodation and incorporation' which act to constrain participation and, whilst it is possible for institutional capacity to be used to positive effect, participation is more likely to be constrained than promoted. In practice this is reflected by a failure to provide adequate resources for initiatives, the questioning of the legitimacy of citizen groups and the strongly held concerns of officials about the validity and legitimacy of participatory initiatives (Sullivan, Newman, *et al.* 2003). Processes of institutional constraint are, however, highly contingent and can only be properly understood at the micro level of the individual initiative as they are more dynamic and unpredictable than 'popular conceptions of individual resistance or organisational 'inertia'' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2004). This means that participative forums facilitated by the same organisation

could operate in entirely different ways as; "... separate and distinct logics of appropriate action can operate in different parts of the same organisation and across different communities." (Sullivan, Newman, *et al.* 2003)

At the heart of this conjecture is institutional theory and, whilst covering a range of diverse approaches and assumptions, it nevertheless provides a valuable framework with which to explain the behaviour of local government actors (Lowndes 1996; Lowndes 2001; Scott 2001). Institutions are regarded as 'multifaceted, durable social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources', they are 'relatively resistant to change' and 'they tend to be transmitted across generations, to be maintained and reproduced (Scott 2001). Crucially the effects of institutions can be explained by regulative, normative and cultural cognitive elements although the relative importance of each is open to debate (Scott 2001). Rules (formal and informal) and norms guide action so that, when confronted with a new participatory initiative, 'actors draw on their resources to interpret and respond to it based upon pre-existing rules and pre-existing logics of appropriate behaviour' (Sullivan, Newman, *et al.* 2003).

Institutions can, however, be changed by the strategic actions of individuals (Lowndes 1996). New rules can be shaped and sustained where there is a willingness to do so by politicians and officials and this has been demonstrated by local councils who have been able to shape the 'participation game' and create an institutional environment which encourages greater levels of participation (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2006). Nevertheless, there is a difference between the levels and extent of participation and the effectiveness of participatory initiatives and their impact upon the policy process. For those initiatives facilitated by local government, existing institutional frameworks continue to present a significant challenge for their effectiveness to the extent that, in some instances, the 'old' rules and norms are so strongly entrenched that they effectively imprison 'all participants, officials and the public alike' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007).

For this conjecture the public cannot be treated as a 'pre-given entity' with 'a neatly bundled set of needs or interests that can be expressed in a rational process of debate' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007). The concept of 'the public' is instead a social construction that can be defined and redefined through discourse, ideologies and institutional practice. This view, in contrast to rational models of behaviour, places importance upon the way in which the idea of the public is understood by professionals and how this understanding influences the practice of participation. Not only is the idea of the 'the public' socially constructed by professionals but, following on from Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality', it can be argued that participation also has a

constitutive effect on participants, making them more 'governable' through the discursive practice of officials (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007). Similarly, understandings of local government will be shaped by institutional practice and local government, as a formal organisational entity, is less important than the institutional frameworks which are contained within it and cut across it, or the micro politics and dynamics of participative initiatives. Network forms of governance mean that formal organisational boundaries have become less important for actors.

Despite entrenched institutional frameworks, the possibility for participative initiatives to be effective still remains but will depend on individuals, both inside and outside of local government, having the capacity 'to challenge dominant rules and norms and to question the ways in which the rules of the game are defined' (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007). If this is to happen; "...public bodies need to be prepared to do what is necessary to make the most of the potential of public participation including addressing institutional inertia and tackling the power relationship between public bodies and public participants." (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007) This implies not just challenging 'old institutions' but fostering "the new linguistic and symbolic resources from which such challenges might flow." (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007) Consistent mobilization strategies in this context can make a difference to the institutions surrounding public participation (Lowndes, Pratchett, *et al.* 2006). Importantly, however, new initiatives are more likely to be successful when they are semi autonomous and located and/or established through voluntary groups (Barnes, Newman, *et al.* 2007); in other words at arm's length from the institutional effects of local government.

Conclusion

The five conjectures described above provide a framework for explaining the problematic relationship between local government and public participation. Each conjecture is theoretically coherent and empirically defensible and, taken together; they provide a map of alternative positions which was previously hidden. In describing the literature in this way the developing compatibility conjecture emerges as an orthodox view. In other words it can be broadly distinguished by a widely shared and long established tradition alongside a lack of serious questioning which is compounded by a lack of solid research (Dearlove 1979). Whilst aspects of the developing compatibility viewpoint have already been questioned from a number of perspectives, the use of conjectures ensures that the alternative positions are both more robust and themselves more visible. This means that advocates of the developing compatibility conjecture can defend and refine their own position. Each conjecture has the potential to be developed and of course critiqued.

