

## Why decentralize decision-making?

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## **WHY DECENTRALIZE DECISION-MAKING? ENGLISH LOCAL ACTORS'**

### **VIEWPOINTS**

In academic debates and policy rhetoric, decentralization of decision-making is frequently presented as an opportunity to experiment with mechanisms to diversify, deepen or increase participation in decision-making or facilitate responsiveness to citizens (Fung 2004, 2006; Fung and Wright 2001; E. Ostrom 1990; 1993; 1996; V. Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren 1961; Salamon 2002; Sirianni 2009; Smith 2005). Principles of subsidiarity and the difficulties of organizing citizen involvement in decision-making at scale mean that more participatory governance is predicated on decentralized decision-making (Pateman 1970). Indeed, these ideas are often conflated; by virtue of being 'closer to the people', decentralization has been closely tied to aspirations for more participatory forms of decision-making.

Despite the rhetoric, participatory experimentation within decentralized decision-making has remained at the margins (Boyte 1989; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001a, 210). Decentralization has often meant the creation of local versions of Westminster, or City Hall, in miniature. Decentralized decision-making offers restructuring from larger to smaller administrative units or spatial scales. Yet in many places, it strays little from existing arrangements (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Decentralization efforts in England are missing meaningful democratic settlements (Richards and Smith 2015) with wider civic engagement (Blunkett, Flinders and Prosser 2016).

For some, the persistence of decentralization processes that result in smaller spatial units of business-as-usual, raises reflections as to 'what went wrong?' between rhetoric and reality. However, this paper queries whether 'what went wrong?' is the right question. In the British context, and elsewhere, moves towards decentralization from central government to

city-regions, and in some areas, below city-region scale to neighborhoods, reflects a broad consensus around a mandate for reform (Fenwick and Gibbon 2015).

But what does this consensus amount to and what is the extent of the reform mandate? The study presented here examines the motivations of those involved, emphasizing the integral role of local actors' preferences in shaping decentralized institutions (Schmidt 2008). It asks, what are the preferences of local actors for decentralized decision-making?

It uses the findings from a Q-methodology study of the viewpoints of local actors who were engaged in attempts to decentralize decision-making in England. This approach allowed a systematic, empirical and comparative analysis of local actor's viewpoints, challenging existing assumptions and opening up a new research agenda. Contrary to the assumed conflation of decentralization with participatory reform, the study found that, local actors, while sympathetic to participatory decision-making, largely had preferences for relatively minor modifications to the status quo. The analytical proposition advanced here is that, to better understand the intended forms and functions of decentralized decision-making, there needs to be a refresh on starting assumptions which conflate decentralization with participatory decision-making. Instead, it advocates a closer focus of the intentions and preferences of those involved in shaping local policy and structures.

### **Understanding Preferences for Decentralized Decision-Making**

Decentralized institutions are shaped through a web of interactions between central and local actors, and within local areas as sites for action and sets of governance actors in their own right. Policy elites in the center are influenced by outside pressures from prominent local actors in government and civil society (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan 2007). There is a dynamic interplay of institutional shaping at work; as Lowndes and Lempriere (2017) argue:

institutional formations are characterised by a combination of formal rules (including structures and processes) and informal conventions (established and routinised practices [...]). such configurations of rules are backed up by customary narratives, which elaborate the underpinning ideas – the ‘reasons why’ institutions operate as they do.” (pp: 227-228)

Drawing on this understanding of rules, practices and narratives as modes of institution-shaping, there has been a wealth of material which has documented the formal rules surrounding decentralization. Much of this literature in the English context emphasizes the context of constraints on local actors’ agency arising from the relationship between the center and local areas. Or rather, ‘the’ center is used as a shorthand for single or multiple parts of a differentiated and sometimes fragmented center, in multiple and intersecting relationships with multiple local actors. Applying a meta-governance framework (Sørensen and Torfing 2017) in the English context, Bailey and Wood (2017) argue that the central state embeds its interest in, and retains control over, local governance networks in city-regional devolution through the tools of network design and framing. These tools allow the center to set the rules of the game, and constrain the players. Other studies have focused on how, as power and control are transferred from the center, formal rules originating in the center shape the context for the terms and scope of the transfer (Rees and Rose 2015), for example in the case of metro-mayors (Gains 2015).

