Chapter 5

The role of the councillor

Neil McGarvey and Fraser Stewart

Introduction

Local councillors play an integral role in the democratic process. Other than nationally elected members of parliament, councils remain in many states the only collective body subject to universal, democratic elections, and exist as a voter's most immediate link to governing power. Functions carried out by councillors, and the role they play within communities and local government, are thus essential to strong, localised democracy, despite claims that councillors are 'amateurish' or local politics incidental to an ever-globalising world (see John 2004; Stone 2005; Trounstine 2009). Indeed, such criticisms habitually ignore the intertwined elements of local, national and international decision-making (Swyngedouw 1997; Sellers 2002; Stoker 2011), and in turn the crucial role councillors play in ensuring citizens and local interests remain represented therein. Without councillors, democracy overall would find itself drastically weakened, and the gulf between citizen and power widened. Local councillors thus provide a first port of call for citizens to have a say in the running of their towns, cities and communities where their voice would be lessened if national legislatures were the only forum of representation.

With the fundamental function local councillors serve, understanding the various roles of the councillor is perhaps more important than ever. How they represent citizens and local interests, how they formulate and scrutinise policy, the work they conduct in their localities and councils, the institutional factors which impact their authority and how other political forces shape and influence their behaviour can all be considered now to be pressing questions for social scientists and politicians alike. Yet research into local councillors remains minimal, with little outside of role perceptions

(de Groot et al. 2010; Karlsson 2012; Verhelst et al. 2013a), councillor and ward demographic studies (Improvement and Development Agency 2010; Thrasher et al. 2014; Kerley and McGarvey 2017) and local government reform critiques to build from. We therefore aim here to provide a broad overview of the role and work of local councillors, and some of the political, individual and institutional determinants thereof.

This chapter has five sections. with the first covers the basic roles a councillor must fulfil, focussing primarily on responsibilities of representation and scrutiny, and discuss briefly the professionalisation of the position in recent decades. Second, the specific councillor duties in public, in office and in the party. Building from the first two sections, section three will then delve into the factors which impact councillor workloads, such as electorate-councillor ratio, individual autonomy and political context. Section four will examine the higher institutional and political forces which shape councillor roles and responsibilities, and the authority and influence ultimately wielded thereby. Finally, we review some recommendations for study and the future of the field overall.

The fundamental role of the councillor

Over time and across space, what it means to be a 'local councillor' can vary substantially. Councillors' authority, how they campaign, how they perceive themselves, the ways in which they fulfil certain responsibilities, the influence they have, the amount of time dedicated to council work and how they are incentivised can all be quite different. Institutional format, ward profile, individual traits and political context can all affect the work, authority and autonomy of councillors, shaping the nature of the job in many different ways. Despite these many variances, however, the fundamental ethos of the position remains the same: to represent citizens and their interests in local government.

Councillors are the elected voice of their constituents, wards, and communities, and are above all else responsible for the advocacy for their interests in the local governance process. This responsibility involves not just relaying citizen concerns into the policy cycle, but ensuring the processes by which citizens are represented and power wielded is fair and inclusive. There are hence two fundamentally democratic principles, under which most councillor work can be categorised, that councillors can

be expected to uphold: *representation*, and *scrutiny* (Snape and Dodds 2003; de Groot et al. 2010; Karlsson 2012; Heinelt 2013b; Copus 2017). These principles are the ends to which all councillor work is a means. In representation, councillors are responsible for the communication of constituent concerns, serving as a conduit between localities and local government. In scrutiny, councillors are tasked with holding the local executive to account, ensuring the oversight of council conduct, and scrutinising the passing of policy.

Representation

Representation (sometimes referred to as *responsiveness*), is a dynamic concept. Other than parliamentarians, councillors are in many instances the only representatives subject to independent, universal elections. This gives them the democratic legitimacy to act as advocates and leaders within the localities they represent. As a basic responsibility, representation involves the relaying of local interests and concerns to the council, so that these concerns may be reflected in policy and action. How councillors go about representing is changeable, however, based on factors such as a councillors' political orientation (Heinelt 2013a: 649) and whether they see themselves as *trustees* or *delegates*.

In an age-old political debate (see Eulau et al. 1959; McCrone and Kuklinski 1979; Mitchell 1997; Mansbridge 2011), *trustees* consider their primary role to be in the direct representation of their constituents' interests via consultation and citizen interaction, while *delegates* see themselves more as appointed decision-makers on their constituents' behalf. Trustees will typically spend more time consulting with citizens over their concerns and opinions regarding policy and local interests, while delegates will more often use their status as elected leaders to take decisions in line with what they believe is the best course of action. It is estimated that 57% of councillors across Europe consider themselves to be trustees, with the number rising to as high as 77% in Switzerland (Karlsson 2013a: 97). Evidently, most councillors view their democratic mandate as a duty to reflect the interests and concerns of their constituents in the political process, rather than a warrant to act as executive decision-maker therefor. In a cross-national European study of councillors, Heinelt (2013b) notes that those orientated towards the right are more likely to adhere to the liberal democratic model of democracy and be comfortable with the trustee model of representation.

A third way in which councillors perceive their representative role is that of *party soldier*, whereby councillors are not strictly acting as trustees or delegates, but rather place the will and interests of their respective political party as paramount. Verhelst et al. (2013), in a comparative study of European councillors, note the importance of parties in terms of providing initial motive for seeking election and providing support in doing so. Party soldiers tend to place emphasis on their party duties. In Europe they tend to be more orientated towards the left ideologically (Egner et al. 2016: 262). However, party soldiers tend to be significantly fewer than trustees or delegates overall, although it is worth considering that most councillors today are members of a political party and so their 'party soldier' duties may still be prevalent, even if they are not primary.

