

# Between Party Democracy and Citizen Democracy

## Explaining Attitudes of Flemish Local Chairs Towards Democratic Innovations

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### Abstract

*As a response to the perceived legitimacy crisis that threatens modern democracies, local government has increasingly become a laboratory for democratic renewal and citizen participation. This article studies whether and why local party chairs support democratic innovations fostering more citizen participation. More specifically, we analyse the relative weight of ideas, interests and institutions in explaining their support for citizen-centred democracy. Based on the Belgian Local Chairs Survey in 2018 (albeit restricting our analysis to Flanders), the central finding is that ideas matter more than interests and institutions. Ideology is alive and kicking with regard to democratic innovation, with socialist and ecologist parties and populist parties being most supportive of participatory arrangements. By contrast, interests and institutions play, at this stage, a minor role in explaining support for participatory innovations.*

**Keywords:** democratic innovations, citizen participation, local politics, Flanders, Belgium.

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## 1 Introduction

Debates on the alleged ‘democratic malaise’ and dissatisfaction with democracy have been around for some time. In response, do-it-yourself-politics (DIY-politics) and putting in place democratic innovations allowing citizens to participate more directly have been seen as a good way of overcoming the limitations of representative mechanisms (Goodin, 2008; Pilet, Steyvers, Delwit & Reynaert, 2006; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014; van Ostaijen, 2018). However, the problem remains to find the right balance between participation and representation. The local level is often seen as the level where this balance can be struck (Bacqué & Sintomer, 2011; Renson, 2017). A twofold argument is typically put to the fore: the proximity both in terms of people and space, on the one hand, and the nature of decisions that affect citizens in their daily lives, on the other hand. Although survey data indicate a difference in the levels of trust and satisfaction between the administration and political institutions on the one hand and between government levels on the other hand, even at the local level, trust and satisfaction among citizens are low (De Koster, Kampen, Caluwaerts, Depauw & Deschouwer, 2010, pp. 25-27, 74, 78; Denters, 2002). The data collected during the exit poll of the 14 October 2018 elections shows that the municipal government got an average trust score of 6 out of 10 and the mayor 5.8 out of 10, which is still one point higher than the federal and regional governments (Close, Dodeigne, Hennau & Reuchamps, 2020).

The declining levels of trust prompted calls for more legitimate policymaking, and the regional authorities that oversee local institutions and policies were aware of this. That is why they made use of their powers to revive local democracy. Both the Flemish *Gemeentedecreet* and the Walloon *Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation* introduced a number of participatory mechanisms to reduce the distance between politics and citizens.<sup>1</sup> After all, greater participation by the citizen is seen as one of the most frequently used ways of improving the legitimacy of the policy and administration.

Even though the regions have created space for local experimentation with citizen participation, the adoption of democratic innovations at the local level depends on whether local parties support more citizen participation. In particular, it is important to find out whether local parties are willing to embrace participatory innovations that are not yet institutionalised, and, above all, mechanisms that have the potential to give real power to the citizens. Indeed, despite all good intentions, we see that the effective use of participation as a means of strengthening local policy is limited (Van Damme, Schram & Brans, 2012) and remains mainly embedded in the traditional consultation and advisory structures (Van Damme, Jacquet, Schiffino & Reuchamps, 2017). In addition, previous research has already shown that the success of citizen participation strongly depends on the political support that exists for the introduction of participatory mechanisms (Lowndes, Pratchet & Stoker, 2001a, 2001b; Jacquet & van der Does, 2020). The extent to which, and the way in which, participation is organised therefore strongly depends on the political will of local politicians and parties, which,

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according to Vetter (2009), indicates a continuing struggle between a party model and a citizen model for local government.

However, a recent analysis of empirical data on Flemish party members shows that the delineation between party membership and new forms of participation is not so clear-cut. Not only do party members participate in new forms of participation to a higher degree than other citizens do, but they are largely supportive of an enhanced role for citizen initiatives (Wauters, Verschuere & Valcke, 2020). This suggests that engagement in citizen initiatives is considered an additional form of participation (next to the traditional party membership), giving support to the pluralisation thesis (as opposed to the transformation thesis) (Hustinx, Meijs, Handy & Cnaan, 2012). Whereas the transformation thesis states that new forms of participation attract another kind of participants (referring to 'monitorial' or 'critical' citizens), the pluralisation thesis assumes that citizens expand their repertoire by combining traditional and new forms of participation (including engagement in citizen initiatives) in complex ways (referring to 'civic omnivores') (Hustinx et al., 2012).

Given the increasing popularity of democratic innovations, the central research question of this article is, to what extent do local parties support citizen participation in local government? And, which ideas, interests and institutions explain local parties' positions towards participatory innovations? Based on a quantitative analysis of the 2018 local chair survey, we argue that local parties support mainly non-binding innovations and that institutions and interests play only a minor role in explaining their positions. Instead, support for democratic innovations at the local level primarily seems to be based on these parties' ideologies, with left-wing parties being more supportive of democratic innovations than right-wing parties.

