

STJÓRN MÁL
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VEFTÍMARIT

Public Impact

Citizen influence in local government in Iceland

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1. tbl. 5. árg. 2009
Fræðigreinar



Abstract

Considering its importance in democratic theory, public impact on public policy is a strangely neglected theme in political science. The main theoretical traditions in political science, in fact, seem sceptical of claims that the public can influence public policy in a systematic manner. The present article is an attempt to consider the ways in which public impact may be studied and evaluated through a study of citizen influence in planning and environmental issues in Icelandic local government. The results indicate – even if only tentatively – that the impact of the citizens is greater than would be expected on the basis of the main theoretical traditions in political science.¹

The way public opinion interacts with public policy is a major concern of both political theory and empirical political science. Political theory is concerned with democracy and its various dimensions, which include citizenship, deliberation, representation and majority rule (Kristinsson 2008). It asks normative questions about the way political systems should respond to citizens' concerns. Empirical political science is preoccupied with the manner in which the citizens form their beliefs and values and how they act on them (if they do (see, e.g., Norris (ed.) 1999; Dalton 2002). The actual impact of citizens' activities is, however, to some extent a neglected field of empirical research. While there exist various frameworks for analysis, of which Arnstein's ladder of participation is by far the best known (Arnstein 1969), the literature on citizen participation has a tendency to focus on prescriptive issues at the expense of empirical ones (e.g. Healey 2006; Taylor 2003). Studies of participation in policy-making are undoubtedly an important line of research (e.g. Rosenberg (ed.) 2007; Brannan *et al.* 2007), but there is a tendency in much of this work to focus on the subject of civil renewal and the identity of the participants rather than the actual impact of the citizenry. Even Salamon's huge edited volume on the tools of government (Salamon (ed.) 2002) has little to say on the potential of democracy as a public policy tool. A contribution by Smith and Ingram (2002) considers the impact of policy tools on democracy but not – significantly – the impact of democracy on public policy. Given the dearth of theorizing on public impact, we adopt the strategy of deriving hypotheses from the classical literature of twentieth century political science on power and democracy. Interestingly enough, there is no well-established body of empirical research or theory claiming that public policy is strongly and systematically influenced by public opinion. This is quite clear when reading through influential textbooks on democratic theory (Held 2000) and theories of the state (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987). Sceptics challenge the notion that either

¹ The article is part of a larger research project supported by the Icelandic Centre for Research, the University of Iceland Research Fund, Association of Local Authorities in Iceland, Landsbanki Íslands and Orkuveita Reykjavíkur.

public opinion or the common good (if such a thing exists) guides public policy in any significant manner (Riker 1982). Most of twentieth century political science adopts an agnostic attitude to the issue of how far, and in what sense, the public actually rules. The main theoretical positions range from elitism, which sees no real role for the masses in public policy, to pluralism, which sees public opinion as one factor among many which influence public policy, but often a very modest one. Faced with this, Gerry Mackie (2003) provocatively points out the need to save democracy from political science, which – he maintains – has lost sight of the important difference between democracy and non-democracy.

The three theoretical positions which we will examine here are elitism, competitive elitism and pluralism.

Theoretical positions: elitism, competitive elitism and pluralism

One of the important theoretical debates in twentieth century political science concerned the contention in elitist theory that ostensibly democratic societies are essentially governed by elites which are “closed off” from ordinary members of the public (Evans 2006). Elitist theory implicitly or explicitly assumes that political actors are primarily motivated by a desire for power. For Michels (1962 [1915]) the apathy of the masses has a counterpart in a general characteristic of human nature found in leaders, namely the “natural greed for power” (p. 205). Elitists were sceptical of claims that the ideals of democrats were being realised in modern societies or indeed could be realized in any organisation. Critics of elitism, including the pluralists, maintained that it failed to show empirically that this was the case, and the conclusion that modern societies are ruled by closed elites is for a number of reasons implausible (e.g. Polsby 1980). It was not part of the pluralist position, however, that the public ruled, directly or indirectly, in any meaningful sense. On the contrary, the people in pluralist theory are considered to be mostly inactive and elections only one factor among many which can influence public policy.