Scrutiny

Scrutiny then (sometimes referred to as *accountability*), can be understood broadly as the councillor's responsibility to scrutinise policy design, critically oversee the implementation and delivery of services, and to hold the council and executive to account (Snape and Dodds 2003: 49). Like representation, this responsibility varies dependent on a number of factors, which we can neatly categorise as *formal* and *informal*. Formal factors generally pertain to local councillor responsibilities as outlined in local government acts (LGAs) and other council-specific legislation. LGAs tend to define the scrutiny responsibilities of councillors quite explicitly (see House of Commons 2013; Queensland Government 2016). These can be useful guides in explaining councillor roles and authority, outlining their duties of scrutiny and the jurisdiction thereof, and in settling intra-council disputes.

These formal responsibilities are often somewhat open-ended, however, and can in some cases be undermined by informal factors such as a councillor's position in or outside of the executive, seniority within the council, and relationships with other council members (Karlsson 2013a, 2013b). Research has shown that councillors can often find their *de jure* influence compromised in favour of the popular political clout of directly elected local mayors, for instance, as has been the case notably in recent years in Italy, Germany and Poland (Denters and Rose 2005; de Groot et al. 2010). Whether a councillor belongs to the party of the executive can also impact how effective they are in the policy cycle, and in overseeing the conduct of the executive and council as a whole. Councillors who are members of the executive can expect to

have a greater input in the policy cycle than those who are not. Consequently however, they will also find themselves subject of greater behavioural and political scrutiny at the hands of non-executive members, whose sometimes-diminished role in the policy cycle is typically offset against heightened responsibility oversight of the executive and wider council conduct (as well as general opposition roles, such as public debate).

Professionalisation

One further consistency of the job of local councillor across examples and indeed time is the general trend toward professionalisation. How councillors go about upholding aforementioned principles and how seriously they do so has shifted considerably in recent decades. In virtually all states, being a councillor was once treated as a mostly voluntary vocation, with minimal attendance allowances paid to compensate councillors for their time commitment and very little formal training involved. Councillor responsibilities now, however, are typically outlined in LGAs, with formal training a necessity of the position in most countries and more generous remuneration provided. The time-series data on councillor working hours tend to suggest that over the decades councillors have committed to ever increasing hours (Kerley and McGarvey 2017). Although the amount of time dedicated to the role varies widely across examples – Scottish councillors work on average 35 hours per week, English 23 hours (Improvement and Development Agency 2010) compared with 87% of those in Belgium who work on average 30–60 hours per month, for instance (Verhelst et al. 2013b: 284) – the increasingly professional nature of the role is fairly constant.

Councillor activities

The increasingly professionalised responsibilities of a local councillor can thus vary based on myriad factors, including formal and informal differences, and whether a councillor views herself as a trustee, delegate, or party soldier. We know also that a councillor's responsibilities to democracy involve the pursuit of two key principles: representation of constituents in the political process, and scrutiny of the policy cycle and indeed council conduct. But what is it that councillors actually *do*? Knowing that councillors have common base principles to uphold, what activities and roles do councillors undertake in doing so? Once more, these can vary across examples,

although many basic elements of councillor work remain the same. We can thus classify councillor activities neatly under three broad headings: the councillor in public, the councillor in office, and the councillor in the party.

In public

As outlined in the previous section, councillors have traditionally acted as the voice of their constituents in the local governance process, fulfilling first and foremost the role of local representative for respective wards and communities. They are typically better educated than the generality of the population, and act as a conduit representing citizens to a large council bureaucracy. They are the link mechanism between communities and the council, and exist predominantly as the channel through which individual constituents can have some voice in council decision-making. Regardless of whether a councillor considers herself a trustee or delegate, most agree that this most elementary duty to represent constituents is of utmost importance (de Groot et al. 2010; Heinelt 2013).

Representing constituents naturally requires communicating with constituents, which can take various forms. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, this has taken place historically in *surgeries*, with councillors in most countries employing some version thereof. Surgeries have over time been among the most visible aspects of councillors fulfilling their local representative role, and provide regular opportunity for constituents to meet with their councillor and raise complaints in person. However, there has been a long-term decline in surgery attendance by residents and consequently in surgery provision. Evidence from recent research suggests that even those councillors who still use surgeries find them a less meaningful and useful form of interaction with constituents than perhaps they were years ago (see Wilson and Game 2011; Kerley and McGarvey 2017), and observe that they are being utilised by a declining, ageing segment of their constituents. Surgeries now are thus as much a tool for public visibility as for raising concerns, allowing councillors to demonstrate their local presence, often without actually having to face a member of the public.

Increasingly then, new information and communication technology is superseding face-to-face and other traditional forms of public interaction. Concerns are distinctly more likely to be raised via digital channels than in person, while many councillors are taking to social and new media to relay information back to the public. Outside of

the United Kingdom, there have been broad initiatives to capitalise on this technological shift. Local councils in the likes of Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, made a point of pushing digital as a new and versatile means of councillor–constituent communication (Karlsson 2012, 2013a). Even in countries where there no such initiatives have taken place, the transition away from 'old school' forms of councillor–constituent communication toward more modern means has occurred somewhat naturally in line with social and technological shifts.

E-mail is now very much the dominant form of communication, both to and from councillors in most cases. Different social media are still somewhat less consistently employed by councillors, although the utilisation of blogs and online documentation of councillor time is becoming more prevalent. Those who use social media tend to view it as a tool to alert constituents to newsletters, invite them to events and make occasional political comments. Undoubtedly then, the diffusion of easy-to-use channels of communication has reshaped the interaction between councillor and constituent. In the past writing and posting a letter tend to demand time for reflection and thought. Today constituents can send petitions, e-mails and campaigning material instantaneously. They often expect a similarly speedy response.