Studying (the support for) democratic innovation at the local level in Flanders can be relevant in different ways. Most generally, it can enrich our insights into the core process of democracy. Indeed, although voting can still be regarded as the democratic standard in Western liberal democracies, where political participation is based primarily on the competition between political parties and political candidates, other forms of (more direct) democratic participation have been on the rise for some time (Goodin, 2008; Kuhlmann & Bouckaert, 2016). Secondly, our article adds to the specific literature on democratic innovation by studying this aspect of participation in the context of local politics. Finally, studying local party support for democratic innovation is important to further our understanding of the local party political system as a whole. Although Flanders (being a part of the Belgian political system) has been labelled as a partyocracy, the importance of new forms of participation at the local level should not be neglected, as we will see below. Moreover, the importance of the attitudes of local politicians has largely been overlooked (Sønderskov, 2019; Verstraete et al., 2018). This is especially relevant because research shows that most politicians do not actively support interactive processes because they fear that these new forms of citizen participation threaten their political primacy (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Jacquet, Moskovic, Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016).

In the remainder of this article, we first discuss the theory on citizen participation at the local level, and, more specifically, we will highlight in what way interests, ideas and institutions might impact support for participatory democracy at the local level. We will then run multivariate analyses explaining local party chapters' support for citizen participation as a goal, and for three specific participatory techniques, namely consultative referendums, binding referendums and randomly selected advisory citizen assemblies.

## 2 Theoretical Perspectives on (Local) Citizen Participation: Interests, Ideas and Institutions

Already back in 1969, Sherry Arnstein demonstrated that citizen participation can be conceptualised as a ladder based on 'the extent of citizens' power' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216) going from forms of participation that do not give any power to the citizens, quite the contrary in fact, to participation that entails a real citizen control of decision-making. Since then, many works have sought to refine this ladder, also in a multidimensional perspective (for instance, Fung, 2006). The theoretical framework of this article falls back on the original ladder as many local politicians think of participation in such vertical dimension.

The extent of citizens' power is actually at the core of the current debates regarding citizen participation. In fact, the idea that the outcome of citizen participation should be binding or not is the sticking point. In a survey comparing Belgian MPs' and citizens' views about citizen participation (Jacquet, Schiffino, Reuchamps & Latinis, 2015; Vandamme et al., 2018), it strikingly came out that MPs were willing to open up more room for citizen participation, but the participatory mechanisms should not be binding. By contrast, citizens were willing to go one step further.

Governments have tried to address dissatisfaction with democracy in different ways (Kuhlmann & Bouckaert, 2016; Pilet et al., 2006). One of the avenues is to complement representative democracy by putting in place democratic innovations and new participatory mechanisms and by so doing to secure the four 'democratic goods' that have been highlighted as fundamental in most theories of democracy, namely inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgment and transparency (Smith, 2009).

International comparative research shows that there is a growth in the number and diversity of participation arrangements. This applies to supralocal levels of government, and even more so to local levels of government, where it is expected that the smaller scale would facilitate citizen participation (Niessen, 2019; Wauters et al., 2020). However, citizen participation is a multifaceted flag, and expectations with regard to its results may also differ. Firstly, there are direct-aggregative forms, such as referendums and citizens' surveys (Kersting, 2013). They are direct, because the voice of the individual citizen is heard by the administration. They are aggregated, because the views of the citizen are counted, rather than discussed. Secondly, there are also direct-integrative participation

arrangements that can be found at the local level (Gaudin, et al., 2018a; 2018b). This concerns deliberative planning processes or citizens' conferences (mini-publics) in which consensus on problems and solutions is sought. These new participation variants present themselves in addition to the existence of more traditional participation arrangements such as advisory councils and public studies.

In this article, we use the data of the Local Chairs Survey in order to explore three such mechanisms: binding and non-binding referendums and additional parallel city councils but with only consultative power. One might wonder why we discuss referendums in an article on democratic innovations. Although they have a long-standing tradition in some countries (e.g. USA or Switzerland), we agree with Smith (2009) and consider referendums to be a democratic innovation because "in the institutional architecture of advanced industrial democracies, it tends to be used sparingly" (p. 111).

So what might explain the position of the local chairs on referendums but also on other forms of participation? Palier and Surel (2005) have summarised that three sets of variables explain public policies, known as the three 'i-words': interests, ideas and institutions. Research has shown that participatory innovations are adopted for a variety of reasons that fall within these three sets of variables (Lowndes et al., 2001a; Mayer, Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2005). Indeed, Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk (2015) distinguish between the instrumental (interests), cultural (ideas) and democratic (institutions) perspective, on which we base the following theoretical framework.

### 2.1 *Interests*

Research has shown that democratic innovations are adopted for a variety of reasons. From an instrumental point of view, these innovations can, on the one hand, increase the carrying capacity and legitimacy of decisions to be taken or policies to be implemented. On the other hand, citizen participation can increase the effectiveness of local policy. The policy is then enriched in terms of content by taking into account the opinion and experience of citizens (Edelenbos, 2000).