The power debate was summed up by Lukes (1974) in an influential little book in which he maintained that power was an “essentially contested” concept (using Gallie’s (1955-6) notion) which might be approached through one-dimensional analysis focusing on behaviour (“who prevails in decision-making”), a two-dimensional one (which also focused on non-decisions) and a three-dimensional focus, critical of the behavioural approach (“real” vs. subjective interests). While Lukes himself seemed sympathetic to the three-dimensional view he acknowledged the difficulties of doing empirical research along such lines, and in fact, his suggestions seem not to have generated much empirical research supporting the suppositions of elitist theory. In its one- and two-dimensional versions, however, elitist theory does produce hypotheses which should in principle be empirically testable. With regard to the public impact these would include at least the following:

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H1: Elites use exclusionary methods to avoid interference from non-elites in formulating and implementing public policy.

H2: Through the use of exclusionary methods, elites manage in fact to prevent any significant public impact on public policy.

A problem with elitism, as Shapiro (2003 p. 36) points out, is that it assumes that power always wins and institutional arrangements make no difference. Thus, democracy becomes a rather uninteresting object of study, since it is never expected to make any real difference. A more plausible approach in this respect is adopted by competitive elitism. This is the theory advanced by, among others, Schumpeter (1943) according to which government majorities in a democracy are considered cohesive and autonomous except for the very limited control exercised by voters through elections. The public, according to Schumpeter, is incapable of any but the most elementary political action – essentially nothing beyond the basic act of voting at regular elections. The function of elections is only that of removing incompetent rulers, and the governing elite is in no other respects bound by the will of the voters. Representative democracy functions through the delegation of power from voter to government, where the government, in a manner reminiscent of the Westminster model, enjoys a strong single-party majority which is accountable to voters at election time but autonomous from them in between elections. Expressed as an empirical hypothesis we obtain the following formulation:

H3: The public can only influence public policy through the methods of representative democracy, basically through elections.

An alternative theory is that of pluralism, which maintains that elites, more often than not, are neither particularly cohesive nor autonomous but fragmented and intertwined with various societal interests (Held 2000). Although the public is thought to be mainly inactive according to the pluralist school of thought, a multitude of interest groups, firms and government agencies do play a role in shaping public policy along with elected representatives (Lindblom 1980). The vote is an imprecise instrument and rarely produces the sort of guidance which would give clear answers to the question of which kinds of policy should be followed. Pluralism should contribute to a more responsive political system even if there is no expectation of a close fit between public opinion and public policy. From the pluralist school we obtain the following hypotheses:

H4: Politics are conducted largely in a non-participatory manner through the interplay of plural elites.

H5: Government majorities which are fragmented should be more responsive than cohesive ones.

While the pluralists basically believed that the different interests in society balanced each other out – which should produce policies which were relatively unbiased with regard to the public interests – the neo-pluralists were less optimistic in this respect (e.g. Lindblom 1977). They believed public policy in the United States was systematically biased in favour of big business. Community research in the United States has produced results which seem to support this view (Elkin 1986; Stone 1993). With roots in neo-pluralism, “regime theory” has made a strong impact on the study of urban politics in both North America and Europe over the last two decades. Regime theory is concerned with the emergence of effective long-term coalitions of public officials and private interests where the former are seen as being subject to a certain degree of popular control and the latter as being dominated by the needs of investors. “Regime theorists” as Stoker points out...

“...argue that the organization of politics leads to very inadequate forms of popular control and makes government less responsive to socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. ... The organization of politics does not facilitate large-scale popular participation and involvement in an effective way” (Stoker 1995: 56).

The applicability of regime theory to European contexts is the subject of some debate. A number of variables may impact the interdependence of business and city officials. The planning powers of local authorities, their fiscal sensitivity to capital mobility, public ownership of land and the degree to which business is localized are among the factors which may influence the relationship (Mossberger & Stoker 2001, 819-20). Davies (2003) maintains that regime theory cannot explain urban coalitions in the UK because the interdependence of business and local politics is much smaller than in the United States and the mutual interest in such collaboration consequently smaller. Regime theory, he suggests, “may work in large cities with a powerful business base within a decentralized state, but what about smaller cities and towns with a weak business base in a centralized state?” (p.266). Nonetheless, the neo-pluralist perspective might give rise to the following hypothesis:

H6: Business interests predominate in policy-making at the expense of public impact.

Public impact in local government in Iceland

To test our six hypotheses we conducted a study of planning and environmental policy in 22 Icelandic local government areas (LGAs). Planning and environmental issues caused a great deal of controversy in many LGAs in the decade preceding the economic crash in 2008, where the intentions of town planners often conflicted with the wishes of local residents. A multitude of spontaneous

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residential movements came into being to protest against individual projects and demand greater citizen impact – “resident democracy” (*Icelandic: íbúalýðræði*) as it is usually called. Planning and the environment were selected for this study because of the relatively great number of disputes in recent years where the willingness of local authorities to accommodate demands for direct participation and citizen influence has been put to the test.