Beyond communicating with constituents over specific concerns, councillors undertake a variety of public activities. These may include participating in local hustings, attending community events and gatherings, mediating local political discussion and visiting local businesses (see Klok and Denters 2013 for a comparative review of the perceptions and actuality of councillor behaviour). This affords citizens further opportunity to interact with their councillors and raise local concerns, and in turn allowing councillors the chance to keep their finger on the local pulse. As with surgeries, however, many of these activities can serve as exercises in public visibility rather than integral council work, employed to bolster political popularity and future electoral prospects. Hustings will typically only take place today during election campaigns, while the heightened prominence of social media and instant reporting have made photo opportunities of councillors interacting with the public at local events all the more valuable.

In the council

The role of the councillor in public and the role of the councillor within the council are very porous and interrelated. In office, councillors must continue to represent constituents and relay their concerns to council meetings. Day-to-day council organisation may include ward casework based on constituent interaction, which in turn can become a topic for discussion in a committee or debate, for example. Likewise, the oversight and scrutiny of policy will generally be conducted in the interest of the councillor's constituency. When we talk of councillor activities in the council, then, we refer to the formal duties carried out by councillors within specifically within local councils and on council business in the furthering of constituent interests, which we can understand as *internal governance*.

Internal governance is a somewhat catch-all term referring to the activities that all councillors get involved in regarding the organisation of their council. It is any activity that involves debating, administration, formulating policy, approving and overseeing council business, or holding the executive to account. Bernard (2010), for example, talks of Czech councillors in small municipalities as 'politicians, development workers and informal leaders'. Forms of this duty can range widely, from basic casework such as e-mailing constituents and local partners, to acting as council or committee leader. Other activities may include acting as a portfolio holder, serving on a committee or taking part in debates in council meetings. In the most basic sense then, internal activity refers to those duties undertaken by councillors on a day-to-day basis within the council.

Different aspects of internal governance can precedence over others. Of the key internal governance activities conducted by councillors, *policymaking* naturally stands as significant. Councillors in the vast majority of cases will perform at least some role in the policy cycle. As a base responsibility, councillors generally find themselves attached to one or a few committees relative to specific policy areas. Within these committees, councillors collaborate, debate, scrutinise and formulate policy. This is a continuous cycle, with scrutiny and oversight present at virtually every stage: from conception, to implementation, to service delivery. Councillors are thus not only responsible for designing and passing policy, but for ensuring its effective implementation.

The position of different councillors within the policy cycle can vary. Within local authorities as outlined in the previous section, the influence enjoyed by local councillors over policy can fluctuate dependent on factors such as whether the councillor is a member of the executive or governing party/coalition, how long the councillor has been a member of the council for, and so forth. Yet these factors do not dictate councillor authority in the policy cycle exclusively. To presume so would be to presume that influence over policy and council business is one-dimensional and restricted to directive capacity, which it evidently is not. For example, dissatisfied constituents will approach their local councillor, regardless of their status as an executive or non-executive member, should complaints arise regarding a policy or its delivery. Following directly from duties of representation, all councillors thus have a fundamental role to play in relaying public feedback into the scrutiny and policy process.

More crucially, however, all councillors have a responsibility to provide scrutiny and oversight of the executive and council conduct, which presents another important element of internal governance. Over time, *oversight of the executive* and local government activity has become a councillor duty of markedly greater prominence (de Groot et al. 2010; Wollman 2012). While members of the executive, members of the governing party/coalition, or generally more senior members may boast greater directive influence – that is, influence to set agendas and with more obvious control over policy design – other members maintain substantial responsibility not just in policymaking, but in the scrutiny of conduct and performance of the executive and indeed the council overall. This can be achieved via oversight committees, inquiries and reviews, which are conducted typically by non-executive members. In this role, non-executive members have the authority to hold executive members to account, and to subsequently ensure the effective, efficient, transparent and representative execution of council business.

In the party

Beyond these two primary sets of roles, local councillors undertake various external activities. One of these which can be of significant important is that of party member. While independent candidate numbers remain high compared with national government, most local councils are dominated by one or a coalition of parties. Candidates often stand on party platforms, with party preferences influencing their

behaviour once elected. In Spain, 88.2% of members cited that implementing their party programme was of great or upmost importance (Navarro and Sweeting 2013). In Denmark, it was found that party membership was the strongest indicator of a councillor's spending preferences (Serritzlew 2003: 327). Many councillors thus clearly have some interest in advancing party policy at the local level, and partaking in party activity, which may involve things like constituency party meetings, canvassing, attending party conference and the like.

It is worth considering briefly at this point what local party groups are, and what they mean to local democracy. Beyond spending and executive policy decisions, local party groups have a substantial role to play. Colin Copus flatteringly cites these groups as being the 'critical determinants of the vibrancy and health of local democracy' (Copus 2004: 57), despite there still being such a high number of independent local councillors. As with party politics at large, however, parties solve a collective action problem and allow groups of like-minded candidates to form coalitions and govern effectively. Parties increase the predictability and transparency of policy outcomes, and simplify choices for voters and help to aggregate political interests (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; White 2006; Kölln 2014). They also act as a structure through which councillors are recruited and trained, a proxy where citizens can observe debate (the '*theatre of representation*' as Copus describes it), and provide informational cues to help constituents understand political positions. It is indeed difficult to imagine a functioning democratic polity without them.