However, the adoption of democratic innovations could also be inspired by mere strategic interest. Research on participatory budgeting has shown that the role of the mayor was a crucial factor (Oels, 2003; Ryan, 2014, p. 71; Wampler, 2007, p. 258). In fact, the position of the party in local politics and the majority/opposition dynamics can determine the extent to which the participation of citizens is considered important. Participatory democracy means a new form of local governance. It introduces new mechanisms that can potentially reorient the relationship between citizen and politics, and it also implies a movement towards network governance in which citizens and government interact on an equal footing with each other to shape local policy. In this sense, participation implies a shift in power. It redefines the role of political parties as the central link between voters and elected people in representative democracy, and this shift inevitably meets with resistance (De Sousa Santos, 1998; Vandamme et al., 2018).

This dynamic was evident during the parliamentary debates on the introduction of local and provincial referendums in 1997. The organisation of these consultations was finally adopted, but in a certain sense, the municipal and provin-

cial councils protected their own decision-making arena by opting for consultative – and therefore non-binding – consultations. On the pretext that the political primacy lies with the elected members, they tried to secure their power for too many interventions by the citizens (Buelens, 2009).

International research also shows that self-interest often stands in the way of far-reaching democratic reforms based on a participatory approach. Bowler, Donovan and Karp (2006, p. 437) state that “we expect winners who are members of the government to be most supportive of current electoral arrangements and most resistant to institutional change”. The expectation is therefore that citizen participation will come across as the most threatening to those who are currently and/or usually in power.

## 2.2 *Ideas*

In addition to the instrumental vision, the expectations of some actors also include a substantial vision of participation, in which democracy is not seen as a decision-making mechanism, but as a social ideal (Mayer et al., 2005). In this vision, local participatory arrangements must contribute to increase the involvement of citizens. Participation is then not a means of achieving more support, or better policy, but an end in itself.

In this regard, the call for more citizen participation should also echo calls for more intra-party democracy. If parties advocate the implementation of democratic reforms, they may be tempted to start within their own party. The basis for citizen participation can therefore be related to the extent to which parties attach importance to participation in their own functioning. One of the most important arguments from the literature on internal party democracy (Scarrow, 1999) is that citizen participation also requires an open organisational culture (Kravagna, Reuchamps & Delberghe, 2013). After all, citizen participation must go hand in hand with a political culture (at the macro, meso or micro level) that sees merit in reflecting the diversity among the population in its policy. Caluwaerts, Reuchamps and Brans (2013) showed, on the basis of the 2012 Local Chairs Survey, that there is a positive correlation between the importance that local party chairs attach to the participation of members and the importance that they attach to the participation of citizens. This strong correlation confirmed that support for citizen participation finds a fertile breeding ground in a participatory organisational culture. It is therefore possible to argue that there is a relationship between ‘micro-democracy’ (within the local party branch) and attitudes towards ‘macro-democracy’ (within society as a whole). Yet this relationship is not automatic because the different dimensions of participation only partially overlap. The question of support for citizen participation cannot therefore be reduced to one specific vision of how democratic parties are in their own workings, but a multidimensional vision of what a democracy should look like is required, which also relates to ideology.

More specifically, ideology can influence the parties’ support for participation. Some ideologies lend themselves more to openness to civil society than others: for example, the radically transformative potential of participation is less easily reconciled with conservative ideologies, while ecological parties, which ini-

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tially grew out of new social movements, will value citizens' participation more strongly (Geissel & Hess, 2017). Previous research into participatory budgeting in Latin America and Europe has shown that citizen participation carries with it an important degree of empowerment because it creates a form of counter-power against the existing representative structures (Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke, 2008, p. 175). The participation of citizens and society as a whole is stronger, which is why these forms of innovation are mainly supported by left-wing parties (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 4). In fact, some of them have given participation a central role in their political programme (Cohen & Fung, 2004). However, Galais and Font (2011) remind us that "it is not clear whether all the left [party] families share this same priority" (p. 10). And to be sure, there are also partisans of citizen participation to be found among right-wing parties and Christian-democratic parties (Jacquet et al., 2015; Schiffino, Jacquet, Cogels & Reuchamps, 2019).

Finally, earlier research found a link between post-materialist attitudes and a left-wing ideological orientation (Gilljam, Persson & Karlsson, 2012). While materialism, with its emphasis on individualistic values and strong authority structures, is in keeping with right-wing ideologies, post-materialists attach great importance to self-expression, collectivism and the quality of life. These post-materialist value orientations are prominently present in left-wing parties, and they strongly overlap with attitudes towards democracy and citizen participation.

Post-materialist politicians who value political expression and value giving people more say in government decisions may be more supportive of reforms, even if these reforms weaken their own control of the political agenda (Bowler et al., 2006, p. 437).

This is supported by research among Flemish party members: members of leftist parties tend to have a more positive stance towards neighbourhood committees (Wauters et al., 2020). The hypothesis that follows is that parties that place themselves on the political spectrum on the left will attach more importance to the participation of citizens. Of course, we should not reify the ideology dimension to the left-right axis, but also take into account the stance of the local chairs on progressive-conservative and materialist-post-materialist dimensions, as well as how their support of the proposed forms of participation varies on the ladder of participation.

