

Councillors and Residents in Hove Park

Suvojit Chattopadhyay, Noemi de la Fuente and Andrew John Edwards

1. The application:

This study was carried out by a group of students as part of their course work. It uses the 'spaces' and 'forms' dimensions of the power cube to investigate a small-scale, local expression of participation in the UK's system of local governance.

2. The case:

In the UK local councillors are the lowest tier of governance, representing wards which in cities constitute small sub-sections of the urban area, with jurisdiction over a range of issues which is limited but important to residents in their everyday lives. In a scenario fairly typical of the UK, in one ward in the city of Brighton and Hove (Stanford Ward), local councillors are actively involved in their local residents' associations, civil society bodies through which residents of a particular street or area (usually smaller than a ward) discuss and address issues that pertain to that area.

The extent to which residents' associations have formalised structures and procedures varies considerably, as does the extent to which members and other residents feel able to contribute to the decision-making that is carried out in them. Of the two residents' associations considered in this case, one has a loose structure and open mandate such that it can be a vehicle for addressing a wide range of issues; the other is more formally structured and well-defined in its purpose. In both cases, local councillors occupy key leadership roles – apparently because they are prepared and able to give time and commitment that other residents may not be.

Councillors who act as leaders in these spaces occupy hybrid roles: elected representative with a voice in council decision-making, and resident with a concern for what's going on locally and a sense of civic duty. Their leadership roles, and relative expertise and capability in taking action on the problems raised, could easily lead to their domination of the residents' associations – although as they are simultaneously elected representatives of the same constituency resident-citizens may perceive this as legitimate. At the same time, in a practical sense, their dual role performs a useful function of intermediation between citizens and representatives in a context where popular participation in local governance is generally extremely minimal.

3. The analysis:

The study argues that residents' associations constitute claimed spaces in which local residents get to express and discuss their concerns. Their different internal structures create different power dynamics. Although the looser association presents more opportunities for engagement by local residents, as its remit is not limited, the informality of the structure creates a lot of space in which the leadership can exercise hidden power to determine which issues make it onto the agenda and get acted upon. The formality of the other group makes the agenda-setting process more visible and transparent as it is carried out by a managing committee, however this structure may also limit the opportunities for other residents to participate in the association. The hybrid role of councillor-leaders within the associations means that the 'space' that is

created is one in which the claimed and the invited come together, and are embedded in each other.

One notable feature of the agendas addressed by the residents' associations is their very small scope and scale: they address the very limited range of immediate, practical issues that local councils are empowered to deal with in the UK system. One framing of this is that it is an expression of invisible power, in that residents are complying with and legitimating the very tight boundaries on what can be dealt with at a local level and what citizens can engage with directly, even though it could be argued that it would be more in their interests to pursue a broadening of those boundaries. Pushing for deeper democracy at a local level might be rationally a better use of residents' time and energy than solving tiny problems one by one.

An alternative framing is that it is an expression of the arrangement of visible power in the UK – simply an artefact of living in a quite centralised polity. Citizens may be complacent, or they may be making an informed choice to comply with a political arrangement which may not deliver participatory democracy at the local level but has other advantages that UK citizens value.

4. Implications & significance

This analysis demonstrates how taking a 'power look' at democratic relations, even in a well-established, deeply entrenched democracy, can lead to reappraisal. In this case it seems to open up the possibility of exploring the potential of hybrid and embedded relationships between governors and governed as means of deepening democracy without starting from the assumption of a need for wholesale institutional reform.

At the same time it is interesting to note how just the process of looking for different forms of power brings to light perspectives which get beyond seeing all citizen - council interaction as inherently 'a good thing for democracy' by raising questions about what power relations are being reinforced at the same time – and, in this case, the limitations of local democracy in the UK.