With these fundamental tasks as with national politics, then, parties are by now institutionally engrained in local government, with considerable implications for affiliated councillors. To the local councillor, being a member of a party means working with party colleagues in the pursuit of common goals, which requires a large degree of coordination with the local party group. Involvement with a political party can thus have significant bearing on the amount of time a councillor dedicates to their role, and the way in which that role is fulfilled. In Germany, Egner (2015: 184) found that party activity took up a substantial amount of councillor time; so much so that councillors who were also members of a party registered higher overall working hours than independent candidates. Party infrastructure can also be an invaluable asset to

councillors in communicating with constituents, financing and campaigning, while strong party cohesion can help to advance party and indeed constituency interests.

External to the council

Ask a random member of the public what councillors do outside of council hours and they might conjure up an image of one cutting the ribbon on a new community centre, or switching on Christmas lights in the town centre. Out-with party and internal council activities, however, councillors are being asked to fulfil various other important roles, namely representing the council in bodies that involve other organisations in the public, commercial and voluntary sectors. Councillors have a part to play in public and private bodies in areas such as health, planning, community safety, transport and social care. Where councils have privatised services, engaged in inter-municipal co-operation, involved contractors in service provision, or established independent bodies for the purpose of oversight and scrutiny, councillors will often be tasked with liaising with and participating in boards and meetings. Recent local government literature has tended to emphasise that such activities are becoming a more pronounced part of council activity (see Stoker and Wilson 2004; Wilson and Game 2011; McGarvey 2012; Painter 2012). In such arrangements local councillors are merely one actor among many (Plüss and Kübler 2013: 203), albeit often one of few with democratic legitimacy credentials.

These additional duties can also involve procurement and investment activity, such as meeting with developers and planning committees and securing contracts for the council area. We might define these as local economic activities. Managing the local political economy, especially in countries whereby local authorities are responsible for the raising of their own revenue as in France, or where funding has tightened over time as in the UK, can be an important councillor role, with effects ranging well beyond the local setting alone. Local initiatives are markedly crucial links in a much longer chain, with observable effects of local economic activity ranging from community regeneration to national employment and welfare performance to international investment (Cox 1995; Swyngedouw 1997; Wood 1998; Sellers 2002). Economic stimulation is by no means inextricably confined to national or international forums, and nor are local communities necessarily guaranteed to be fully served by generalised national economic policy. As such, councillors play an

important role in managing the local economy, which can in turn have much more expansive effect.

Councillor workload

Knowing now the various duties and responsibilities councillors are expected to conduct, and the similarities in these duties evident across examples, it may intuitively seem like councillors everywhere fulfil similar roles that might take up similar amounts of time and effort. Across the literature the trend of professionalisation has been noted, while the base responsibilities over time have remained the same. Indeed, most councillors go about their duties via analogous means and so instinctively this makes sense. As flexible as the role itself, however, councillor workloads can vary substantially for a number of reasons, across examples and indeed within councils themselves. This remains a surprisingly under-researched area: while there have been studies documenting the evolution of councillor roles, few have dissected the underlying factors influencing workload pressure in any great depth.

Within the limited research that exists, some interesting hypotheses have been made. Studies have attempted to show that factors such as deprivation, councillor–electorate ward ratio, party affiliation and time served on the council can all influence councillor workloads to some degree. These relationships are often relatively weak, however, or too heavily caveated to prove generalisable. Ward deprivation, for example, is somewhat shaky in that boundaries change and many wards can have high workloads with relative affluence. There is also the issue that those suffering in deprivation tend to also be politically subdued. Accepting that councillor workloads are at least in part influenced by constituent communication, this hypothesis becomes questionable.

Ward size and ratio

Of the cited determinants of councillor workload, *ward population* and *councillor–electorate ratio* are perhaps the most common. These factors, it is thought, influence councillor workload in that the more people a councillor ultimately represents, the more work they will have to do. This is of course an entirely reasonable hypothesis to make, with research such as that conducted by Rao (1994) seeming to provide support therefor. More recent studies, however, have brought the strength of this relationship into question. Kerley and McGarvey (2017) for example, in their study of councillor

workloads in Scotland, find no statistically significant relationship between councillor workload and ward population or councillor–electorate ratio. Rather, it is found that councillor workload can vary within just as much as between Scottish councils (ibid.: 48), exposing a fairly serious methodological issue hidden with the use of average councillor time as a comparative measure; that is, where averages are employed, they can inadvertently mask internal ward and individual councillor differences.

Broad-brush comparisons of average councillor workloads should thus be viewed with some vigilance, although that is not to say that they are always uninformative. Numbers of councillors serving the same population can vary markedly – for example Boston, USA and Glasgow, UK have roughly the same populations (670,000 and 620,000 respectively), Glasgow has 85 councillors, Boston has 13. In US council jurisdictions small numbers of aldermen/councillors in councils are common. Even accounting for the undoubted substantial differences in political culture, council statute and constitutions, representative–executive relationship such a stark difference in number has an inevitable consequence in terms of how councillors in each city see their role.

When we take into account average councillor working hours in the United Kingdom compared with other local councils across Europe, for example, these ratios are quite obviously of some note. The average councillor–electorate ratio in the United Kingdom is approximately 1:2860, while the average hours worked range from 25 in England to 35 in Scotland per week. Contrast this with the average 1:400 ratio in Germany to 30–60 hours per month, or even the 1:800 in Belgium (Wilson and Game 2011: 275) and electorate-councillor ratio appears to be very much an open-and-shut case. But what of the differences between individual councillors, which show no real consistency with macro considerations? We can hence explain the difference in average workload between the anomalous United Kingdom and the rest of Europe in this regard, but we cannot explain differences between UK wards, nor wards in other countries, or differences overall at the individual councillor level.

