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Do local politicians really want collaborative governance?

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Abstract

Purpose—The purpose of this paper is to empirically assess the opinions of local politicians towards the direct involvement of citizens in collaborative governance processes. Elected politicians play a key role as gatekeepers when it comes to the political impact of participatory initiatives.

Design/methodology—The empirical findings are from an ongoing project studying democratic innovation, the primary objective of which is to understand how local politicians think about the need and conditions for increased and deepened citizen participation in political decision-making. The source of data is interviews with 29 members of the executive boards of four Norwegian municipalities.

Findings—Although most of the politicians acknowledge that there are good reasons to facilitate greater citizen involvement, they perceive a number of challenges to doing so, particularly in relation to ensuring the democratic goods of ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘popular control’ in a representative democracy.

Research limitations/implications—The municipalities in this study are not a representative sample of Norwegian municipalities. Since they have each expressed an interest in democratic innovation and collaborative governance, I would expect them to have more positive attitudes than the average municipality.

Originality/value—Bringing the opinions of more people into the public debate can help fulfil the promise of key democratic values and promote innovative policy ideas. Given that elected representatives decide whether and how to involve citizens, their attitudes are crucial in order to understand and explain collaborative governance efforts in Western democracies.

Introduction

In Western Europe, political-party membership has been in decline, electoral turnout has fallen, public disaffection has spread, and it has been claimed that people hate politics (Norris, 2011). It appears that representative democracies do not necessarily satisfy citizens' needs, and citizens have expressed a growing interest in debating the failures of prevailing democratic institutions since the wake of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Joas, 2012)—a debate that is becoming ever more pertinent with the rise of populism and dissatisfaction with current political elites and systems, both at the international and local levels. Democracy is a variable, not a constant (Newton, 2012, p. 3); thus, it needs to adapt to changing conditions and expectations in society. The debate about the health of democratic institutions has resulted in many efforts to expand citizen participation. Increased public engagement can help achieve key democratic values, such as legitimacy, social justice and effectiveness in governance (Fung, 2015, p. 514); thus, it has been argued that citizens can and should be able to exert more influence than is possible in current forms of liberal representative models (Pierre and Peters, 2000). Increased citizen participation can improve the quality of democracy, but such participation is commendable for several other reasons.

To ensure that the public sector can solve future challenges, several scholars point to a need for permanent and systematic innovation efforts (Hartley, 2008). Innovation can be defined in many ways, but most definitions contain two important elements: an invention or a new idea, and the implementation of that idea (Fuglsang, 2010; Rønning and Knutagård, 2015). Whereas efficiency and the drive to maximise profits often are primary goals behind innovation in the private sector, the key driver in the public sector is the creation of public value (Fuglsang and Rønning, 2014; Moore, 1995; Mulgan, 2007). Interaction with citizens in management, policy development and the realisation of values is a principal issue in the public value debate (Boyte, 2015). One conclusion from extant literature is that 'public value is more likely to result when citizens are involved directly in solving public problems, or at least in directly transmitting their public values to their representatives' (Bryson *et al.*, 2015, p. 371). Traditional democratic institutions seem ill-suited for solving the novel problems we face in the 21st century. But instead of curtailing democracy, one possible solution is to 'deepen' it by connecting citizens and politicians through creative problem-solving processes (Fung and Wright, 2003). Interaction between actors with different roles, identities and resources is a key driver for developing new and innovative solutions to intractable or wicked

problems, and growing evidence indicates that collaboration can spur public innovation (Sørensen and Waldorff, 2014; Hartley *et al.*, 2013). Citizens are thought to have tacit knowledge about what works and what does not work, and citizen involvement might provide a powerful tool by unleashing this knowledge and feeding it into political processes (Bovaird and Downe, 2008).

The core idea of combining representative democracy with continuous citizen participation has been referred to as interactive governance (Torfing *et al.*, 2012). According to Sørensen and Triantafillou (2013, p. 1), one consequence of this new governance discourse is that ‘it redefines society from being an object of governance ... to being a potential resource that needs to be activated in the pursuit of efficient, effective and democratic public governance’. A public value perspective supports interactive modes of governance by emphasizing the complex and dynamic processes of co-creation involving relevant stakeholders. Bringing in more citizens and new voices can be one way to broaden the discussion of an issue by combining different perspectives and types of knowledge. In addition, research shows that expanding politicians’ opportunities to collaborate with stakeholders can promote innovative policy ideas (Sørensen, 2016a). High hopes can be found in extant literature. Engaging civil society in collaborative governance assumably contributes to public innovation, and lead to a well-functioning democracy (Torfing *et al.* 2012). Such a strategy has become a significant policy endeavour in many Western countries (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016).