Attempts made by recent British administrations to devolve power to sub-regions within England have been described by an academic expert on English local government as “government [...] seeking to impose a super-centralised model of decision-making in which locally elected politicians are required to comply with central directives.” (Hambleton 2017, p.3). Forty years of change in English local government is described by one seasoned commentator as: “much of it imposed by the central government” (Stewart 2014, p.836),

hindering, he argues, local agencies abilities to act (p.836). Decentralization has been described as “best [...] understood as one of elite co-option” and maintenance of control from the center (Richards and Smith 2015, p. 386). Empirical studies from the English context suggest that the center’s shaping of decentralization agendas are perceived by local actors as: unhelpfully centrally mandated and locally constraining, vague and lacking in clarity (Lawson and Kearns 2014); abstracted or divorced from local and sub-local trajectories and practices, inflexible and therefore limiting of local experimentation, variation and fluidity (Fenwick and Gibbon 2015). Other empirical work has suggested that decentralization has, in some cases, involved unsavory compromises at local level, including ‘sell[ing] our soul’ (Lowndes and Gardner 2016, 371).

Next, looking at practices, the literature has established that participatory reform through decentralization can be constrained by the practices within local institutions. Local intentions are partly blocked by the difficulties of establishing new ways of working against established institutional cultures (Newman, Barnes, Sullivan and Knopps 2004). In England there have been periodic attempts at participatory reform over many decades, such as the neighbourhood decentralisation movement of the 1980s described as “radical initiative from within local government”, which “emerged from within local public agencies as well as being imposed from above by central government” (John, 2009, p. 20). However, “significantly, these initiatives did not survive, and fell by the wayside, rather like the community development experiments of a decade earlier.” (p.20)

Possible explanations of a lack of sustained reform from decentralization are about the practices of institutionalisation of party politics in management structures in English local government (John 2014). Some have concluded that these practices and structures generate “path dependence [which] may have shut off options for democratic renewal and participation.” (John 2014, p.687) However, while acknowledging path dependency as a

brake on change, there has been a critique of these arguments on the grounds that “institutional formation does not unfold due to unflinching logics of path dependency” (Lowndes and Lempriere, 2017, p. 228). Instead, institutions may provide resources for actors who can try to mobilise those assets to create change. The implication here of situated actors whose agency is constrained but also enabled by the institutional context is reflected in a wider literature emphasising heterogeneous local response, discretion and creativity ([author 2009]; Taylor 2007; van Hulst, de Graaf and van den Brinken 2012).

Turning now to narratives, decentralized institutions are also understood to be shaped locally partly through local actors’ narratives (Fenwick and Gibbon 2015; Lawson and Kearns 2014; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001b). The background ideational and foreground discursive abilities of these actors are integral in shaping decentralized institutions (Schmidt 2008); which then has implications for understanding how decentralization plays out on the ground, and to what extent it involves participatory reform. One study showed how local actors saw tensions between different forms of decentralized governance depending on the motivations and rationales for creating them ([author] 2010). For some, these tensions spill over into a lack of participatory reform, with some authors suggesting that heterogeneity in local motivations creates spaces which contain and limit more participatory aspects of decentralized decision-making (Griggs and Roberts 2012). Heterogeneity masks the dominance in practice of economic rationales of efficiency and growth ([author 2009]), and therefore is argued to render decentralized decision-making a technocratic rather than democratic endeavor (Lowndes and Gardner 2016; Pearce and Ayres 2012). That is, the shape that decentralization takes when driven by a dominant economic rationale is unlikely to be participatory.

The research in this paper follows in this decentering tradition of unpicking multiple narratives (Bevir, McKee and Matthews 2017; Bevir and Rhodes 2001; Bevir and Richards

2009). There is an empirical gap in knowledge on decentralization about local actors' aspirations, their hoped-for sets of formal rules rather than criticisms of the ones that exist. What of their visions of a more perfect world of improved informal practices? Actors' customary narratives and underpinning ideas are generative, and therefore are already a mix of a description of what happens, and what is desired to happen. Narratives are mobilised for different purposes, some of which are to offer justifications for possibly imperfect institutional forms, some of which create spaces for possible institutional change through revealing gaps or tensions between what is, and what is intended. How then, can actors' more unfettered preferences be surfaced? It is not clear how local actors see the various parts of decentralization puzzle ideally piecing together, or what different actors think local experimentation might look like. It is useful to see local actors' narratives concerning their own constrained choices. However, by focusing on perceptions of decentralization rather than preferences for decentralization, understandings of local actors' views on decentralization remain partial. Therefore, the research presented in this paper looks at local actors' preferences for forms of decentralized decision-making in contemporary governance, and differentiation in preferences amongst local actors. This research attempts to address the lack of knowledge of these perspectives, not by asking local actors for their response to particular decentralizing reforms, but analyzing their preferences for decentralized institutions.