Clearly, alternative policy directions are implied by the different conjectures. For this reason establishing their validity will be particularly important for those policy makers seeking to embed public participation at the local level. Different policies that flow from one or other of the different conjectures might include:

- Continued support and encouragement for local government as it seeks to further develop participatory initiatives (developing compatibility)
- A focus on the culture of national political parties and their operation at the local level (elite rejection)
- A focus on the role of third sector bodies and intermediary bodies such as the media (democratic incompatibility, institutional constraint)
- A fundamental review of the role and function of local government (democratic incompatibility, elite rejection, corporate manipulation)
- The introduction of direct electoral mechanisms such as recall ballots (elite rejection)
- Development and support for strategies which focus on institutional change (institutional constraint)
- Reduced expectations for the relationship between local government and public participation (democratic incompatibility)

Given the policy relevance of these conjectures, important research questions naturally follow. Whilst the most important is; 'which of these conjectures has the greatest explanatory power?' there are research challenges for each. In terms of the developing compatibility conjecture the challenge is perhaps twofold. Firstly there is a need to demonstrate that the increasing number of participatory initiatives is having a genuine impact on the policy process and that public participation is becoming part of the 'day job'. This is a question of more rigorous evaluation, something that has been lacking to date in the UK and more widely (Abelson, Forest, *et al.* 2003; Wilson 1999). Secondly, the challenge is to develop a theoretical model of what a hybrid of local representative and democratic democracy should look like. The value of this would be both to address the concerns raised within the democratic incompatibility conjecture and to provide a guide for policy makers and practitioners who are seeking to move beyond ad hoc approaches. Importantly this would require debate on the normative basis of such a system.

The elite rejection, corporate manipulation and institutional constraint conjectures pose a different type of research challenge; to look more carefully outside of the operation of the participatory initiatives themselves and to gain a greater understanding of what is happening along the corridors of power

and behind the closed doors of local government. Whilst most research has been devoted to studying citizen participation from the viewpoint of the citizenry (Askim and Hanssen 2008), there needs to be a renewed emphasis on understanding the official's eye view. There is a notable absence of research into public participation from the perspective of local politicians and a limited empirical knowledge of the dynamics of the political decision making process in this respect (Askim and Hanssen 2008; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000) and this would be a promising agenda. At the same time comparative analysis could provide useful counterfactual insights where, for example, political parties do not hold sway or where the power of local political elites has been successfully challenged such as in Porto Alegre, Brazil and Kerala, India (Fung and Wright 2003). Institutions provide a powerful means to analyse and explain the behaviours of the significant political and management actors and uncovering their existence and effects should be of great value. Finally, by focusing on the relationship between public participation and local government it will be possible to develop a truly comparative research agenda given that local government lends itself so well to this type of approach (John 2006).

Table 1. The relationship between local government and public participation: 5 Conjectures

Conjecture	Summary	Theoretical Frame / Focus	Local Government	Local Government Relationship with Public	Prescriptions
Developing Compatibility	Local government is increasingly successful at enhancing representative democracy with participative initiatives	Liberal & Social Democratic / Citizenship	Emergent community government	Responsive – Local government responds to needs of complex, diverse and changing citizenry	Participation can be developed through continued support for the innovation and commitment of local government – central government should take a ‘hands off’ approach
Democratic Incompatibility	Joining of participative initiatives to local government is theoretically and practically problematic	Democratic Theory / Democracy	Appropriately a solely representative institution	Disconnected - Local government is lacks relevance to public who are instrumental, rational and bounded	As participation cannot be a simple enhancement to representative democracy intermediate organisations could be utilised or expectations lowered
Elite Rejection	Local political elites reject citizen engagement when it comes into conflict with their own interests	Elite Theory / Political Power	Vehicle for national political parties	Contradictory – public exists in state of apathy yet exercises ultimate power through ballot box	Local political parties will need promote a more participative culture – requirements for direct democracy and a new central / local settlement may also be required
Corporate Manipulation	Public participation is used cynically by local government as a means of managing the urban population	Marxist Theory / Urban Management	‘Local State’ – Instrument of National Government	Conflicted – Public make demands as collective consumers of services which cannot be met by local government	Whilst initiatives are a means of manipulation they may also provide opportunities to challenge urban elites
Institutional Constraint	Institutions found within and across public bodies act to constrain the operation of participative initiatives	Institutional Theory / Institutions	Less important than the institutional frameworks which are contained within it and cut across it	Constituted - The concept of ‘the public’ is a social construction that can be defined and redefined through discourse, ideologies and institutional practice	Possibility for institutional change is left open but participative initiatives more effective when convened by non governmental bodies

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