14 Local councillors in comparative perspective: Drawing conclusions

Björn Egner, David Sweeting and Pieter-Jan Klok

The chapters of this book contain the first results of our common research project. They show a rich picture of many aspects of local councillors in 16 countries. It is not the intention of the group that this is the final output from the project. On the contrary: these analyses should be only a first step in the use of this valuable dataset. Further analysis and publications are under way and are foreseen in the future.[1]

Clearly there is much diversity between councillors included this study. However, it is already possible to draw some general conclusions. In this chapter we provide overall conclusions combining the results from the different chapters relating particularly to councillors and parties, citizens, the executive, governance reform, gender, and ideology, and in doing so return to some of the issues and broader processes raised in the first chapter. This analysis is based on empirical investigation of councillors in municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants – and therefore these conclusions generalise to that specific group of councillors, rather than all councillors in the countries included in this research.

The councillor and their party

A major conclusion permeating several chapters is that the political party still plays a significant role in the work of local councillors. Although on a national level party membership of citizens might be in decline, for those who are elected in the council their party is still very much 'alive and kicking'. An overwhelming majority of councillors is member of a political party and parties play an important role in the election of councillors: Verhelst et al. in chapter two show the party is important in providing elective support and even in providing a motive for running in the election in the first place. However, the relations between the councillor and the party are by no means one sided: A majority of councillors presently have, or have had a position in their local party. So councillors do not only depend on their party, they also play an important role in

---

their party. As Razin illustrates in chapter three, party leaders usually seek support of the party group in the council and the party group has much influence over the decisions of the local party. The relations between the councillor and the local party can thus be seen as characterised by symbiotic interdependency.

Thus it may come as no surprise that implementing the party programme is perceived as an important task by many councillors (especially by those who are member of a national party). However, Klok and Denters (chapter four) demonstrate that this task is seen as somewhat less important than the traditional representative tasks. When we turn to the contribution that councillors bring to these tasks, it shows that implementing the party programme scores among the top of the different tasks, indicating that party politics is more important in terms of what councillors actually do, than in terms of their role perceptions. This is matched by the fact that local councillors have the most frequent contact with the members of their party group and the leaders of their local party rank fourth in their frequency of contact (Plüss and Kübler, chapter eleven). The significance of the party for the role orientation of councillors is also illustrated by Karlsson in chapter six by the fact that almost 30% can be characterised as 'party soldiers'. Although they are outnumbered by those who can be seen as 'delegates', there are four countries where the party soldiers form the largest group with approximately half of councillors (Spain, Belgium, Norway and Sweden). On the other hand party soldiers are very rare (approximately 10%) in the Czech Republic, France, Israel and Poland.

Comparing the different countries we find a consistent pattern where party politics is very important in some countries and much less in others. On all the indicators mentioned above Sweden, Norway, and in most cases Spain score high. On the other side of the spectrum we find France, Israel and particularly Poland, where political parties play only a minor role in the everyday practice of local councillors.

The councillor and the citizen

What are the implications of the role of the political parties for the relation between the councillor and the citizen? Are councillors' loyalties with their party or with the constituents? The evidence that can be gathered from our chapters points toward different directions in answering this question.

When councillors are asked for their general notions about democracy, Heinelt finds support for a participatory model, giving citizens an active role in democratic 'self-determination', is higher than support for a narrowly defined representative or 'liberal' notion of democracy, where only elected politicians decide what should happen. This finding would indicate that councillors are

moving in line with the more general trend noted in the opening chapter where citizens demand greater access to decision-making processes outside the electoral model. However, when it comes to specific participation mechanisms, Sweeting and Copus show none of these mechanisms receives overwhelming support. This support is to some extent influenced by the role that the party plays: members of parties show less support than non-members and councillors who are party soldiers show particularly low support for mechanisms that provide citizens with binding influence on decisions. Even for delegate councillors, who are most likely to support mechanisms for citizen participation, support does not exceed 65%. Therefore, while citizens may demand greater involvement, and councillors may appear to be in favour of granting it, they may be unwilling to veer very far from the liberal model in practice.