All Icelandic LGAs with more than two thousand inhabitants were covered by the survey. This amounts to 22 out of 77 municipalities in the country, containing 90% of the population. The remaining smaller municipalities are mostly stagnant rural areas where planning disputes are rare. Under the Planning and Building Act (No. 73/1997), planning authority lies with the local authorities, subject to regulatory control by the National Planning Agency. The extent to which the local authorities own the land used by planners varies, but the powers accorded to them by law are substantial even where land is owned by private developers. In each LGA there is a planning committee in charge of planning policy under the supervision of the local authority.

The study began with a preparatory phase where major planning controversies were identified through scanning of the local and national media and the writing of a basic case history. A total of 65 interviews were then conducted among local politicians (from both majority and minority), town administrators and activists. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted for the most part in the relevant localities. They were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the research team. Thirty-five controversies were identified in the period since 1998 in the LGAs covered by the project. The issues varied in scope and impact on local politics but all can be said to have been at some stage a major focus of local attention. In the smaller communities, however, the scale of the issues was much smaller than in the larger ones and in the largest one – Reykjavik (with 120,000 inhabitants) – the six issues identified could in some cases have been identified as clusters of issues rather than individual ones.

Planning disputes were found in 17 of the 22 LGAs studied.² The planning disputes mostly took place in growth areas as a result of general population growth, urban renewal and economic expansion, but some were also related to energy projects or power-intensive industry.

² The numbers of disputes in each were as follows: Reykjavik was 6, Mosfellsbær 1, Kópavogur 4, Hafnarfjörður 3, Álftanes 3, Seltjarnarnes 2, Garðabær 1, Reykjanesbær 1, Hveragerði 2, Árborg 2, Fljótsdalshérað 2, Fjarðabyggð 2, Norðurþing 1, Akureyri 2, Fjallabyggð 1, Skagafjörður 1, Borgarbyggð 1. No planning disputes were identified in Grindavík, Vestmannaeyjar, Höfn, Ísafjörður or Akranes.

The use of exclusionary methods (H1)

According to hypothesis 1, the public is excluded in public policy through the use of exclusionary methods, i.e. rules and methods which effectively limit the access of the public to the political arena. Exclusionary methods are probably too numerous and varied to fall neatly into just a few broad categories. Some of the main types, however, seem obvious enough.

Formal methods of exclusion

A basic distinction may be made between formal and informal methods of exclusion. Formal methods are the rules which decide who has formal access to the decision making process. Representative democracy may, in fact, be seen as one such barrier, as may any formal restrictions on the right of actors to be included in decisions which affect them in one way or another. Those who are without full citizenship rights (children, immigrants) are excluded by formal barriers as are citizens in other LGAs who may be affected by municipal decisions, but are without a formal right to representation outside their own place of residence. Making participation costly (e.g. through registration, etc.) may also be considered an exclusionary practice in this sense, as is any arrangement which raises a high threshold for representation in the municipal council. The latter can be achieved through a number of electoral arrangements, including small constituencies and a small council, which raises the effective threshold for newcomers (and increases the likelihood of a minority party obtaining a majority on the council).

Planning debates in the 22 LGAs were examined with regard to the fit between the community affected by the decisions and the boundaries of the LGA responsible for planning.

Table 1. Community membership in planning disputes: single and multi-LGA issues

	Issues 1999-2008
Single LGA	28
Multi-LGA	7
Total	35

Note: The dispute concerning Vatnsendi and Elliðavatn is counted among the single-LGA issues since it was to a large extent a Kópavogur affair, even though outsiders (esp. in Reykjavik) were also affected.

Twenty-eight of the 35 issues concern only one, or primarily one, LGA. Of the remaining seven, five were about large-scale power projects or power-intensive industry. In five of the issues there was little debate within the centrally affected LGA. The debate took place more between the inhabitants in one LGA and

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various outsider groups or organizations. In other cases, debate took place both in the relevant community and among the broader population that might be affected by the local decision. Reykjavik Airport is an example of this type: there are differences of opinion within the local authority on whether to move the airport, but while the planning authority clearly belongs to Reykjavik, the planning decision also affects the population of other regions which have an important stake in the issue.

