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Here, Ank Michels and Laurens de Graaf revisit an article they wrote for *LGS* Vol 36 No 4, in which they discussed the widespread claim that citizen participation had positive effects on the quality of democracy, basing the insights they offered on research into local participatory projects in two municipalities in the Netherlands.

Examining citizen participation: local participatory policymaking and democracy revisited

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses developments in citizen participation and its contribution to democracy since the publication of the original article. It evaluates the continued relevance of the use of a normative framework to assess different forms of citizen participation, nuances some of the conclusions and shows how inclusion and a connection with formal decision-making remain central issues that need more scholarly attention. Moreover, the article shows how the framework has been used in advising councillors and organisers of local citizen initiatives.

KEYWORDS Citizen participation; democracy; democratic innovations

Introduction

In our original article, we explored the theoretical claim that citizen participation in policymaking has positive effects on democracy. Theories of participatory democracy, deliberative democracy and social capital assert that citizen involvement has positive effects on democracy: it contributes to the inclusion of individual citizens in the policy process (inclusion), it encourages civic skills

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and civic virtues (civic skills and virtues), it leads to rational decisions based on public reasoning (deliberation) and it increases the legitimacy of the process and the outcome (legitimacy). This finding formed the basis for a framework that we used to examine the probability of these claims for local participatory policymaking projects in the Netherlands.

Similar frameworks for democratic values developed by researchers in this field (e.g., Smith 2009; Michels 2011; Geissel 2009; Boogaard and Michels 2016; Van Hulst et al. 2017) have included additional democratic values or aspects, such as influence (Smith 2009; Michels 2011), transparency and efficiency (Smith 2009) and innovation (van Hulst et al. 2017). Although these frameworks may differ slightly, revisiting our approach of assessing empirical examples of citizen participation against normative criteria for democracy, we found that such an approach is still valuable. Using a (similar type of) framework to assess the relation between citizen participation and democracy offers a means to gain a deeper understanding of whether and how citizen participation contributes to a stronger democracy to be obtained.

That said, obviously major developments in citizen participation have occurred since the publication of the original article. Citizen participation has become normal practice in local democracy; various forms and types of citizen participation have developed, leading to consequential changes in the roles of local administration. These developments have implications for the conclusions drawn in the original article.

Role of citizens and contribution to democracy

Since the appearance of the original article, local governments around the world have introduced and gained experience with a wide range of instruments to enhance citizen involvement in policymaking and implementation, including different forms of interactive policymaking, deliberative forms and e-governance. In addition to this, new forms of citizen participation have developed in which the citizens take the initiative, as in the British Right to Challenge and in other, more informal bottom-up citizens' initiatives (de Graaf, van Hulst, and Michels 2015). In these cases, the role of local governments is limited to setting the rules and providing (financial) support.

In our original article, we examined the roles of citizens and the division of roles between citizens and politicians in two specific forms of citizen participation: an interactive process of policymaking in the city of Eindhoven and a participatory budgeting process in Groningen. We concluded that, although these participatory projects were aimed at giving citizens more influence, citizen participation did not lead to a new division of roles between government and citizens in either city. In sum, the original article concluded that participatory policymaking leaves vertical decision-making

intact, while at the same time creating more space for suggestions and ideas provided by citizens (2010: 488).

From more recent research, we now know that the conclusion that the influence of citizen participation on policy mainly remains limited to providing ideas and suggestions is still valid in most cases but that at the same time the role of citizens and their impact depends on the specifics of the design of the participatory process. For example, a comparative analysis of 31 cases of National Public Policy Conferences in Brazil shows different outcomes in terms of different effects on policymaking, which can be associated with differences in the organisation of the process (Pogrebinschi and Ryan 2017). In addition, sometimes the outcome of a participatory process is followed by a referendum with a binding vote for all citizens. Also, where citizens themselves take the initiative, for example, to develop and maintain a playground or to organise projects for vulnerable people in their neighbourhood, their impact on the public environment is obviously far stronger and more direct.

Second, we assessed the contribution of citizen involvement to democracy in the two cases mentioned above and concluded that citizen involvement has positive aspects on some aspects of democracy. It makes people feel more responsible for public matters and increases public engagement. It also encourages people to listen to a diversity of opinions, and it contributes to a greater legitimacy of decisions. The overall conclusion in the original article was that the most important aspect of citizen participation to democracy is not to have real power; aspects of citizenship appeared to be much more important.

In the light of research conducted since the publication of the original article, however, two refinements should be made. First, the contribution of participation to democracy differs according to type of democratic innovation. An empirical analysis of 120 cases in western countries of four different types of democratic innovation showed that deliberative forums and surveys appear to be better at promoting the exchange of arguments, whereas referendums and participatory policymaking projects are better at giving citizens influence on policymaking and involving more people (Michels 2011).