The same is true when we consider councillor workloads longitudinally. Time-series data on councillor working hours, particularly through the more extensive English studies (see Rao 1994; Purdam et al. 2008), suggests that councillors have committed to increasing hours over time. This has ranged from 52 hours per month in

the 1960s to as high as 92 hours per month by the 2000s (Redcliffe-Maud 1969; Robinson 1977; Widdicombe 1986; Improvement and Development Agency 2010). From this we can surmise that councillors overall are expected to commit to bigger workloads today than in the past, but again this presents a very approximate reading of a far more nuanced reality. Again, despite steadily increasing averages, workloads still vary dramatically within councils, across wards and across countries (see Wilson and Game 2011; Karlsson 2012; Verhelst et al. 2013a, 2013b; Egner 2015). Country and ward averages are thus helpful in showing some macro trends, but can often conceal important information regarding internal ward and individual variance.

Self-determination, partisanship and politics

So – how do we get to the root of these individual differences? For this, the most reliable and consistent observation may simply be that 'councillors themselves decide how much energy they put into the representation of their electorate' (Wilson and Game 2011: 274); that is, despite party and council pressures and varying ward profiles, councillors retain a high degree of discretion and agency over their own working hours, both in absolute terms and in focus i.e. which matters they wish to prioritise and the roles they wish to ultimately play (see Glasgow City Council/MORI 2004). This is an important point to emphasise. If councillors have the autonomy and capacity to self-determine their working hours, then institutional pressures such as the size of ward population, its sparsity, deprivation level and other demographic factors will have muted impact on hours worked. With that, personalised factors become distinctly more pressing. Political persuasion or personal belief may very well be more indicative of how much work someone conducts in their ward to combat deprivation, rather than the scale and existence of deprivation itself, for example. The predominance of males in council chambers across the globe becomes very relevant when one considers the differences in importance of policy areas between genders. Women councillors across Europe consistently place social, environmental and (unsurprisingly) equal representation issues above men (Egner et al. 2013: 261).

In this more autonomous vein, other political factors can also have a strong impact on the nature and amount of work councillors choose to do (Thrasher et al. 2012: 1). From the previous section, we know that councillors tied to a party tend to have increased working hours overall than independent members. This is because they have extra party responsibilities to attend to, such as running the local party group,

communicating and meeting with party colleagues, and campaigning in party colleague constituencies. But politics does not occur in a party vacuum. Extending this aspect further then, other political factors such as the level of electoral competition in a ward may also influence councillor workloads. Councillors in safe wards, under less immediate electoral pressure, may be less prone to generate higher workloads by responding to contact from citizens or enthusiastically seeking out potential sources of constituent grievance. On the other hand, councillors in highly contested and marginal seats may be inclined to increase their workload, particularly in the public eye, to demonstrate their dedication to constituents and bolster their re-election prospects.

Institutions, multi-level governance and parties

We know now, then, that councillors have reasonable autonomy to determine the amount of work they do, and the ways in which that work is conducted. Yet there are other substantial, external factors which influence the role of the councillor on a more fundamental level; namely, the wider political and institutional contexts in which councillors operate. How a state chooses to organise its democratic and institutional structures can cause significant variance in the autonomy afforded to councillors, the funding they are likely to enjoy, the jurisdictional remit of their position and the formal power held in local councils to affect change. With this, the position of a councillor can differ markedly across examples. The 'millefeuille' multi-level system in France is bound to have serious implications for local councillor duties and remit compared with, say, the very direct central-local relationship in England or Scotland for instance. Thus, where councillors can determine their own workload to a large extent, they cannot dictate their relative position within a state's institutional framework.

Unitary v. federal institutions

Of institutional factors likely to shape the role of the councillor, decentralisation is instinctively most obvious. The extent to which a state is *unitary* or *federal* can have considerable bearing on local powers, authority and responsibilities (Crepaz 1996; Lijphart 1999; McGann 2006; McGann and Latner 2013). Ranging from highly federalised systems as in Germany and the United States, convoluted multi-tier systems as in France and Switzerland, to more direct relationships as in England, the

authority granted to local councils, the devolved powers they wield and the funding mechanisms the employ will all have stark impact on how councillors operate, the amount of work they undertake, the official responsibilities they fulfil, and the vitality thereof to the national political context (see Sharpe 1970; Crook 2003).

A cursory glance across cases illustrates this variance well, although perhaps not immediately in line with what we might expect. For instance, under the French system of governance, typified by its numerous layers (national, regional, sub-regional, inter-communal and communal), it would be reasonable to assume that the role of councillors at the smallest commune level would be minimal and jurisdictionally unclear. Compare this with the local government system in England, typified by a direct central–local government relationship and control over larger numbers of citizens, and we could justifiably presume that councillors in England would boast more robustly defined and indeed expansive authority. This is evidently not the case. Where French councillors perhaps have a somewhat smaller remit, the autonomy they have over that remit is arguably stronger than in England. French councillors have almost full control over their raising, spending and policy priorities, protected clearly in legislation, while those in England find themselves heavily dependent on decisions taken at Westminster (Stoker 1997; Rhodes 1997). Councillors in unitary systems, it would seem, tend to be of greater subservience to the centre overall.

One explanation for this may be that, under complex federal systems, councils and councillors are protected from tyranny of national government. National government in these cases has less direct access and input into the affairs of the local council. Local government in Belgium, for example, is intricate and often adversarial – so much so that policy gridlock can become common, with local councils in many instances stifling central government programmes (Happaerts et al. 2012; Happaerts 2015). Germany presents a similar case, in that strongly protected federal rights of *Länder* councils, often referred to as the *principle of subsidiarity* whereby it is held that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible and practical level, can cause fairly staunch embattlement over jurisdiction, responsibility and policy implementation (Kraemer and Schreurs 2007: 7).