### 2.3 *Institutions*

A third set of determinants that can influence support for local participation concerns institutional/geographical factors. We make a distinction between the size of the municipality and whether the municipality has historically had any experience with consultative referendums.

First of all, the size of the municipalities might matter. Participation arrangements encounter problems when they have to be applied on too large a scale. Participatory tools suffer greatly from scale problems, and modern mass democracies therefore pose major challenges for the feasibility of citizen engagement (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). At the local government level, this problem of scale

may be less pronounced for two reasons (Dandoy et al., 2013). On the one hand, bringing together a selection of citizens in municipalities is less of a problem from a logistical point of view. On the other hand, the complexity of local policy is more limited, and the participating citizens have a better understanding of how the problems concretely affect their lives. What's more, the municipality is closest to the population.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the term 'municipality' covers many aspects and that there is a great deal of local diversity. The administration of a large city will find it more difficult to implement participatory techniques because the diversity of the population – and consequently the number of inputs it has to process – is very large. We can therefore expect greater support for the participation of citizens in smaller municipalities because they are better able to deal with the problems of scale. What's more, participation is more likely to yield impact in smaller municipalities (Denters et al., 2014, p. 152). In fact, "in municipalities with few inhabitants, deliberative procedures seem to be easier to organize" (Geissel & Hess, 2017, p. 6) and it is "easier for participants to hold the public authority to account for failure to implement proposals" (Font, Smith, Galais & Alarcon, 2016, p. 9).

On the other hand, however, the demand for more citizen participation is often greater in large municipalities than in small ones. In small municipalities, the (physical and symbolic) distance between citizens and government is smaller. In addition, large cities are more often confronted with a very diverse population and very complex problems, as a result of which the need for legitimacy through citizen participation is greater (Dodeigne, Jacquet & Reuchamps, 2019). But in municipalities with larger populations, Geissel and Hess (2017) posit that "it might be more difficult to influence local politics because more citizens and interest groups compete for influence" (p. 6).

In addition to the size argument, it might also matter whether the local community had any experience with democratic innovations such as consultative referendums. The results of a study on Sweden's local political representatives' attitudes towards citizen protests show that local politicians with more protest experience show higher protest acceptance: "the more experience, the more acceptance" (Gilljam et al., 2012, p. 260). *Mutatis mutandis*, this could be applied to democratic innovations at the local level aiming at more citizen participation: e.g. local politicians who experienced a local referendum could be more supportive of those specific participatory mechanisms or more inclined to (stimulate) citizen participation in general. Not only did the research on representatives' own experiences find a significant positive effect, but, in addition, the effect of experience seemed to be conditional on ideology and (parliamentary) position. Positive effects of protest experiences were only found among the opposition and leftist representatives. The effect of position in the municipal council is an interesting finding as it tells us that politicians of majority and opposition parties have somewhat different self-interests.



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### 3 Data, Operationalisation and Method

To answer our research question we rely, in line with the other contributions in this Special issue, on data that was gathered in the scope of the Local Chairs Survey in 2018. As the quality of the data is lower in the French-speaking part of Belgium, we restricted our analysis to Flanders – the Dutch-speaking part.

This article aims to explain local party branch support for citizen involvement as well as the means that local chairs consider suitable to achieve (more) participation from citizens. In order to measure the general support, we rely on the question ‘How important is it for your local party branch to take up new forms of citizen participation in your party programme?’. Local party chairs answered this question on a scale ranging from 0 (‘not important at all’) to 5 (‘very important’). As for the specific means, the survey includes a question that allows one to tab support for different, specific types of citizen involvement. The question reads as follows: ‘Please indicate for each of the following instruments whether you are in favour of the instrument or not.’ The inquired instruments comprise (1) an advisory citizen assembly that can give advice on local issues and is constituted by sortition, (2) replacing the elected, local council by a citizen council that is constituted by sortition, (3) a consultative non-binding local referendum and (4) a binding local referendum. Survey respondents’ support for each of these instruments was captured with a dummy variable indicating that they are ‘in favour’ or ‘not in favour’ for the respective instrument. We rely on these variables to gain more insight into the means that local party branches deem suitable to achieve (more) citizen participation.

As for the independent variables, we are interested in the effects of ideas, institutions and interests. The operationalisation of ideas is twofold: On the one hand, we measure party ideology, based on the question that captures the name of the party a respondent is part of. We expect parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum to be more in favour of citizen participation than parties on the right side of the ideological spectrum. On the other hand, we measure ideas by the importance that party chairs attach to intra-party democracy. We expect that party chairs who think it is important that ordinary party members can have a say in the party branch’s organisation and functioning are also more supportive of citizen participation. We capture their support for intra-party democracy by relying on the question: ‘A political party can strive for different aims. How important do you think it is for your local party branch to strive for the following aims?’ Among the proposed aims there is ‘Giving ordinary party members a say?’, and the response scale ranges from 0 (‘not important at all’) to 5 (‘very important’).