High electoral thresholds in the municipalities seem to characterize Iceland to a greater extent than the other Nordic countries. According to the Local Government Act (No. 45/1998) the number of council members may range from seven to 27 in LGAs with one thousand inhabitants or more. In those with 1,000-9,999 inhabitants, the number of representatives is 7-11, in those with 10,000-49,999 and more (i.e. Reykjavik) their number may range from 15-27. Within this range, the local authorities themselves decide the number of representatives, and they are not obliged to change their numbers until their populations have been above or below the reference points for eight years. This arrangement has several interesting characteristics. In the first place, the number of inhabitants per representative in Iceland is generally much lower than in local government in the Nordic countries³. This is not a politically neutral arrangement, since it is well known that electing few members favours large parties (Taakepera 2007) and may therefore be considered an exclusionary practice against smaller ones. Secondly, the smaller LGAs are more exclusionary in the sense that they have fewer council members (and consequently a higher threshold) but less exclusionary in the sense that they have a much more favourable ratio of inhabitants to representatives than the larger ones. Finally it is important to note that within this rather exclusionary system the local authorities have a say in whether they wish to be more or less exclusionary since they can decide if they are going to adopt the minimum number of representatives required by law or a more inclusive approach, introducing extra representatives.

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Table 2. Council size and inhabitants per representative in Icelandic municipalities

Municipality	Inhabitants	Council size	Deviation from minimum council	Inhabitants per representative
Reykjavík	119,848	15	0	7,990
Kópavogur	29,957	11	0	2,736
Hafnarfjörður	25,837	11	0	2,537
Akureyri	17,522	11	0	1,593
Reykjanesbær	14,208	11	0	1,292
Garðabær	10,358	7	-4	1,480
Mosfellsbær	8,469	7	0	1,210
Árborg	7,928	9	+2	881
Akranes	6,630	9	+2	737
Fjarðabyggð	4,736	9	+2	526
Seltjarnarnes	4,410	7	0	630
Vestmannaeyjar	4,090	7	0	584
Skagafjörður	4,077	9	+2	453
Ísafjarðarbær	3,968	9	+2	441
Borgarbyggð	3,747	9	+2	416
Fljótsdalshérað	3,707	11	+4	337
Norðurþing	2,998	9	+2	333
Grindavík	2,849	7	0	407
Álftanes	2,510	7	0	359
Hveragerði	2,316	7	+2	331
Fjallabyggð	2,129	9	+2	237
Hornafjörður	2,110	7	0	301

Inhabitants as per 1 Dec. 2008. Garðabær deviates from the minimum council size in the sense that it has recently exceeded the 10000 inhabitant mark but may maintain its old council size for eight years, as mentioned above.

The number of inhabitants is the main factor determining council sizes in Iceland, and if only the ratio of inhabitants to representatives is examined, the larger councils tend to be more exclusionary. It is interesting, nonetheless, that the larger councils tend also to be more exclusionary with regard to their choices within the margins set by the law. Thus, all the LGAs with more than 8,000 inhabitants have chosen the minimum number of representatives allowed by the law, while this applies to only one third of those with fewer than 8,000 inhabitants. The most likely reason for this may be sought in a more polarized party competition in the larger LGAs where the largest parties gain electoral advantage by maintaining small councils.

Informal methods

Exclusion may also be achieved through informal methods which are not primarily based on the formal regulatory framework of the local authorities but more on the behaviour of politicians and administrators. Network governance is likely to reduce the transparency of decision-making – and citizens are not able to respond to plans which they have not heard of. Networks of hybrid actors may lead to a high degree of complexity and secrecy which essentially reduces transparency (e.g. Mulgan 2006; Smith and Ingram 2002). Private initiative in town planning and development can, for example, effectively privatize the first stage in the planning process and close it off from public scrutiny. Similarly, a complicated network of public actors (national agencies, other local authorities and publicly owned firms) may reduce the transparency of decision-making significantly.

Table 3. Networks in planning debates

	No. of disputes
Strong networks part of dispute	13
Networks present but not dominant	10
Networks weak or non-existent in dispute	12
TOTAL	35

Most of the networks are made up of contacts between property developers of various kinds and the local authorities, although in some cases other interests (such as industrial ones) played a key role. Close contact with property developers was seen by many interviewees as involving a dilemma for the local authorities. On the one hand they need private enterprise for investment and development in both new and long-established areas. But the interests of property developers may be different from those of the neighbourhood. Property developers need density (e.g. high buildings) and often prefer less costly solutions to attractive-looking ones. Given a free hand, they may be tempted to produce plans which the local people object to on both practical and aesthetic grounds. On the other hand, if the local authorities do not cultivate good relations with the developers, the latter may be tempted to go elsewhere and look for more accommodating LGAs for their projects. Such a strategy on the part of the local authority may help avoid a planning debate in the short run, but in the long run it will lead to stagnation, and presumably also dissatisfaction, among voters.