When looking for the distribution of councillors' orientations, Karlsson (chapter 6) finds that the trustee is most common (57%), followed by the party soldier (28%) and the delegate (15%). For the influence of the citizen this implies 'mixed news'. Not many councillors see themselves as just transferring the opinions of the citizens, but on the other hand the party preferences are also not decisive for many councillors. Most councillors see themselves as playing a pivotal role in the translation of citizens' preferences into municipal decisions. This is in line with the findings from Klok and Denters in chapter four that representing requests and issues from local society and subsequently defining the goals of the municipality are the tasks that are seen as most important by councillors. Explaining decisions of the council to citizens and publicising debate before decisions are taken, are seen as important tasks, but score somewhat lower. However, they are seen as more important than implementing the party programme. When it comes to actual role behaviour, representational activities score high as well, but they are matched by activities concerning the party. In terms of frequency of contact, Plüss and Kübler (chapter eleven) demonstrate members of the party group score highest, but individual citizens are second on the list.

A preliminary conclusion is that the role of political parties does not result in neglect of the relations with citizens. Both parties and citizens are important for councillors, not as absolute masters that determine the decisions to be taken, but as crucial points of reference that are both seriously taken into account.

According to Karlsson in chapter six, when councillors are asked about their representational focus, an overwhelming majority answers that they represent the whole locality. This indicates that councillors favour a general conception of representing all interests (the 'general' interest) over particular interests. This does not mean that particular interests are not important. The interests of 'less resourceful citizens' are also seen as relatively important, with little differ-

ence among other specific groups. The growing secularisation of society is reflected by the fact that the interests of religious groups are seen as the least important to represent. For urbanisation – one of the broader trends mentioned in the opening chapter – the city-wide representational focus is important. If urbanisation does entail greater diversity of population, and the majority of councillors indicate that they do not tend to focus on particular groups, then city-wide, common, and general interests still take precedence, despite increasing societal diversity. While councillors do express a desire represent the interests of less resourceful citizens, this lack of resources may not be a product of greater social diversity, but may instead relate to broader trends relating to inequality and the way that economic benefits in cities are shared out.

The representational focus of local councillors is also reflected in the priority that they attach to different policy domains. Getimis and Magnier (in chapter thirteen) show that policy domains that are seen as particularly important are linked to the economic development of the cities: attracting new economic and high-tech activities, improving infrastructures and services for transport. This is in line with the economic logic of globalisation outlined in chapter one, where municipalities are increasingly expected to place economic development concerns alongside their roles in service provision. However, reducing the accompanying pollution and increasing well-being in the city are also seen as very important. Significantly, increasing levels of service provision is also important for councillors. This shows that, in responding to the increased demands from citizens mentioned in chapter one, they look to improve both matters inside and outside direct municipal control.

Among the lowest priorities we find the domains of attracting a wealthier population, defending the traditional cohesion of the city, and, somewhat in contrast to a desire to a desire to represent less resourceful citizens, fighting against social inclusion and poverty. Combining these results on representational focus we can conclude that although 'less resourceful citizens' are seen as an important group, their problems are not so much addressed through a redistributive agenda on poverty, but through a more general economic development agenda.

The councillor and the executive

As noted in the opening chapter, embodied in the conception of the role of councillors as an intermediate one, transmitting representational power from citizens (through party-based elections), to governmental decisions is the idea that councillors should have an impact on what is decided in local government town halls. The representational model of democracy will only remain viable if this second leg of the electoral chain of command functions well.