### **Methodology**

The context for this particular study was of local actors across England, which has a particular tradition of highly centralized governance. As has been documented, "England has been a landscape of almost permanent administrative reconfiguration [...] during the last 50 years" (Ayres, Sandford and Coombes 2017, p 863). Within this, there has been some limited experimentation by individual localities or local organizations with forms of

decentralization and participation in decentralization over many decades. These initiatives have tended to be isolated, and/or relatively quickly withdrawn or revised ([author], 2012). The contemporary context for the study was the latest round of English decentralization. This process included an historically noteworthy level of financial devolution to city-regions, albeit in a context of reduced public resources overall (Ayres, Sanderson and Coombes 2017; Lowndes and Lempriere 2017). Local governance in England already has significant responsibility for a wide range of policy decisions affecting the principal services of education, social services, the environment, regulation, the local economy, and may devise policies in the local interest.

Empirical testing in other contexts would need to take account of differences in traditions, history and policies that influence local actors' perceptions. However, as has been pointed out, UK policy experimentation in this field has not happened in isolation (John, 2009, p. 21). Although "more pronounced" in Anglo-American democracies; there are cross-national experiences of similar initiatives (Gaventa, 2004) to increase citizen participation in decision-making, alongside reforms to public management, including devolved arrangements.

In this study, Q-methodology was employed to understand sets of preferences (Stephenson 1953) for different forms of decentralized decision-making. Q-methodology uses a qualitative approach to sampling and data collection, combined with a data reduction technique based upon numerical, systematic and transparent criteria. The Q-methodology survey – an in-depth rank ordering process - enables a detailed understanding of key informants' vision for local decision-making. It facilitates a systematic comparison of these viewpoints, enabling the identification of any shared perspectives on decentralized decision-making, and on whether and how far decentralization is linked to more participatory reform in decision-making. It follows in the tradition of a burgeoning literature using Q-methodology to understand the diversity of people's normative preferences for different sorts

of democratic, political and policy-related institutions (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993; Gaynor 2013; Skelcher, Sullivan and Jeffares 2013; [author 2016]). In policy terms, this intensive and systematic approach is intended to clarify and identify competing problem definitions and solutions, points of agreement and contention, and thus provide information that could forge policy solutions attractive across viewpoints (Durning 2006).

Mainstream quantitative analysis methods use techniques such as principal components analysis and factor analysis to group single variables into sets of related variables. Q utilizes the same techniques to group respondents' responses according to the similarities across their entire viewpoint, generating sets of composite shared viewpoints. Their richness enables a detailed interpretation, facilitated through systematic and transparent quantitative comparison, whilst retaining a nuance and complexity within the data that is more akin to qualitative research (Stephenson 1953; Watts and Stenner 2012). A methodological contribution to the field is made in further expanding the use of this relatively novel approach in public administration scholarship. Q-methodology, alongside other approaches such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis, symbolizes wider moves towards the application of more transparent systematization to rich qualitative data (Evans and Stoker 2017).

Q-methodology is an intensive modified rank-ordering procedure requiring participants to sort, prioritize and comment on a set of statements about the topic under investigation. It is particularly appropriate for understanding complex and socially contested topics (Watts and Stenner 2012), such as the desirability and feasibility of different forms of decentralized decision-making. It provides a means to clarify alternative perspectives and identify competing problem definitions and solutions (Durning 2006). Whilst each participant produces a unique Q-sort, its standardized form allows for systematic, statistical analysis of inter-subjectivity, facilitating the identification a discrete set of composite viewpoints,

amalgamating a number of individual responses. In this study, each viewpoint consists of a unique combination of 36 statements, where individuals can subscribe to more than one viewpoint. The focus for Q-methodology is on describing these shared composite viewpoints rather than providing an account of the prevalence of these different perspectives within the general population (Brown 1980), which is best pursued using other methods. The research design was conducted according to a well-established five-step Q-methodology sequence (McKeown and Thomas 2013), as described below.