We might view this capacity to resist national government as testament to the strong legal respect for local authority and the democratic legitimacy of the local

councillor in such systems. Compare this with a unitary state such as England or Finland and we see stark differences. In these mostly unitary systems, a vast majority of power is retained at the centre (Kettunen 2007: 43), with national government reserving the capacity to redefine local council authority and restrict funding should local councils refuse to play ball. In Italy, the constitution allows the national government to pre-empt local councils where they are seen to be failing to perform or meet obligations (Vesperini 2009: 9). Here, gridlock is palpably less common, since central government can adapt the rules of the game to suit their own agenda with relative impunity. Strong federalism can thus provide a safeguard for councillors and their authority from central government, ultimately lending more gravitas to the position itself.

Yet federalism is not always so positive, particularly in cases where political and judicial oversight is found to be lacking. Until now this chapter has been largely concerned with examples from Western systems, reflecting what is often a lack of scope in the literature itself. Venturing further afield, however, the experience of local government and the position of the local councillor in places such as India and across sub-Saharan Africa can be quite different (Crook 2003; Singh 2004; Cali and Sen 2011). Often in these areas there exists a local political culture of clientelism, where patronage and emphasis on social order is more evident.

In some states, convoluted multi-tier governance provides a perfect arena for corruption, patronage, and exploitation. Often this is down to weak scrutiny capacity and political institutions overall allowing unsavoury activity to fester and blossom (North 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Councillors can become compromised (or *captured*, to borrow a term from public administration) by corrupt interests. Often they are already members of these interest networks prior to election. They thus cease to fit the traditional representative roles of trustee, delegate or party soldier, instead serving as what we might consider a purveyor of interests for dominant economic, social, and political classes, protected from repercussion by weak institutions and deep-rooted political culture.

Party executives and national government

Multi-level governance is not the only extra-local force with bearing on councillor roles. Party political matters can also be of some significance. We know from

previous sections that being a member of a party can increase councillor workload and influence how a councillor behaves in government, while being a party soldier can lead to them being almost entirely subservient to a party machine – yet we have so far only covered the party locally, with little consideration for the party as a national entity controlled by a central executive. At this level, parties shape councillor roles in other ways. Party constitutions, operating practices and culture tend to be designed to induce discipline among elected representatives, councillors included. Being a member of a party, particularly mass parties wherein decision-making is highly centralised (Kirchheimer 1966; Krouwel 2006), will thus have distinct bearing on the autonomy a councillor has not just over policy matters and voting preferences, but over the duties they are expected to fulfil. Party leadership may identify executive and committee roles for councillors, or seek move their voting behaviour and debate contributions in line with their own national priorities. Furthermore, they may encourage councillors to spend more time on activities such as local canvassing and campaigning.

Another, less direct party-related factor which may impact councillor roles and workload is which party or coalition holds power in national government. In the United Kingdom during the 1980s, for instance, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was very much in the business of privatising and reducing the responsibility of local councils (see Bulpitt 1989; Buller 1999). With such support for privatisation, typical of conservative parties and not exclusive to the United Kingdom (see for example Bel et al. 2007; Warner and Hebdon 2001), it follows logically that councillors might find themselves with reduced authority and workload. Accepting that conservative parties tend towards privatisation of services and smaller government while social democratic and socialist governments tend towards increased nationalisation and local service provision (see Hicks and Swank 1992), we could hence surmise that the role and workload of the councillor is directly impacted by which party or coalition sits in national government.

Conclusions

The role of the councillor is hence a flexible and multifarious concept. From this chapter, we know the basic responsibilities councillors hold, the roles they play, and the factors which shape the nature, intensity and authority thereof. Where councillors

have various duties in the public, in the council, in the party and indeed elsewhere, matters such as formal responsibilities as outlined in LGAs, their position within the local government and the institutional context under which they operate can all impact the role and work of councillors across examples. We understand also the ways in which councillors perceive themselves, and the different drivers and incentives of councillor behaviour.

Councillors today see themselves predominantly as trustees, relaying and representing the will of their local interests and constituents. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on why this is significant. In the modern world, cynical assertions are often made regarding the diminishing role and autonomy of the councillor and local politics under forces of economic and political globalisation. It is clear, however, that under such forces, the primary democratic roles fulfilled by local councillors provide a vital link between citizens and power, without which democracy overall would be fundamentally weakened. Under such forces – arguably even in spite of them – councillors remain the most direct link to localities and citizens, who might otherwise find themselves marginalised in favour of higher political and economic dealings. The part played by local councillors in representing local, citizen and community interests is thus integral to the political process, and fills an essential need that cannot be achieved by distant central or international governance alone. It is little exaggeration to suggest that councillors, as locally elected representatives, are one of the key building blocks on which democracy is based.

Of course, despite this increasing and fundamental importance, the role of local councillors and local politics overall, often still finds itself sidelined by academics in favour of apparently more significant research areas in field such as global governance and international relations. As such, in the existing literature, there are various questions that remain unanswered, unconvincingly answered or answered in one jurisdiction only. These questions serve as promising avenues for further cross national study. These include, but are by no means restricted to: the impact of central party and partisanship on the local councillor; the role of the councillor in the local economy; the impact of institutions (e.g. elected mayors) on councillor roles and responsibility (i.e. how different institutional structures impact councillor authority and work at local, national and international levels); councillor roles in new networks

of focused on service provision; councillors and new media; and councillor workload and role studies beyond the British and European norm. There are hence myriad questions to ask and answer for scholars not just of local politics, but of political parties, democracy and institutions, political economy, globalisation, sociology and beyond. Given the heightened significance of local councillors today, this is perhaps a more important pursuit than ever.