Furthermore, we operationalise institutions. On the one hand, we included the size of the municipality. Based on the postal code that respondents filled in, we are able to identify their municipalities and to distinguish with a simple dummy variable between big and regional cities (=1) and small municipalities (=0), based on the oft-used Belfius municipal typology. On the other hand, we included a dichotomised variable indicating whether a consultative referendum

had already been held in the municipality before, i.e. whether there was previous experience with referendums (=1) or not (=0).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, we focus on interests as independent variables and operationalise them, first, by distinguishing between parties that are in the majority (=1) and those in opposition (=0) and, second, by taking the size of the local branch in terms of members into account. The first variable is based on the question 'Is the party with which you participated in the 2012 local elections represented in the local government now?'. Respondents had three options to answer this question: (1) yes, our party governs along, (2) yes, our party governs in a coalition government and (3) no, our party is in the opposition. We recoded this variable into a dummy variable distinguishing between being in government (comprising response options 1 and 2) and being in the opposition. The second variable is based on the question 'How many members did your local party have in 2017?'

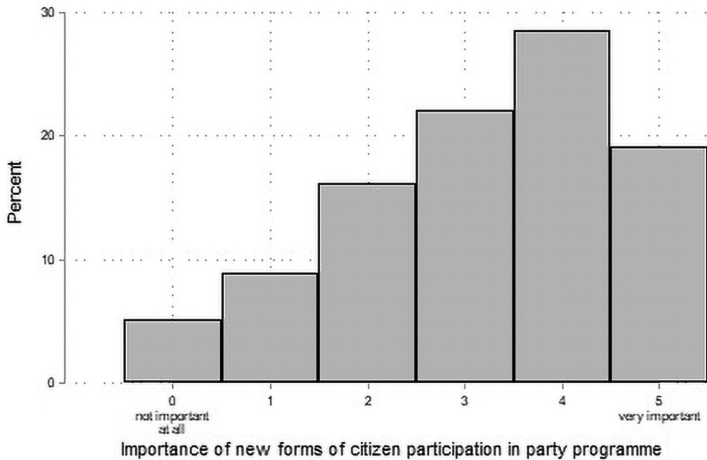
We conduct our analysis in two steps. In the first step, we investigate local parties' support for citizen involvement in politics. We provide some descriptive analyses as well as a multivariate regression analysis, taking all suggested independent variables into account.

In the second step, we focus on the support for specific instruments that can be used to implement (more) citizen involvement. Again, we start from describing the data and then evolve to more comprehensive, multivariate analyses. Given that support for specific instruments is captured by simple dummy variables indicating support (=1) or no support (=0), we opted for logistic regression analyses in order to explain this support.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Support for Citizen Involvement in Politics

This article deals with the question of to what extent and through which means local party branches support more citizen participation in local politics. Before turning to the specific participatory institutions, we will first analyse the determinants of overall support for more citizen participation. In order to do so, we first want to gain insight on how important local chairs think it is to introduce new forms of citizen participation in their party programme. Figure 1 shows that, overall, local chairs seem to perceive this as rather important (average score is 3.2 on a scale from 0 (not important at all) to 5 (very important)). This might be an indication for a general willingness to experiment with new forms of citizen participation at least among the local political elites. However, it is also possible that support for these kinds of mechanisms is overestimated because of a social desirability bias in the answers of these local chairs and/or a self-selection bias in filling out the survey, as it might be the case that particularly local chairs who are open to citizen participation are also more willing to complete the Local Chairs Survey.



**Figure 1** *Support for new forms of citizen participation in the party programme (N = 234)*

As elaborated previously, we use this item as an operationalisation of a more general support for citizen involvement in politics. In the next step we conducted a regression analysis in order to test our hypotheses.

Table 1 reports the results of the regression analysis predicting levels of support for citizen involvement in politics based on ideas, interests and institutions. Even though we hypothesised that support for participatory democracy might be due to ideas, institutions and interests alike, a simple look at the explained variance suggests that ideas play a predominant role. 23.7% of all variation in support for citizen participation can be explained by ideas (i.e. party ideology and support for intra-party democracy) alone. The explained variance of institutions (0.9%) and interests (4.4%) is much lower.

Not only are ideas the strongest determinants of a local branch's position on citizen participation, but a closer analysis reveals that the relationship runs in the direction that we hypothesised. The results indeed suggest that there is a positive relationship between support for citizen participation and support for intra-party democracy. Local chairs who state that participation of members in their own party branch is important are also more inclined to support wider citizen participation in local affairs. This suggests that local parties have a more generalised view of citizen participation, which is not merely limited to their internal functioning.

In addition, the regression analysis also reveals that the question about the relationship between ideology and support for participation is justified. Party ideology is even the strongest determinant of support for participatory democracy among local party chairs in Flanders. As we mentioned in the theory section, previous research has shown that participatory techniques are generally empowering for citizens and that they are therefore more compatible with left-wing

ideologies and less compatible with right-wing ideologies. Our data confirm this trend: support for citizen participation is highest among local party chairs from the socialist SP.A, and especially the ecologist party Groen. The position of Groen as a strong supporter of participatory democracy makes intuitive sense since it is an outspokenly post-materialist party that has always held political self-expression and participation in high regard.