This paper explores how the opinions of elected politicians in Norway fit into the debate about increased citizen involvement in policy making and community development. In theory, the potential exists to strengthen the capacity for innovation at the local level by introducing collaborative modes of governance, but most extant studies have overlooked the role of political representatives (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011) despite their central function in embedding organisational changes. Local politicians have a role in promoting or blocking citizen participation, and they can be viewed as ‘gatekeepers in relation to the political impact of participatory initiatives’ (Karlsson, 2012, p. 796). Generally, our knowledge about what local politicians think about efforts to deepen citizens’ role in governance processes is limited. However, extant research shows that most politicians do not actively support interactive processes because they fear that these new forms of citizen participation threaten their political primacy (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000). In this paper, I empirically assess the general attitudes that local politicians express when talking about increased citizen involvement in

political processes. Attitudes can be defined as psychological tendencies ‘expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour’ (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). The relationship between attitudes and behaviour is inconsistent (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977), but research shows that individuals are more likely to behave in accordance with their attitudes when they are formed through direct experiences (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Examining elected representatives’ attitudes might lead to a deeper understanding of perceived challenges linked to collaborative governance from the view of local politicians. I will discuss this from the perspective of realising four democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency (Smith, 2009).

First, the paper describes the theoretical discussion further to clarify the collaborative governance perspective. Before presenting the empirical findings, I briefly explain the methodological approach. The empirical analysis is followed by a short discussion on how local politicians’ general attitudes might affect the potential for collaborative governance at the local level. Although the empirical study is conducted in Norwegian municipalities, which have longstanding historical traditions of participatory democracy, reasons exist to believe that the findings also might apply to local politicians’ attitudes in other Western democracies.

Collaborative governance: What is at stake?

The numerous manifestations of collaborative governance examined in extant academic literature—ranging from the role of networks to public-private partnerships, collaborative public management and community-based collaborations—mean that conceptual confusion is a real danger (Kooiman, 2003). However, collaborative governance generally entails trends that lead away from hierarchical modes and toward power-sharing and collective decision-making together with other kinds of actors (Johnson and Osborne, 2003). Collaborative governance can be defined as ‘a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets’ (Ansell and Gash, 2008, p. 544). It is described as a new paradigm for governing in democratic systems (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012).

Efforts to enhance collaborative modes of governance have been given many names, including ‘institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance’ (Fung and

Wright, 2003), ‘governance-driven democratization’ (Warren, 2009), ‘innovations in democratic governance’ (Michels, 2011), ‘participatory innovations’ (Geißel, 2013), ‘collaborative policy innovations’ (Agger and Sørensen, 2014), and the collectively termed ‘democratic innovations’. What these different models have in common is that they are ‘specifically designed to increase and deepen citizens’ participation in the political decision-making process’ (Smith, 2009, p. 1). According to Smith (2005, p. 9), ‘citizens are attracted to political involvement when it is clear that the involvement can lead to change’. Collaborative governance considers this and aims to hand over significant influence and an element of power. This kind of interactive policy making is never merely consultative, but implies two-way communication or deliberation, high levels of shared authority and processes linked to outcomes. It differs from traditional methods in various ways, one of which is that citizens are involved personally in setting the agenda by participating in the problem-defining and solution-seeking phases (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2002). In this paper, I use the term collaborative governance to refer to government-induced processes that seek to share power with citizens in decision-making processes to develop shared recommendations for new solutions to society’s public problems.