There is no doubt that councillors perceive this 'internal' task as very important. Defining the main goals of the municipality and controlling municipal activity rank first and third in importance, as Klok and Denters demonstrate in chapter four. Together with representing local requests they form the very heart of the role orientations of local councillors, with limited variation between different countries. When asked about their contribution to these tasks (role behaviour), councillors still indicate a substantial contribution, but the scores are on average considerably lower. The role behaviour deficit (the difference between orientation and parallel behaviour) is the largest for defining goals and controlling municipal activity. This deficit is not so much the result of limited activity (councillors have frequent contact with members of the executive board and with the mayor), but as they rank themselves as not very influential compared to other actors in town hall (see Plüss and Kübler in chapter eleven). Councillors rank themselves as only ninth in a comparative ranking of the influence of different actors on local authorities' activities. The mayor, the executive board and the administration are regarded as the most influential actors. This is in line with a comparison with data presented by Ryšavý from the mayoral research in chapter nine: in all countries mayors indicate higher scores for their influence than councillors, with executive councillors in an intermediate position. To some extent this limited influence will be the result of the part-time character of the councillors' job. Contrary to mayors, whose job is usually a full-time one, ordinary councillors spend considerably less hours on doing their job, with executive councillors occupying an intermediate position. Although we see important elements of professionalisation in both the recruitment and career developments of councillors, there are still many aspects in which councillors can be labelled as matching the profile of a 'layman' (Verhelst et.al., chapter two).

The executive councillor

As has been indicated above, some councillors occupy a position that can be seen as part of the executive function, which has an influence on their power position (they see themselves as more powerful than ordinary councillors) and on the time they spend on their tasks (they spend more time). The additional time that they spend on their tasks is also reflected in the fact that they spend more time than ordinary councillors on contacts with different actors inside and outside town hall (Getimis and Hlepas, chapter 8). Their increased power position is in line with the finding that their role behavioural deficit (the difference between the importance of a task and their contribution on that task), is lower than for ordinary councillors (Klok and Denters, chapter four). Their position also matters in terms of the higher importance they attach to the specific task of sup-

porting the executive. They are more often party soldiers, and less frequently trustees or delegates (Karlsson, chapter six) and their leadership style is more often authoritarian and less frequently cooperative (Getimis and Hlepas, chapter 8). Overall, the executive councillor has a more central position in local governance (both inside and outside town hall) than his ordinary counterpart, which is in line with his institutional position as an executive.

The councillor and administrative and governance reform

It was noted in chapter one that in relation to a more demanding citizenry, councillors' attitudes to New Public Management reforms is important, as this sort of reform is often presented as a way of improving services. Above we indicated that councillors are not overwhelmingly supportive of democratic reforms that respond to citizen demands for a stronger position in decision-making in municipal activities. When looking at support for administrative reform, a still less enthusiastic attitude seems to be present – some limited commitment at a general level, but with considerable unease. Competition between service providers is seen by a majority of councillors as facilitating choice for citizens, but other statements reflecting the need for and the benefits of New Public Management reforms fail to attract a majority (Krapp et al, chapter twelve). Moreover, the agreement with the statement reflecting the internal aspect of administrative reform (councillors should only define objectives and control outputs, and never intervene into task fulfilment of the local administration) does not correlate strongly with those on statements reflecting the external aspect (contracting out and Public Private Partnerships). Thus there is no cohesive orientation of councillors on administrative reform. The claim of those propagating administrative reform, that what councillors might lose on short term influence on municipal activities is more than compensated by what they will win in strategic control, is not accepted as very convincing by those councillors themselves.

A comparable picture appears when looking at the possible implications of a change from government to governance on the local level (another trend noted in chapter one). Support for Public Private Partnerships can not only be seen as support for administrative reform, it can also be seen as an indication for the growing influence of and orientation towards private actors as important partners in local governance. When councillors are asked to state which actors are influential in local authority decision-making, Plüss and Kübler in chapter eleven indicate that public actors are considerably more influential than private actors. The same holds for the influence of public and private actors on the decisions by the council. This picture of public dominance is matched with the contact patterns that councillors develop. They do have frequent contact with indi-

vidual citizens, but contacts with organised private interests are considerably less frequent than with public actors. Local councillors are very far from taking up their 'new role' as coordinators of local governance. This is matched by the results from Klok and Denters (chapter four) that 'mediating conflicts in local society' is seen as the second least important task by councillors.