Even though these results confirm participatory democracy's "progressive bent" (Ryfe, 2010, p. 1), they are more nuanced on the right side of the spectrum. Based on the theory, one would assume that outspokenly right-wing and conservative parties (Vlaams Belang and N-VA) would be least in favour of citizen participation, but, in line with previous findings from Caluwaerts et al. (2013), the data suggests that there is no significant difference in support for participatory democracy between these right-wing and more centrist parties (Open VLD and CD&V).

#### *4.2 Support for Specific Participatory Institutions*

Besides analysing the general support for citizen participation in local policymaking, we also decided to look at specific ways in which citizens could theoretically participate. More specifically, we initially distinguished between four different participatory institutions: (1) consultative randomly selected citizen forums, (2) a randomly selected city council, (3) consultative (i.e. non-binding) referendums and (4) binding local referendums. However, we had to drop the second one since there was very little variation on this variable (see Figure 2). Even though randomly selected assemblies have received increasing levels of attention in recent years, only five (out of 241) respondents supported the idea of replacing the elected city council by a randomly selected citizen assembly. This, in all likelihood, is the consequence of the fact that this innovation fundamentally undermines parties' fundamental function in selecting political candidates and in aggregating and articulating interests. Parties would largely make themselves redundant, which explains their reluctance in supporting this innovation.

We hence focus on support for non-binding referendums, binding referendums and advisory randomly selected citizen councils and conduct three binomial logistic regressions predicting this support (see Table 2). The first finding is that the explanatory power of ideas, institutions and interests yield very different results for all three types of participatory techniques: they explain only 11.8% of the variation in support for non-binding referendums, 14.9% of support for consultative citizen forums and about 20% of support for binding referendums. Moreover, Table 2 also highlights that interests drive support for non-binding referendums, whereas support for the other two participatory methods is determined most strongly by ideational factors.

Even though consultative referendums are the most widely accepted participatory technique, and even though local consultative referendums have been formally allowed since 1997, our descriptive analyses (see above) have shown that about 30% of the respondents do not support this technique. Table 2 shows that ideational factors do not play a central role in explaining support for or opposition to consultative referendums. Neither party ideology nor support for intra-

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**Table 1** *OLS regression predicting support for citizen participation among local party chairs<sup>a</sup>*

		Support for citizen participation	
		B(SE)	Sign.
<b>Constant</b>		2.353 (0.469)	0.000
<b>Ideas<sup>b</sup></b>	Ideology (ref.: CD&V)		
	– Groen	0.813 (0.337)	<b>0.017</b>
	– N-VA	0.058 (0.286)	0.840
	– Open VLD	0.666 (0.400)	0.097
	– SP.A	0.314 (0.142)	<b>0.022</b>
	– Vlaams Belang <sup>c</sup>	-0.335 (0.477)	0.482
	Intra-party democracy	0.346 (0.076)	<b>0.000</b>
<b>Institutions</b>	Big and regional cities	0.394 (0.433)	0.364
	Historical experience with referendum	-0.074 (0.350)	0.833
<b>Interests</b>	Majority	-0.254 (0.183)	0.165
	Number of members	0.000 (0.000)	0.333
<b>R<sup>2</sup> ideas<sup>d</sup></b>		23.7%	
<b>R<sup>2</sup> institutions</b>		0.9%	
<b>R<sup>2</sup> interests</b>		4.4%	
<b>R<sup>2</sup> total</b>		21.5%	
<b>N</b>		212	

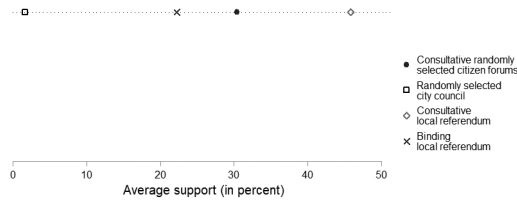
<sup>a</sup> In additional analyses, not shown here, we checked for interaction effects between party ideology and majority-opposition dynamics. These interaction terms were not significant.

<sup>b</sup> Our initial models also included left-right self-placement of the local party branch as an ideological explanatory factor. However, owing to problems of multicollinearity between party ideology and the self-placement scale, the variable was omitted from the final analysis.

<sup>c</sup> PVDA was not included in the analysis because of the low number of respondents (N = 11).

<sup>d</sup> These R-squared figures are the results of regression models with ideas, interests and institutions added individually, in order to determine the explained variance for each of these I's. So the ideas alone had an R<sup>2</sup> of 23.7%, institutions alone accounted for 0.9% of the R<sup>2</sup> and interests alone accounted for 4.4% of the R<sup>2</sup>. The overall R<sup>2</sup>, including all variables, amounts to 21.5%.

party democracy shows any significant relationship with support for consultative referendums. Majority-opposition dynamics, however, do yield significant effects. More specifically, chairs of local parties that are in the opposition are significantly more likely to support consultative referendums. This suggests that those who are in power are more likely to resist sharing that power with citizens than those who are not in power. This is in line with what Buelens (2009) reported: opposition parties find citizen inputs more important than majority parties because the latter expect citizen participation to come at the expense of their own power. This suggests that even though they have gained wide acceptance, consultative referendums now are the object of a strategic battle over power and how and when to use them.