References

Acemoglu, D. and Robinson, J. (2012) *Why Nations Fail? The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Bel, G., Hebdon, R. and Warner, M. (2007) Local Government Reform: Privatization and its Alternatives. *Local Government Studies* 33(4): 507–515.

Bernard, J. (2010) The Role of Councillors in Small Municipalities in the Czech Republic – Between Politicians, Development Workers and Informal Leaders. Paper prepared for the ECPR Joint Session, March, Munster.

Buller, J. (1999) A Critical Appraisal of the Statecraft Interpretation. *Public Administration* 77(4): 691–712.

Bulpitt, J. (1986) The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft. *Political Studies* 34(1): 19–39.

Cali, M. and Sen, K. (2011) Do Effective State Business Relations Matter for Economic Growth? Evidence from Indian States. *World Development* 39(9): 1542–1557.

Copus, C. (2004) *Party Politics and Local Government*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Copus, C. (2017) Could Local Government Govern? Rethinking the Role of Councillors. Retrieved from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/rethinking-the-role-of-councillors.

Cox, K. R. (1995) Globalisation, Competition and the Politics of Local Development. *Urban Studies* 32(2): 213–224.

Crepaz, M. M. L. (1996) Consensus Versus Majoritarian Democracy: Political Institutions and their Impact on Macroeconomic Performance and Industrial Disputes. *Comparative Political Studies* 29(1): 4–26.

Crook, R. C. (2003) Decentralisation and Poverty Reduction in Africa: The Politics of Local–Central Relations. *Public Administration and Development* 23(1): 77-88.

Dalton, R. and Wattenberg, M. (2000) Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies. New York: Oxford University Press.

De Groot, M., Denters, B. and Klok, P.-J. (2010) Strengthening the Councillor as a Representative and Scrutiniser: The Effects of Institutional Change on Councillors' Role Orientations in the Netherlands. *Local Government Studies* 36(3): 401–423.

Denters and Rose 2005

Egner, B. (2015) Parliaments in Disguise? How German Councillors Perceive Local Councils. *Local Government Studies* 41(2): 183–201.

Egner, B., Sweeting, D. and Klok, P.-J. (eds) (2013) *Local Councillors in Europe*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Egner et al. 2016

Eulau, H., Wahlke, J. C., Buchanan, W. and Ferguson, L. C. (1959) The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke. American. *Political Science Review* 53(3): 742–756.

Glasgow City Council/MORI 2004

Happaerts, S. (2015) Climate Governance in Federal Belgium: Modest Subnational Policies in a Complex Multi-level Setting. *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences* 12(4): 285–301.

Happaerts, S., Schunz, S. and Bruyninckx, H. (2012) Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations: The Multi-Level Politics of Climate Change Policy in Belgium. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 20(4): 441–458.

Heinelt, H. (2013a) Councillors' Notions of Democracy, and their Role Perception and Behaviour in the Changing Context of Local Democracy. *Local Government Studies* 39(5): 640–660.

Heinelt, H. (2013b) Councillors and Democracy: How Do They Think and How Can Differences in Their Views Be Explained? In B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds), *Local Councillors in Europe*, . Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Hicks, A. M. and Swank, D. H. (1992) Politics, Institutions and Welfare Spending in Industrialized Democracies, 1960–82. American Political Science Review 86(3): 658–674.

House of Commons (2013) Communities and Local Government Committee Councillors on the Frontline Sixth Report of Session 2012-13 HC 432. London: House of Commons.

Improvement and Development Agency (2010) *Exit Survey of Local Authority Councillors in England.* London: Improvement and Development Agency.

John, P. (2004) *Why Study Urban Politics?* In J. S. Davies and D. L. Imbroscio (eds), *Theories of Urban Politics*, 2nd edition, . London: Sage Publications.

Karlsson, M. (2012) Participatory Initiatives and Political Representation: The Case of Local Councillors in Sweden. *Local Government Studies* 38(6): 795–815.

Karlsson, D. (2013a) Who Do the Local Councillors of Europe Represent? In B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds), *Local Councillors in Europe*, . Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Karlsson, M. (2013b) The Hidden Constitutions: How Informal Political Institutions Affect the Representation Style of Local Councils. *Local Government Studies* 39(5): 681–702.

Kerley, R. and McGarvey, N. (2017) *Report: Councillors' Roles and Workload.* Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. Retrieved from www.lgbc-scotland.gov.uk/publications.

Kettunen, P. (2007) EU and the Sub-national Government of Finland: Half-shut Windows of Opportunities. *Politicka misao* XLIV(2): 41–53.

Kirchheimer, O. (1966) The Transformation of Western European Party Systems. In: Lapalombara, J. and Weiner, M. (eds), *Political Parties and Political Development*, . Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Klok, P.-J. and Denters, B. (2013) The Roles Councillors Play. In B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds), *Local Councillors in Europe*, . Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Kölln, A. K. (2014) The Value of Political Parties to Representative Democracy. *European Political Science Review* 7(4): 593–613.

Kraemer, A. R. and Schreurs, M. A. (2007) *Federalism and Environmental Regulation in Germany and the EU*. AICGS Policy Report no. 31. Retrieved from http://ecologic.eu/2095.

Krouwel 2006

Lijphart, A. (1999) *Patterns of Democracy.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mansbridge, J. (2011) Clarifying the Concept of Representation. American Political Science Review 105(3): 621–630.

McCrone, D. J. and Kuklinski, J. H. (1979) The Delegate Theory of Representation. *American Journal of Political Science* 23(2): 278–300.