Overseeing the orientations of local councillors in the fields of democratic, administrative and governance reform, we can generalise the conclusion drawn by Sweeting and Copus on democratic reform to the other two fields of reform: their primary concern is their traditional, recongnisable role of contributing in different ways to decision-making in municipal government. They show less conviction to moves away from that model, whether that be in terms of more citizen participation, or their attitude to administrative reform, or their view of governance. Whether this makes councillors necessary defenders of a widely understood governmental process, or actors that are trailing in the wake of other forces, clinging to an outdated model of government is debatable.

The gender factor

It comes as no surprise that the local councillors are predominantly male. In most countries, between 70% and 80% of the councillors are male, with a more even share of women in the Scandinavian countries and France (Verhelst et al., chapter 2). The fact that women are underrepresented in local councils becomes particularly relevant as gender is related to differences in opinions on political issues. The results we find here are mixed. There are many issues where little or no difference exist between the sexes, for instance they both assign a high priority to local (economic) development (Jurlina Alibegović et al., chapter ten). On issues regarding social and environmental policy the differences are considerable and point consistently in the direction that women consider the policy goals on these issues more important than men. This is in line with the findings from Karlsson and Getimis and Hlepas (in chapters six and eight respectively) that women attach higher importance to representing specific groups in their municipality. The gender differences are not equally strong in all countries. They are particularly strong in the Scandinavian countries and in France and Switzerland (Jurlina Alibegović et al. chapter ten). There is however one issue where men and women consistently differ and that is on the importance of representing issues regarding the position of women in local politics (see Jurlina Alibegović et al., chapter ten; Klok and Denters, chapter four; and Karlsson, chapter six). It may come as no surprise that women attach higher priority to this task than men.

Regarding their own position in local governance women regard themselves as somewhat less central than men. They see themselves as less powerful

than men and consider themselves less often as trustees and more often as party soldiers (Getimis and Hlepas, chapter eight). In chapter five Heinelt shows their notions of democracy are more often than for men in line with participatory democracy and less often in line with the liberal representative model. This seems consistent with the finding from Getimis and Hlepas in chapter eight that they more often prefer cooperative styles of leadership and less often authoritarian styles.

The influence of ideological orientation

In line with the ideological position of different parties in European countries, local councillors can also be characterised as having an ideological position on a left/right scale. Does this ideological disposition influence their opinions and behaviour? One of the issues where such influence can be expected is the representation of (the interests of) specific groups in local society. As can be expected, councillors with a disposition towards the right give higher priority in representing business groups, whereas councillors orientated towards the left give higher priority to representing workers and less resourceful citizens, as Karlsson shows in chapter six. Councillors with a left orientation also see representing minorities as a more important task (Klok and Denters, chapter four). Considering administrative reforms, councillors with a disposition towards the right are more convinced of the benefits of reforms that use market or business models in local governance such as competition, public-private partnerships and contracting out (Krapp, et al, chapter twelve). They are however less in favour of reforms that increase citizen participation. Sweeting and Copus in chapter seven show that on most of these reforms councillors with an orientation towards the left are more positive. This is in line with the finding of Heinelt in chapter five that councillors with an orientation towards the right are more often adherents of the liberal representative model of democracy and also can be more often labelled as trustees (Karlsson, chapter six; Getimis and Hlepas, chapter eight). Councillors orientated towards the left are more often characterised as party soldiers. They are also more often in favour of a cooperative style of leadership, whereas their counterparts on the right are more in favour of an authoritarian style of leadership.

As can be concluded from the results described above, the ideological left/right dimension is still a valid indicator for the understanding of local councillor orientations and behaviour.