Collaborative governance has been studied in several policy contexts, but researchers’ focus has been on the potential impact of public participation, i.e., whether it is good or bad, rather than on whether direct citizen participation can help improve decision-making processes and outcomes by identifying and furthering the understanding of public value (Emerson *et al.*, 2012). To disrupt current ways of thinking about a policy issue, a constructive exchange between different heterogeneous actors is needed. Collaboration facilitates mutual learning and enables the formation of political compromises that challenge established views and practices (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016a). Politicians need a seat at the table, but at the same time, citizens’ role in governance processes must be redefined. In this perspective, citizens no longer should be viewed as passive beneficiaries/voters and instead need to become active, informed partners and co-creators. However, in mainstream models of liberal representative democracy, existing policy arenas are ‘heavily exposed to the centrifugal forces of political hierarchy and competition’, and Sørensen (2016b, p. 183) asserts that dialogue rarely is elicited between politicians and relevant, affected stakeholders. In addition, motivating social actors and stakeholders to participate in collaborative governance arrangements also might be a protracted process (Speer, 2012). However, according to Ackerman (2004, p. 447), it is

worth the effort because inviting social actors to participate in the state's core activities is the best way to 'tap into the energy of society'.

In this paper, I examine what local politicians think about increased citizen participation as a strategy to improve the innovation capacity and quality of democracy. The question is simple: Do they really want collaborative governance?

Methodology

The empirical findings come from an ongoing project about democratic innovation, the primary objective of which is to understand local politicians' 'experiences' and what they think about the needs and conditions for collaborative governance. Municipalities reported their interest in joining the research project, and their participation was anchored in municipal councils. The overall research design contains some elements of action research; the lead academic behind the study helped municipal administrations in planning and facilitating several seminars to give elected politicians insight into scientific knowledge pertaining to democratic innovation. The municipalities in this study are not a representative sample of Norwegian municipalities, as they have expressed an interest in political innovations and wished to participate in the project. Thus, I expect them to have a more positive attitude toward innovation than the average municipality. The overall study's goal is to examine and understand the institutional prerequisites for democratic innovations from politicians' perspective, so I chose to apply qualitative methods in my research.

The study data come from interviews with members of the executive boards of four Norwegian municipalities. The biggest municipality in the study encompasses 100,000 residents, while the rest each comprise fewer than 15,000. Norwegian municipalities have executive boards consisting of one quarter of the municipal council. (Boards must contain a minimum of five council members.) These boards are proportionally composed to reflect the relative strength of the political parties represented on the council. The executive boards comprise the most central politicians from these parties. In the three smallest municipalities, I interviewed six of seven municipal executive board members. In the largest municipality, I interviewed all the political group leaders: the mayor, deputy mayor and two committee managers. The data come from 29 interviews with politicians representing different political

parties, all of whom have central roles on their municipal councils. The sample paints a picture of local Norwegian politicians' attitudes, allowing me to talk about some tendencies.

I conducted the interviews just before the local 2015 elections to gain insight into the experiences of politicians who had been on their municipal councils for at least four years. The interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes each and were held in meeting rooms at the four respective city halls. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. I used a structured interview guide, but allowed myself to modify the questions' order based on the politicians' responses during the interviews. Using a structured guide helped ensure that I asked all the politicians the same questions using more or less the same formulation. I used the computer program NVivo to sort and code the data. After coding the interviews thematically on the basis of the questions in the interview guide, I sorted the material analytically based on my interpretation of the politicians' attitudes. First, I sorted the data based on whether the politicians expressed positive or sceptical sentiments toward increased citizen involvement, and whether they considered it possible/desirable to include citizens more directly in political processes. Although I was most interested in mapping general attitudes, I also introduced the politicians to the idea of using new institutional designs to allow citizens to be more personally involved in crafting policy. This made it possible to examine opinions toward collaborative governance more specifically. Second, I analysed how the responses measured up against theories, focusing particularly on realising the ideals of inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency (Smith, 2009), i.e., how local politicians emphasised such democratic goods and perceived challenges related to realising these goods, as well as how their attitudes might influence the potential for collaborative governance in practice.

Although it is contextual, the knowledge that I gained allows me to test existing theoretical assumptions in relation to phenomena in practice. Local politicians' lived experiences as elected representatives—along with their attitudes—provide a rich source of 'raw material' that can be used to advance theoretical ideas (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p. 115). Attitudes are subjective, i.e., the findings reflect how local politicians think about increased citizen involvement, not how it exists in reality. However, since attitudes arise because of beliefs, feelings and past behaviours regarding the attitude object (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), the findings might offer explanations as to why local politicians are approach-oriented or avoidance-oriented toward sharing power with citizens in decision-making processes.

Citizen involvement: Advantages and challenges

The analysis specifically focused on mapping two dimensions: 1. What are local politicians' attitudes toward extended, direct citizen involvement? 2. What challenges do local politicians highlight in that regard?