Decision-makers can also adopt a more directly manipulative approach which aims at corrupting the discourse by weakening the opposition, buying it out, harassing it or bluffing it into accepting an unfavourable deal. A typical example in the planning debates is the tactic of starting out with plans on a larger scale

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than is actually intended, so as to leave room for a compromise (e.g. lowering a building by two floors to appease protesters when the result is in fact all that was aimed at to begin with). Timing can also be used strategically. Policy-makers sometimes rush issues through in the hope of avoiding a public debate and the related practice of “hiding” announcements or publishing them during vacations has a similar effect.

Table 4. Manipulation in Icelandic planning debates

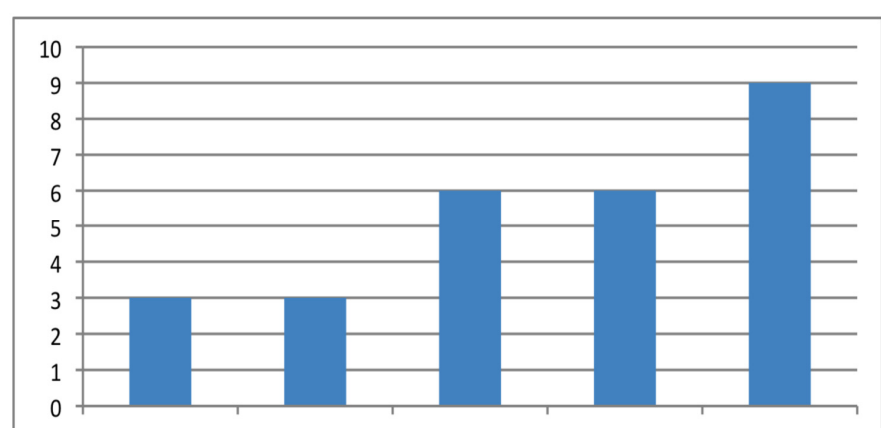
	No. of disputes
Manipulation suspected	17
Manipulation not suspected	18
TOTAL	35

In 17 of the planning debates, suspicions were raised that the local authorities were being manipulative in one way or another. We have no way of judging whether such suspicions are well grounded. The most common forms of manipulation, according to our interviewees, consisted of various attempts to hide information and avoid debates by calculative timing or rushing decisions. Other instances include perfunctory or purely symbolic concessions to protesters, and in one case it was suspected that dissenters were harassed to a certain extent.

Public impact (H2)

According to elitist theory, we should expect to find not only the practice of exclusionary policies but also the effect of preventing a significant public impact on public policy. In each of the debates studied, we evaluated the impact made by citizen groups on the outcome of the planning issue. The impact was rated from 1 (no impact) to 5 (high impact). In some cases, however, there were complications which make straightforward use of this scheme impossible. As was seen in Table 1, seven of the planning debates concerned not only the LGA with the planning authority but also neighbouring LGAs, or environmental stakeholders, or both. Such outsiders may have access to a number of methods to influence the outcome. A public debate and public opinion can make a certain impact if it manages to influence government policy or the willingness of public enterprises to invest in a project. Formal methods in accordance with the regulatory framework provided by national government (especially the Planning Agency) can also have an impact. On the whole, however, the impact of “outsiders” is weaker and more accidental than that which citizens can achieve within their own community. Looking only at the single-LGA issues, our estimates of citizen impact is presented in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Citizen impact in single-LGA planning debates



Note: In one instance the outcome was not determined.

The graph seems to indicate that local authorities in Iceland are considerably more responsive to citizens' demands than is compatible with the elitist theory. In single LGA debates it is, in fact, rare for citizens to have no impact at all, while citizen groups quite often (in 9 cases out of 26) had a large, and in fact decisive, impact on the outcome.

Representative vs. participatory democracy (H3)

Moving on from classical elitism to competitive elitism, we encounter the question of whether citizens' impact was achieved mainly through the classical methods of representative democracy or whether direct or participatory methods played a role. Methods used by citizens in the disputes were broadly grouped into the methods of representative democracy and participatory methods. The former include, above all, elections and changes of majorities on the municipal council. The latter include various demonstrative actions, public debate and referenda. While it could be argued with some justification that the latter essentially depend on the former, it is nonetheless clear that in some cases the majorities resisted strong pressure from the citizenry and basically staked their governing position on this – whereas in others, the majority yielded to popular pressure without an election or a change in majority.