**Figure 2** *Average support for new forms of citizen participation in the party programme, by party*

The fact that strategic considerations only affect consultative referendums is somewhat surprising given that each of these three participatory mechanisms is in essence a way of redistributing power between politicians and citizens. The question remains, however, why interests (such as majority-opposition dynamics) only affect consultative referendums, and not other innovations, where party ideology plays a more prominent role. One explanation could be that consultative referendums have indeed already been implemented, contrary to the other two innovations that remain speculative. As such, there is a real possibility for citizens to use consultative referendums to contest the majority's power.

The second main finding from Table 2 is similar to the results from Table 1: support for binding referendums and consultative randomised citizen councils is largely determined by party ideology. In line with our hypothesis, we find that the post-materialist, ecologist party Groen is a strong supporter of both participatory techniques and that the socialist SP.A is also significantly more supportive of citizen councils. This finding partially confirms democratic innovations' perceived progressive agenda. However, Table 2 also holds a somewhat unexpected result: the local chairs of the radical right-wing party Vlaams Belang are apparently also inclined to support binding referendums and consultative citizen councils, even though the latter effect is significant only at the 0.10 level. This is a surprising finding in light of Table 1. After all, the data suggests that local Vlaams Belang party chairs are strongly in favour of binding referendums and randomly selected citizen councils (Table 2), but, at the same time, they are not necessarily loud supporters of the goal of increasing citizen participation (Table 1). This is in line with previous research that finds that right-wing populist parties are strongly in favour of direct democratic techniques, such as referendums (Bowler, Denmark, Donovan & McDonnell, 2017; Coffe & Michels, 2014; Mudde, 2007), whereas ecologist and post-materialist parties favour deliberative types of democratic innovations (Biard, Bottin, Cogels & Sabbe, 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2017).

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**Table 2** Binomial logistic regression predicting support for three participatory institutions among local party chapters<sup>a</sup>

		Model 1: non-binding referen- dums		Model 2: binding referendums		Model 3: consultative randomly selected citizen councils	
		B(SE)	Sign	B(SE)	Sign	B(SE)	Sign
<b>Constant</b>		2.066 (0.900)	0.022	-2.394 (1.002)	0.017	-1.910 (0.861)	0.026
<b>Ideas</b>	Ideology (ref.: CD&V)	REF		REF		REF	
	- Groen	0.329 (0.667)	0.622	1.888 (0.700)	<b>0.007</b>	2.148 (0.637)	<b>0.001</b>
	- N-VA	0.039 (0.502)	0.983	0.330 (0.592)	0.577	-0.270 (0.517)	0.602
	- Open VLD	0.979 (0.794)	0.218	0.617 (0.772)	0.424	0.499 (0.683)	0.456
	- SPA	-0.310 (0.586)	0.597	0.823 (0.685)	0.424	1.712 (0.584)	<b>0.003</b>
	- Vlaams Belang <sup>b</sup>			3.738 (1.314)	<b>0.004</b>	0.452 (0.819)	0.581
	Intra-party democracy	0.015 (0.139)	0.914	0.124 (0.157)	0.430	0.116 (0.136)	0.392
<b>Institutions</b>	Big and regional cities	-0.457 (0.768)	0.552	-0.393 (1.102)	0.721	-0.380 (0.771)	0.622
	Historical experience with referendum	-0.196 (0.634)	<b>0.757</b>	-1.244 (0.991)	0.209	-0.248 (0.634)	0.696
<b>Interests</b>	Majority	-1.134 (0.320)	<b>0.001</b>	-0.200 (0.377)	0.595	-0.453 (0.320)	0.157
	Number of members	0.000 (0.001)	0.826	-0.002 (0.002)	0.256	0.000 (0.001)	0.896
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup> ideas</b>		3.3%		17.8%		14.7%	
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup> institutions</b>		0.3%		0.4%		0.2%	
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup> interests</b>		9.9%		7.7%		3.3%	
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup> total</b>		12.3%		22.1%		14.1%	

*Table 2 (Continued)*

	Model 1: non-binding referendums		Model 2: binding referendums		Model 3: consultative randomly selected citizen councils	
<b>N</b>	<b>B(SE)</b>	<b>Sign</b>	<b>B(SE)</b>	<b>Sign</b>	<b>B(SE)</b>	<b>Sign</b>
	217		211		210	

<sup>a</sup> We also checked for interaction effects between party ideology and majority-opposition dynamics. These interaction terms were not significant and these additional analyses are not shown here.

<sup>b</sup> Vlaams Belang was omitted from the analysis of non-binding referendums, since there was no variation. All Vlaams Belang respondents were in favour of non-binding referendums, which produced unstable results.