Generally, the interviewees emphasised the role of 'ombudsman', i.e., having the ability to make contact with citizens and listen to them as being crucial aspects of being a politician. Dialogue and cooperation with citizens take place primarily through organised channels and might take the form of public hearings on specific cases and consultations/other dialogue with user groups, user boards and citizen committees (with or without politicians). A fundamental characteristic of these forums is that they are designed to enable citizens to provide input. During the interviews, the politicians asserted that such interactions with citizens are a two-way dialogue, in which they inform the public about their plans while also listening to people's opinions. However, politicians are not obliged to consider the public's advice. One respondent said, *'You may be heard, but it is not certain that we will be listening'*.

The respondents acknowledged that involving citizens more directly might provide several advantages. For one, bringing in outside opinions would ensure that debate would not be limited to one perspective. They also emphasised the importance of constituents' input. One mentioned that constituent participation is a question of understanding the problems at hand and why certain decisions are being made. *'That's where we have to go ... it is not like we can just sit here at the city hall and know what people in the community are concerned about'*. Respondents also highlighted that more public involvement encourages citizens to feel ownership in relation to plans that are later adopted. It fosters a climate of commitment, knowledge and understanding. One interviewee also pointed out a problem when it comes to political recruitment: While many citizens are hugely committed and have opinions about many issues, they might not want to be active in a political party or sit on a municipal council because it takes too much time. This points to a need for improved debate (deliberation), enhanced decision-making (input from citizens) and more ownership/understanding (legitimacy). Timeliness also is singled out as a factor, as one interviewee says: *'It is very important to include groups early on to avoid a reactive democracy, as we have seen in some cases'*. Some answers touched on aspects of efficiency, i.e., politicians do not have all the

answers, and if we are to ‘*create room for innovation*’, we need to involve ordinary people in policymaking.

Even though these local politicians acknowledged that good reasons exist to facilitate greater citizen involvement and saw opportunities and advantages in that regard, they were very keen on highlighting several challenges in doing so, some of which were related to working conditions, especially formal institutions and organisational structures within the political system, including time—or rather a lack of it. Their concerns revolve around having enough time to talk with citizens, reflect on political considerations, develop policy and remain up to date on political issues and research. With the exception of those who do not have regular jobs (usually only the mayor), local politicians serve on a voluntary basis in their spare time. The politicians interviewed also expressed concern that citizen participation could make it more difficult to trace responsibility in decision-making. They were worried about what degree of influence citizens can be given without renegeing on public-sector accountability. Several stressed that it is elected politicians’ job to make decisions, and that they are the ones with the formal decision-making power in the first place.

The politicians also generally were very concerned about bias in the selection of citizens for participatory initiatives, as well as the possibility of citizens choosing to participate merely to gain influence. These concerns largely are based on the notion that only the loudest, most resourceful and most articulate people engage in politics. One interviewee said, ‘*You cannot reach all groups. It depends on what the issue is. There are many people who do not engage in those sorts of events*’. The politicians expressed concern that the same group of people would show up all the time and that this group would not be representative of the population. In addition, several of the interviewees were sceptical regarding the motivations behind citizens’ participation: ‘*The vast majority do not care. You do not show up unless you are personally affected*’. Several respondents questioned citizens’ resources, skills and competencies, especially regarding their ability to look at the big picture and not simply act out of self-interest. They also expressed doubts about which issues citizens plausibly could tackle. One said, ‘*Often there is a discussion about the budget and stuff like that, and “What should we cut?” It is one of those situations where it is impossible to involve everyone*’.

Table 1

	Possible and/or desirable	Not possible and/or not desirable
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —It could enrich governance. —It could encourage feelings of ownership in relation to plans that are later adopted. —It fosters a climate of commitment, knowledge and understanding. —It could be a supplement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —It would be desirable if it were possible (but would require new rules). —The debate could be better, but there is a limit to people’s engagement commitment.
Sceptical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —The same citizens consistently would show up (and would not be representative of the population). —It would favour certain groups of people (the most resourceful and loudest). —Citizens might lack the appropriate level of competence, knowledge and information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —It is the job of elected politicians to make decisions. —There is no need; representative democracy works. Ideology and worldviews should be communicated through political parties. —There is a lack of discussion culture. —Time and finances are limited.