Table 5. Mechanism contributing to citizen impact

	No. of cases
Representation	8
Participation	16
TOTAL	24

Note: Included in the analysis are single-LGA disputes where citizens had some impact.

The impact of the planning debates on local politics was substantial in the period under study. In eight cases, the debates brought down majorities or contributed to their downfall. This indicates that representative democracy has a role in translating the wishes of the inhabitants into public policy. But in the majority of our cases, protest was not channelled primarily through the parties. Various citizens' organisations with no party-political allegiance often engaged the authorities through a major effort by the citizens. The debates show that the citizens can make an impact through participatory means to an extent which would surprise competitive elitists, such as Schumpeter.

Participation or docility? (H4)

The pluralist school admits that there are more ways to make an impact than merely elections. The pluralists, nonetheless, see the public as largely inactive, while a plethora of institutionalised actors carry the weight of public policy-making. According to this, our Hypothesis 4 states that politics are conducted in a non-participatory manner. The meaning of "non-participation" here may probably be debated but it seems clear that the emergence of spontaneous citizens' organizations does not fit well with the pluralist emphasis on citizen inactivity. In order to test this hypothesis, we therefore looked for the involvement of formal citizens' organizations in the disputes. Such organizations were involved in 23 of the 35 disputes identified. Size of municipality appears to be an important factor affecting the likelihood of formal organizations being involved.

Table 6. Overview of planning disputes 1999-2008

Inhabitants	No. of disputes where formal organizations were involved	No. where formal organizations were not involved
2,000-4,999	6	9
5,000-30,000	11	3
<u>Reykjavik</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	23	12

Most of the formal organizations were formed especially to deal with the dispute in question, but in Reykjavik there are a few more permanent citizens' organizations formed to address issues in this sphere. Formal organizations are more likely to take part in planning disputes in larger LGAs than in smaller ones. The relative ease with which citizens' organizations emerge in the planning debate casts doubts on the pluralist view of the citizens as being largely inactive in the policy process. The more frequent emergence of citizens' organizations in larger communities than in smaller ones also casts doubt on Dahl and Tufte's (1973, 108-109) contention that participation is less likely in large communities than in small ones.

Cohesiveness of governing majorities (H5)

Pluralism and competitive elitism share several assumptions about the political process, for example regarding the inactivity of the public. Their views on the cohesiveness of the government, on the other hand, are very different. While competitive elitism sees the government as relatively cohesive, the pluralists envisage a more fragmented and pluralistic government. Moreover, a pluralistic government, according to pluralist doctrine, should be more responsive to the voters than governments that are more akin to the image presented by competitive elitism.

The cohesiveness of governing majorities refers to their ability to act as one, depending on the degree of common interests, and the ability to solve collective action problems. Direct measurements of the communality of interests are hard to come by. In the case of the council majorities, however, the party composition of the majority may serve as a reasonable proxy. A single-party majority can be assumed to be more cohesive than a majority composed of many. Seven councils in our study have single-party majorities – although in one (Álftanes) the majority belongs to a local list which is essentially an alliance of different groups. Of the remaining 15 councils with coalition majorities, all but one (Árborg) are composed of only two parties. Two-party coalitions fall into two broad groups. On the one hand, there are those with a predominant partner (where the minor partner only has one representative) and on the other there are more equally divided coalitions.

Table 7. Party composition of majorities in Icelandic local authorities

Single-party majorities	Predominant-party majorities	Broad two-way coalitions	Three-party coalitions
Álftanes Garðabær	Akranes	Akureyri	Árborg
Hafnarfjörður	Kópavogur	Borgarbyggð	
Hveragerði	Ísafjörður	Fjallabyggð	
Reykjanesbær	Mosfellsbær	Fjarðabyggð	
Seltjarnarnes	Reykjavík	Fljótshérað	
Vestmannaeyjar	Skagafjörður	Grindavík	
		Hornafjörður	
		Norðurþing	

Five of the single-party majorities are held by the Independence Party, one by the Social Democrats and one by a composite left-wing list.

We also have to use an indirect gauge of the capacity of majorities for collective action. A reasonable assumption is that the position of the mayor is a crucial factor in providing leadership for collective action. Mayors in Icelandic local authorities are of two kinds. Some are council members and also heads of the “executive,” while others are hired in a professional capacity, with a more restricted political role. There are political mayors in a majority (12) of the 22 local authorities under study. Whether the mayors are political or professional traditionally varies from one local authority to the next, and sometimes practice varies within the same authority.