McGann, A. (2006) The Logic of Democracy: Reconciling Equality, Deliberation and Minority Protection. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

McGann, A. and Latner, M. (2013) The Calculus of Consensus Democracy: Rethinking Patterns of Democracy Without Veto Players. *Comparative Political Studies* 46(7): 823–850.

McGarvey, N. (2012) Inter-Municipal Co-operation: The United Kingdom Case. Instituzioni del Federalismo 3.12. Retrieved from www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/affari_ist/Rivista_3_2012/McGarvey.pdf.

Mitchell, J. (1997) Representation in Government Boards and Commissions. *Public Administration Review* 57(2): 160–167.

Navarro, C. and Sweeting, D. (2013) Comparing local Councillors in Spain and the UK: Representation, Participation and Party Politics. Paper presented at 63rd Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Cardiff, 26 March. Retrieved from www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/462_227.pdf.

North, D. C. (1990) Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Painter, C. (2012) The UK Coalition Government: Constructing public service reform narratives. *Public Policy and Administration* 28(1): 3–20.

Plüss, L. and Kübler, D. (2013) Coordinating Community Governance? Local Councillors in Different Governance Network Arrangements. In B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds), *Local Councillors in Europe*, . Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Purdam, K., John, P., Greasley, S. and Norman, P. (2008) *How Many Elected Representatives Does Local Government Need? A Review of the Evidence from Europe.* CCSR Working Paper 2008-06. Retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/30770278/2008-06.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1504805802&Signature=nU%2FIl4kL8bnrhnP%2FdQmL0hkL5dY%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DHow_many_elected_representatives_does_lo.pdf.

Queensland Government (2016) Councillor Responsibilities under the Local Government Act 2009. Retrieved from

www.dilgp.qld.gov.au/resources/guideline/local-government/councillor-resource-kit.pdf.

Rao, N. (1994) *The Making and Unmaking of Local Self-Government*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Redcliffe-Maud, J. (chair) (1969) *Royal Commission on Local Government in England*. Cmnd 4040. London: HMSO.

Rhodes, R. A. W. (1997) *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Robinson, D. (chair) (1977) *Enquiry into the System of Remuneration of Members of Local Government*. London: HMSO.

Sellers, J. M (2002) *Governing from Below: Urban Regions and the Global Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Serritzlew, S. (2003) Shaping Local Councillor Preferences: Party Politics, Committee Structure and Social Background. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 26(4): 327–348.

Sharpe, L. J. (1970) Theories and Values of Local Government. In: *Political Studies* 18(2): 153–174.

Singh, N. (2004) Some Economic Consequences of India's Institutions of Governance: A Conceptual Framework. *India Review* 3(2): 114–146.

Snape, S. and Dodds, L. (2003) The Scrutineer: The Impact of Overview and Scrutiny on Councillor Roles. *Public Policy and Administration* 18(1): 46–62.

Stoker, G. (1997) Local Government in Britain after Thatcher. In J.-E. Lane (ed.), *Public Sector Reform: Rationale, Trends and Problems*. London: Sage.

Stoker, G. (2011) Was Local Governance Such a Good Idea? A Global Perspective. *Public Administration* 89(1): 15–31.

Stoker, G. and Wilson, D. (2004) Conclusions: New Ways of Being Local Government. In G. Stoker and D. Wilson (eds), *British Local Government into the 21st Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stone, C. N. (2005) Looking Back to Look Forward: Reflections on Urban Regime Analysis. *Urban Affairs Review* 40(3): 309–341.

Swyngedouw, E. (1997) Neither Global nor Local: 'Glocalization' and the Politics of Scale. In K. R. Cox (eds), *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local*. London: Guildford Press.

Thrasher, M, Borisyuk, G., Shears, M and Rallings, C. (2012) The Nature of Local Representation – Councillor Activity and the Pressures of Re-election. Paper presented to Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Conference, University of Oxford, 7–9 September.

Thrasher, M., Borisyuk, G., Shears, M. and Rallings, C. (2014) Councillors in Context: The Impact of Place upon Elected Representatives. *Local Government Studies* 41(5): 713–734.

Trounstine, J. (2009) All Politics is Local: The Reemergence of the Study of City Politics. *Perspectives* 7(3): 611–618.

Verhelst, T., Reynaert, H. and Steyvers, K. (2013a) Necessary Asymmetry or Undemocratic Imbalance? Professionalisation in the Recruitment and Career of Belgian Local Councillors. *Local Government Studies* 39(2): 273–297.

Verhelst, T., Renaert, H. and Steyvers, K. (2013b) Political Recruitment and Career Development of Local Councillors in Europe. In B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds), *Local Councillors in Europe*, . Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Vesperini, G. (2009) Regional and Local Government in Italy: An Overview. Available at: http://dspace.unitus.it/bitstream/2067/1252/1/regional%20and%20local%20government%20in%20Italy.pdf.

Warner, M. E. and Hebdon, R. (2001) Local Government Restructuring: Privatization and its Alternatives. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 20(2): 315–336.

White, J. K. (2006) What is a Political Party? In R. S. Katz and W. J. Crotty (eds), *Handbook of Party Politics*. London: Sage.

Widdicombe, D. (chair) (1986) *The Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume II: The Local Government Councillor*. London: HMSO.

Wilson, D. and Game, C. (2011) *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 5th edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wollmann, H. (2012) Local Government Reforms in (Seven) European Countries: Between Convergent and Divergent, Conflicting and Complimentary Developments. *Local Government Studies* 38(1): 41–70.

Wood, A. (1998) Making sense of urban entrepreneurialism. *The Scottish Geographical Magazine* 114(2): 120–123.