When I asked the politicians to reflect on the idea of connecting more directly with citizens in collaborative processes, most generally were positive about the idea, but some did not believe it would be possible to involve citizens in the creation of policy in practice. One justified this by saying that it would require ‘new rules’, while another believes there is a limit to people’s engagement commitment. Of the sceptical respondents, one argued that, although it would be possible to create policy with citizens’ involvement, collaborative policy making would not necessarily be more meaningful or representative because the same citizens likely would show up, i.e., the process would favour certain groups of people over others, notably those with the resources to participate. One also noted the absence of a culture of discussion: *‘There is no market for that kind of openness’*. These perceived challenges seem to shape attitudes toward increasing citizen participation significantly.

Attitudes related to realisation of democratic ideals

In discussing the general features of representative democracy from an institutional perspective, Smith (2009) highlights four ‘democratic goods’ that are fundamental to most theories of democracy, namely inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. The first concerns who participates and how: Citizens need to represent different perspectives or interests, and participation must be both inclusive and meaningful to be democratic. In addition, participation should ensure that a climate for deliberation exists,

that citizens are enlightened and that perceived legitimacy is improved (Geißel, 2013). Both Smith (2009) and Geißel (2013) state that efforts to enhance citizen participation also should improve the effectiveness of governance (an institutional good) through more accurate decision-making, i.e., identifying and achieving collective goals and output in line with public interests. Collaborative governance seeks to realise these democratic ideals by sharing power with citizens in collective, deliberative and consensus-oriented decision-making processes. The challenges identified in this paper create barriers to realising Smith’s (2009) four democratic goods.

Table 2

Challenges related to:	Inclusiveness (Is participation inclusive?)	Popular control (Is participation meaningful?)	Considered judgment (Does participation include deliberation?)	Transparency (Does participation lead to improved legitimacy?)
Working conditions	Time and ‘rules’	Limited opportunities to influence policy	Existing forums	Language and complexity
Decision-making authority	Selection bias	Ignoring input/ feedback	Communication mode	Making promises that cannot be fulfilled
Citizens’ resources/skills	Citizens’ motivation	Citizens do not see the big picture	Citizens have strange opinions	The need for different communication channels

Smith (2009, p. 15) emphasises a widely held concern that inclusiveness would not be realised in practice because ‘extended opportunities for citizen participation in political processes will simply reinforce and amplify the existing differentials of power and influence within society’. Unequal participation across social groups—related to available time, money, knowledge, etc.—makes it difficult to realise this democratic ideal. However, although it can be difficult to achieve, it can be argued that inclusiveness is a fundamentally democratic good that needs to be considered. This paper’s findings show that Norwegian politicians are especially concerned about inclusiveness, i.e., how it is possible to create incentives to entice different social groups to participate. A central issue that concerns most politicians is *who* shows up and whether they have the necessary skills to be involved in political processes. Many politicians are convinced that only the most articulate and outspoken people show up,

thereby risking a power imbalance when stakeholders are directly involved. This is consistent with Smith's (2009) observation. Another general concern in extant literature is whether increased participation would have any impact on policy (popular control), or whether citizens' views would be ignored. The findings show that a tension exists between involving citizens and listening to what they have to say, i.e., just because citizens are invited to participate does not mean that their input will be used in formal decision-making. Politicians seem to have a difficult time with the idea of relinquishing some of their control/power to their constituents, and they are worried about participatory processes' representativeness.

Most local politicians do not view citizen participation negatively, but they do seem to think that it is sufficient merely to inform or consult citizens. They speak positively about 'collaborating' with citizens in existing forums, e.g., public hearings and user boards, asserting that this constitutes two-way communication in that they inform the public about their plans and listen to their opinions. However, Arnstein (1969) describes such conveyance of information and consultation as tokenism. Considered judgement contains deliberation, which is about accepting and valuing different views and experiences. The formal structure in representative democracies leaves little room for dialogue, knowledge exchange or collaboration between stakeholders and politicians (Sørensen, 2016a), and politicians often end up selecting recommendations that fit pre-existing policy positions. Such dialogue falls short of the citizen involvement that collaborative governance theory envisages, which requires engaging citizens directly in political decision-making (and during the process of defining problems and exploring solutions), including recognising and utilising their resources and expertise.