According to our interviewees, political mayors are usually in a stronger position vis-à-vis the political representatives, although the importance of the mayor also varies according to the size of the localities. The mayor plays a relatively larger role in the smaller ones than in the larger ones where professional administrations take some of the workload off them.

Combining our two measurements of elite cohesiveness, we maintain that single-party majorities and/or predominant-party majorities with political mayors come close to the image of political elites presented in competitive elitism. More broadly-based coalitions – with or without a political mayor – seem closer to the pluralist image.

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Table 8. Elite cohesiveness in Icelandic local authorities

	Competitive Elitism
<i>Cohesive elites</i>	Álftanes
Single-party majorities with political mayors	Hafnarfjörður Hveragerði Reykjanesbær Seltjarnarnes Vestmannaeyjar
<i>Predominant elites</i>	
Predominant-party majorities with political mayors from major party or single-party majority with professional mayor	Garðabær Kópavogur Ísafjörður Reykjavík
	Pluralism
<i>Mayoral pluralism</i>	
Political mayor in a broadly-based coalition	Akureyri Árborg Grindavík
<i>Pluralism</i>	
Professional mayor with coalition majority	Akranes Borgarbyggð Fjallabyggð Fjarðabyggð Fljótshálsa Hornafjörður Mosfellsbær Norðurþing Skagafjörður

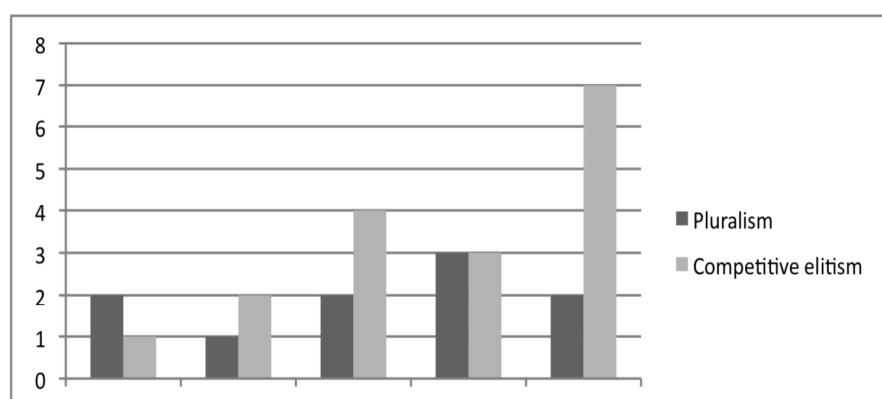
Roughly half the LGAs are governed by fairly cohesive groups of politicians where a single or predominant party plays a key role and the mayor is usually an elected representative. In all but two of these, the Independence Party is the backbone of the local elite. Other LGAs are governed by more pluralist groups, usually with a professional mayor and almost always with a coalition of two parties (except for Árborg, with three), neither of which has a predominant position.

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The notion that broadly-based coalitions can serve as a proxy for pluralism is perhaps debatable in this context. Pluralism is usually reserved for a situation where government policy is carried out “through negotiation, bargaining, persuasion and pressure at a considerable number of different sites in the political system” (Dahl 1963, 325). The mere existence of a broadly-based coalition, alas, does not guarantee that this is the case. On the other hand, it seems likely that competitive elites are less vulnerable to the kind of negotiation, bargaining, persuasion and pressure which Dahl speaks of than a broadly-based coalition. In this sense, we feel justified in using the proxy, as a preliminary measure, even if further research may yield more accurate results.

Hypothesis 5 states that the pluralist local authorities should be more responsive than those with competitive elitism. Our findings here are puzzling. Most of the planning debates (two thirds) occur in areas where competitive elitism is dominant. This could indicate that competitive elitism is more prone to a confrontationist style of politics than pluralism and in that respect less responsive than pluralism. On the other hand, looking only at the debates which actually did take place, we find that local authorities with competitive elites are no less responsive than the pluralist ones. In fact they are more responsive, according to Graph 2.

Graph 2. Citizen impact in single-LGA disputes according to pluralism and competitive elitism (number of disputes)



It seems likely that competitive elitism and pluralism are two competing modes of policy-making where the launching of policy projects is easier in the more elitist systems, while they are also more likely to encounter opposition. The need to win a council majority at election time may, however, also make competitive elitism more responsive once a debate has started, whereas a less efficient decision-making procedure in pluralism may actually make it more difficult for such majorities to respond adequately to citizen protest.