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Vlaams Belang's ambiguous position has two potential explanations. On the one hand, Vlaams Belang has, historically, always been a strong supporter of binding referendums. Direct democracy was mentioned in their party manifestos as far back as the 1990s (De Koster et al., 2010). The party is generally considered a populist party, in which 'the people' play a central role. This might manifest in a strong preference for participatory techniques. On the other hand, its position can be explained by the fact that the party is permanently excluded from coalitions at the local level as a consequence of the so-called *cordon sanitaire*. Increasing citizen participation might therefore be a way of turning the tables of power in its favour, and of gaining policy and political influence. Statistically, however, we have no way of disentangling this causal chain because there is no variation in majority-opposition dynamics among local Vlaams Belang chapters.

A final finding worth highlighting, is that the effect of institutional explanations is limited. On the one hand, historical experience with consultative referendums in a municipality is not significantly related to support for either of the democratic innovations. On the other hand, the size of the municipality does not play any significant role in explaining support for these participatory innovations. Based on the literature, our expectations went in two different directions. On the one hand, we expected greater support for the participation of citizens in smaller municipalities because they do not encounter problems of scale and because participation is more likely to yield impact in smaller municipalities. On the other hand, we expected larger cities to act as catalysts for citizen participation because of the more diverse population and complex problems could foster a greater need for legitimacy through citizen participation. Our results are not conclusive in either way.

## 5 Conclusion

As a response to the perceived legitimacy crisis that threatens modern democracies, local government has increasingly become a laboratory for democratic renewal and citizen participation. In this contribution, we studied why local party chapters support the goal of citizen participation and examined different types of democratic innovations. More specifically, we analysed the relative weight of ideas, interests and institutions in explaining their support for citizen-centred democracy.

Our central finding is that ideas matter more than interests and institutions. Ideology is alive and kicking with regard to democratic innovation. Support for citizen participation and different participatory techniques is driven mainly by ideological differences, with progressive (socialist and ecologist) parties and populist parties being most supportive of participatory arrangements. There might thus be few ideological struggles in terms of substantive policy preferences at the local level (Buelens, Dumont, Rihoux & Heyndels, 2006), but there are clear ideological differences in process preferences.

In addition, and contrary to our expectations, our analysis also suggests that interests play a minor role in explaining support for participatory innovations.

Even though it is difficult to statistically disentangle the role of ideas and interests with regard to *Vlaams Belang* (because it is in the opposition everywhere), majority-opposition dynamics only determine support for the – ideologically uncontested – consultative referendums, with opposition parties being more supportive of consultative referendums than majority parties. This is somewhat surprising because participatory innovations are essentially about the redistribution of power between parties and citizens, so we assumed that interests and strategic considerations would have played a central role. Finally – and contrary to our expectations – institutional differences play no significant role. Support for participatory democracy is as strong in large cities as it is in small municipalities, and previous experience with referendums does not necessarily lead to stronger support for the future introduction of democratic innovations. This suggests that even though the principles of citizen participation seem to have gained traction at the local level, this might not be due to growing experience with and knowledge of participation among local elites (Schiffino et al., 2019).

Even though our findings suggest that ideological struggles remain about the desirability of citizen participation and democratic innovations in representative democracies, our results should nevertheless be interpreted with a pinch of salt. First of all, we cannot exclude that social desirability and/or self-selection biased the answers of local party chairs. This clearly represents a limitation to our study. Future research could therefore try to tackle these issues by complementing these survey results with in-depth interviews to assess the impact of ideas, institutions and interests in the spread of democratic innovations at the local level.

A second limitation concerns the operationalisation of the institutional variables. Ideally, the data would have allowed us to compare Flanders and Wallonia to determine whether different legal contexts (i.e. the *Gemeentedecreet* in Flanders and the *Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralization* in Wallonia) created different support bases for local democratic innovations. However, owing to the poor data quality in Wallonia, we were unable to assess the effects of these macro-institutional variations.

A final limitation is that we take a temporally static view of support for democratic innovations at the local level by focusing only on the 2018 data. Future research would definitely contribute to our findings by looking at variations in support over time and by mapping learning curves among local politicians. After all, as the *Ostbelgien Modell* in the German-speaking community (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019), the *Agora Citizen Assembly* in Brussels, Antwerp's participatory budget, and the numerous experiments in small and large communities across the country have become more visible in the last few years, processes of policy learning might take place. It would be good for future research to map these processes of diffusion. Despite these limitations, however, we can conclude that democracy at the local level is ever evolving and that the success of these pioneering cases might foster support for local democratic renewal in the future.

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## Notes

- 1 The so-called citizen initiative (*burgerinitiatief*) and application (*verzoekschrift* in Dutch) go beyond the 'classical' advisory board and referendum.
- 2 This data was retrieved from [https://lokaalbestuur.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/public/thema/werking\\_bestuur/volksraadpleging\\_resultaten.pdf](https://lokaalbestuur.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/public/thema/werking_bestuur/volksraadpleging_resultaten.pdf) on 4 May 2020.

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