Transparency is essential to building trust and confidence in the political system, but the language and complexity of political issues can be a constraint. When citizens get involved, it not only requires a clear understanding of the conditions needed for participation, but also an understanding of the public. Some of the politicians I spoke to expressed doubts about citizens' expertise and knowledge. They are convinced that most citizens act out of self-interest or for personal gain and are not interested in collective interests and goals. It is possible to interpret this scepticism as a form of elitism.

An obstacle to collaborative governance?

Collaborative governance processes might bias decisions toward citizens with greater resources (Purdy, 2012), and the risk always exists that collaboration is a way of advancing self-interested goals (Huxham *et al.*, 2000). However, as noted in the introduction, many contradictory arguments exist. From a participatory perspective on democracy, participation provides several functions: It encourages civic skills and virtues, contributes to individual citizens' inclusion and leads to deliberation and increased legitimacy of decisions (Michels, 2011). Innovation theories also support the idea of interactive governance, i.e., the capacity to innovate is strengthened when different actors work together in the search for, and realisation of, new solutions. Not only might collaborative governance strengthen legitimacy and justice within the political process, but it also can contribute to increased efficiency and real outcomes.

Even though the tradition of relevant stakeholders' corporatist involvement is strong in Northern-Western Europe (Sørensen and Torfing 2016b), traditional public hearings and meetings remain dominant, even though they are low on the deliberation and influence scale. These meetings are open to the public, and participation is self-selected. As a consequence, those who participate often are citizens who are highly interested in the issues, and they often are more socioeconomically advantaged compared with the broader population (Fung, 2015). The politicians interviewed for this study possess certain assumptions about citizens' motivations and skills—general attitudes based on personal experiences, e.g., from public hearings. This might have helped shape a social representation of citizens as passive beneficiaries/voters with little interest in, or the capacity to get involved with, politics, apart from the 'usual subjects' who always show up, i.e., the loudest, most resourceful citizens.

Governance theory concerns the role of politically marginalised groups by conceptualising citizens as 'experts' whose knowledge and experience can be used to foster new and better policies and practices. If local politicians think that most people are unmotivated or incapable of participating in collective decision-making, this attitude might prevent them from accepting a higher level of shared decision-making authority. However, a risk exists that citizens will not take political engagement seriously if outcomes from participatory processes are not used to inform formal procedures. If participatory initiatives do not create a substantial role for citizens so that their views are taken seriously, it is possible that such initiatives would result

in an even greater democratic deficit or increased distrust in political institutions. Citizens expect something in return, and trivial forms of citizen participation ‘will almost certainly result in widespread disappointment’ (Fung, 2015, p. 521). Local politicians’ opinions concerning citizens’ role in governance processes are important, and the perceived challenges identified in this paper offer some reasons why they are avoidance-oriented toward the idea of more direct citizen involvement. Elected representatives might need to start viewing citizens as an important source of inspiration, knowledge and innovation—not just as passive or demanding voters—so that trust can be built to make such collaboration possible.

Concluding remarks

In theory, there is potential to strengthen the capacity for public innovation by implementing interactive modes of governance. Collaborative governance implies deliberation, mutual learning, a high level of shared decision-making authority and processes that are linked to decision-making outcomes. A constructive exchange between different heterogeneous actors is a key driver for developing new and innovative policy ideas. Citizen participation can bolster legitimacy, but if participatory processes’ outcomes are not used to inform formal procedures, there is a risk that citizens will not take political engagement seriously.

In this paper, I have used the opinions of leading politicians from four Norwegian municipalities as an indicator of general willingness to enhance collaborative governance efforts to supplement the activities of municipal councils and other formal elected bodies. The findings indicate that several barriers exist that are related to elected representatives’ attitudes regarding such efforts. Most of the politicians whom I interviewed acknowledged the existence of good reasons to promote greater public involvement, but they tend to approach citizen participation in terms of informing or consulting, rather than collaborating. They assert that most citizens are not interested in politics and refer to selection bias as a reason why extended direct involvement is not desirable. They primarily are concerned with representativeness in discussing participatory initiatives, which is why they do not think it is possible or desirable to give citizens significant influence in decision-making processes.

While much extant research is concerned with motivating citizens to partake in political processes—and describe this as a reason why implementing collaborative modes of governance is such a protracted process—this paper’s findings suggest that local politicians’

attitudes can be an obstacle as well. At the very least, they might help explain the limited scope and success in promoting efforts to initiate such democratic innovations in these municipalities.

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