Second, our conclusion that citizen participation enhances people's feelings of responsibility for public matters and increases public engagement needs nuance. One of the findings of the original article was that citizens who take part in citizen participation initiatives are relatively highly educated, have often been involved on previous occasions and have taken part in participatory processes for a long time. Hence, the diversity of the group of participants is rather low, a finding also confirmed in other studies (Bovens and Wille 2017; Denters et al. 2011). Even for mini-publics, of which a key element is to try to attract a diverse crowd, those who decide to attend are usually well educated, older and politically or civically active (O'Flynn and Sood 2014). Also, participants tend to be more knowledgeable than non-participants, which suggests that political interest also plays a role

in the decision to participate (45). Other research on citizens' summits in the Netherlands demonstrated that not only was there a participation bias, of this selective group only a minority felt more connected and responsible after having participated in the citizen summit; many participants already had a sense of public engagement (Michels 2017). This would seem to imply that a sense of public engagement is a precondition for participation rather than a consequence.

Using the framework in practice

The framework which we developed also appeared to be useful in advising both councillors and organisers of local citizens' initiatives. We used the framework in workshops with more than 20 Dutch city councils to reflect on their role as a local assembly, city councils being the highest democratically elected authority of a local community. We raised questions such as What sort of democracy do you want for your community; How important is participatory policymaking; and What will you do about inclusion, deliberation, legitimacy, civic skills and virtues and influence to strengthen local democracy? The framework helped local councillors to broaden their understanding of the different aspects of local democracy. Councillors commented that they were 'not fully aware of all these different aspects, but liked the overview. It helped them to reflect on democracy from different angles' (de Graaf 2013).

We also advised organisers of local citizens' initiatives (citizens or social entrepreneurs) and used the framework to formulate a number of key pointers, aimed at strengthening the democratic value of the initiative. These included the following (de Graaf 2017, 23–24):

- (1) Make sure there is room for criticism to be voiced. This means that you should also be open to opponents or dissidents and not only than to your followers. Do not exclude them, even if they may slow the initiative down (inclusion and legitimacy).
- (2) Maintain communication with people who are not (yet) involved in the initiative. People are not obliged to take part, but it is important to communicate the message to those who are not directly involved that they are genuinely welcome at any time (deliberation and inclusion).
- (3) Bear in mind that things are not about you or the organisation. The initiative is meant to contribute to the public domain, and it is sustained by people who commit themselves because they are driven to do so. Do not simply ask people to fill vacancies or perform specific tasks. Ask them 'open questions' instead: What would you care to do? What makes you tick? What are you good at? (Civic virtues and skills).

- (4) Invite people to try their hand at taking the driver's seat to forestall a succession problem and make a timely exit yourself. Much of the expertise in such initiatives has been gained in a learning-by-doing process, and new participants require sufficient time to go through a similar learning curve (inclusion, civic virtues and skills).
- (5) Be transparent about any possible private interests. Difficult as it may be to discuss this theme, not discussing it may prove to be even more difficult in the end (legitimacy).
- (6) Make sure there is a network not only inside but also outside the local community. Many ideas, sources of inspiration and other resources (social, political and economic capital) will be available within the community itself, but do broaden your horizons, as this will often prove to be fruitful (inclusion and influence).
- (7) Do not forget that it is simply fun to join in: fun is a very rich source of energy. Celebrate your successes (more than civic virtues and skills).

Conclusion: a research agenda

Now that we have made some nuances to the findings of the original article, to some extent, nuanced the findings of the original article, while at the same time shown the continued relevance of the use of the normative framework in assessing different forms of participation and as a basis for councillors, citizens and other parties to organise democratic participatory policymaking and initiatives, we conclude with a brief research agenda.

Revisiting the original article revealed a number of fundamental issues related to citizen participation. A first issue refers to the relation with formal decision-making: how should participatory and deliberative forums be linked to formal decision-making forums? No connection at all would relegate participatory projects, at best, to interesting democratic experiments. Moreover, this could be off-putting to participants who may have joined with high expectations, are then disappointed and who then perhaps even decide not to take part in future projects. We believe that questions such as how to increase the impact of citizen participation and how to connect this to political decision-making deserve more scholarly attention. This also relates to the emerging literature on scaling-up, particularly for mini-publics, in which it is argued that it is vital that participation has an impact outside the forum, in the broader public sphere (Niemeyer 2014; Curato and Böker 2016). One way of approaching these issues is to think about smart ways of combining participatory processes and formal decision-making, for example, by splitting the process into different phases and coupling participatory and deliberative phases to the phases of decision-making.

The lack of diversity and inclusion is a second issue that needs more attention from researchers studying citizen participation and democratic innovations. Well-educated, civically active and politically interested citizens are overrepresented in all forms of citizen participation. Even in mini-publics which aim to attract a diverse group of participants, biases are likely to remain due to self-selection. A systematic failing to include citizens who are less interested in politics, less civically active and more cynical may affect the outcome of participation (Binnema and Michels 2016), which ultimately undermines the legitimacy and democratic value of participation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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