Business interests and public impact (H6)

Regarding Hypothesis 6, the likelihood of finding full-blown American-style regimes in local authorities in Iceland may be deemed relatively small. Although the local authorities have strong planning powers, they are relatively independent fiscally and many of them own a significant share of the land in their local government areas. This should make them less dependent on investors than city managers in the USA. Icelandic municipalities are also - with the sole exception of Reykjavík - smaller than the 50,000- inhabitant figure which Elkin (1987) maintains is the minimum for the formation of long-term regimes (although he never explains why this should be the case). This does not mean, however, that businesses are indifferent to planning decisions by local government. On the contrary, there are all sorts of property developers, branches of major firms, land-owners and contractors who have a major stake in the decisions made by local planning authorities. Relatively few of these, however, are basically local firms. During the heyday of the cooperative movement, there were strong local cooperatives in various parts of the country that were in many ways the backbone of the local economy, their functions including commerce and various branches of production, credit and so on. Akureyri is an example of a town of this kind. However, the only remaining cooperative with anything like the former strength of such firms is the one in Skagafjörður, which retains both the economic power and political clout resembling a regime actor.

There are other actors that are perceived as powerful in the LGAs, although more in the sense of being able to put pressure on the local authority when their interests are affected rather than forming a permanent regime. The ones most frequently mentioned by our interviewees were sports clubs. As the voluntary organizations, sports clubs can have a crucial impact on politics both in the party primaries and at elections. Party politicians are sensitive to pressure from the sports clubs and some of them cultivate them for political purposes. The sports clubs, in turn, need the support of the local authorities for subsidizing their activities and building sports facilities. This applies to a number of different sports activities where sporting halls and stadiums are needed and also to sports for which large areas of land is required, such as golf or horsemanship. Some of these groups are frequent participants in planning debates. One politician commented on horse riders in the following manner:

“... I don't know if you are familiar with horse enthusiasts. They are, you know, very independent individuals with strong opinions and ... so I'm not sure ... I don't think you can always, always when you are debating planning issues, that there is always likely to be a difference of opinion and, if there are inflexible individuals involved then ... well sometimes you just have to go ahead.”

Some LGAs also have social elites consisting of people from “old” high-status families, which are sometimes even referred to as dynasties. References to such groups, however, are usually in the past tense and they are not a major power in Icelandic local government according to our interviewees.

No particular connection could be made between the presence of networks in the planning debates and the likelihood of a public impact on the outcome. Further research may reveal a hidden influence, but a simple comparison of the presence of networks (Table 6) and the amount of impact made by the public (Graph 1) yields no regularities or tendencies. So far as they go, these results do not support the neo-pluralist position as presented in Hypothesis 6.⁴

Conclusion

Our findings in this article are tentative and exploratory. They constitute a first attempt at studying the way local democracy works in Iceland. They indicate that elitism, in its stronger versions at least, has limited value in accounting for decisions on local planning in Iceland. While instances of the use of exclusionary methods (as assumed in H1) indicate that democracy could be expanded in Icelandic municipalities and made more inclusive, the results also show that the authorities are responsive to a significant degree when faced with determined opposition from the inhabitants (contrary to H2).

The public has an impact on public policy not only – or even primarily – through elections as would have been expected by competitive elitists (H3). Elections undoubtedly play an important role in making the public influential, but their effect is intertwined with other methods. One of these is direct participation (H4) to a much greater extent than would have been expected according to our pluralist hypothesis.

Our attempt to compare the responsiveness of competitive elitism and pluralism – tentative and preliminary as it is – may indicate that they have different strengths and weaknesses. Competitive elitism is an efficient way of making policy in the sense that the political majority reaches conclusions more easily than in a pluralist body. It seems more likely, however, to encounter opposition, even if it also is often quite adept at dealing with protest.

Finally, with regard to business interests, we found no evidence that the presence of business interests reduced the likelihood of public impact on policy-making. While the municipalities undoubtedly have to tread a difficult path when balancing the interests of property developers and the public, the present analysis gives no indication that business interests are, as a rule, dominant.

The analysis indicates that the public is more easily organized than conventional political science gives it credit for being, and its impact on public policy is greater. We have not, of course, shown that public impact is “democratic” in the sense of normative democratic theory. It is still possible, for example, that citizens are not equal when it comes to participatory politics of the kind seen in Icelandic

planning debates. The issue in this article is merely the responsiveness of the authorities to public concerns, not whether these responses were justifiable. Similarly, we are not saying that local authorities should always give in to public pressure – they can be perfectly justified in standing their ground against unreasonable public demands. But what we have tried to show is that the authorities do feel a need to accommodate the citizenry and are in this sense responsive to the citizens' concerns.

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