### **Step 1: Development of the Q-Sample and Statements**

First, the researchers determined what is known in Q as the *concourse*, that is, the full range of discourses and concepts that characterize the debate surrounding a topic. In this case, the topic was forms of decentralized decision-making. Following recommended Q guidelines, the *concourse* was mapped based on existing secondary data and analysis and primary empirical data. Four approaches were used<sup>1</sup>, in summary: a synthesis literature review; interviews with relevant national actors; a research workshop with practitioners; and data collection at relevant practice events. Following John Dryzek and Jeffrey Berejikian (1993) and Chris Skelcher, Helen Sullivan and Stephen Jeffares (2013), a structured Q-sample of statements, shown in Figure 1, was derived from the *concourse*, to represent the scope and diversity of the *concourse*. Structured Q-samples allow for explicit interrogation of theoretical preconceptions without prejudicing analysis (Brown 1980). Participants are confronted with diverse propositions, the potential combinations of which enable the expression of different viewpoints, including contradictions or present alternatives to those underpinning the sampling grid.

One grid dimension was five ideal types of decentralized decision-making, based on the literature (see [authors 2014]) that exemplified different types and levels of participatory

decision-making, for example, more traditional ‘mini Town Hall’ models, basic citizen consultation, and more co-productive approaches. The second dimension differentiated between particular features of the ideal types, for example, roles for citizens, the nature of power; how transparency works; and specific forms local governance practices took in the British context. These two dimensions were then used to structure a sampling grid. Material from the discourse was sifted to identify over 500 potential statements reflecting the definitional, normative and paradoxical features for each debate on each type, with a high proportion of overlap between statements. Researchers are required to narrow their sample to a manageable number while preserving the diversity of the sample (Fisher 1960). Working iteratively to collate similar ideas on a structured grid reduced them to a manageable and balanced number of 36 statements.

**FIGURE 1 HERE**

### **Step 2: Person Sample**

As the second step, the researchers developed the person sample. Q-methodology does not rely on a large-N sample to generate sufficient statistical power to produce meaningful results. It is conventional to carry out Q studies with samples of around 30 to 50 participants (McKeown and Thomas 2013, p.32), though considerably fewer is acceptable (Watts and Stenner 2012, 73). The study used a purposive sample of 45 key informants, which was not intended to be representative of the general population or make probabilistic statements concerning distribution of views within a population (Brown 1980; Watts and Stenner 2012; McKeown and Thomas 2013, p. 32). Instead, Q aims to characterize the diversity of attitudes to a phenomenon. Further research would be required to determine external validity and confirm the distribution of views within a wider population.

Key informants were recruited based on their experience, knowledge, and prior work related to their involvement in decentralized decision-making in England. Existing research, policy and practice networks were drawn on to purposively sample a group of 45 key informants, drawn from networks across public, community and voluntary sectors. The literature identified questions about how far local actors' perspectives coalesce around a series of coherent shared viewpoints. Therefore, the recruitment was designed to attract participants who were most likely to have shared worldviews broadly favourable towards greater participation in decentralization, and who were also aware of and actively involved in debates on decentralization. Within this, recruitment of the sample was targeted to maximize diversity. In order to check diversity analysis was conducted of individual participants' sectoral role (Figure 2), as well as their self-reported levels of involvement in, and power over, local decision-making (Figure 3).

**FIGURES 2 and 3 HERE**

### **Step 3: Q-sort**

Q is a modified rank-ordering procedure. Step Three involved the 45 key informants performing a Q-sort on the 36 statements comprising the online Q-sample, using the specialist POETQ software (Jeffares and Dickinson 2016) adapted for this study. POETQ reproduces the same process as a face-to-face Q-interview, taking the key informant through background questions on their role, involvement and power in local decision-making. The respondents then sorted each of the 36 statements in turn into broad categories of 'agree', 'disagree' and 'neutral'. Key informants were then asked to rank the statements into a quasi-normally distributed grid.

**FIGURE 4 HERE**

Key informants were presented with their grid and made any final adjustments, finishing with an opportunity for a free text response elaborating on selections of the two ‘most agree’ and two ‘least agree’ statements. On average, key informants took 27 minutes to complete the Q-sort and provided 130 words of free text.

#### **Step 4: Analysis**

For the fourth step, relative differences in statement rankings between each participants’ Q-sort were used to create a correlation matrix demonstrating the extent of similarity between each participants’ Q-sort. The specialized PQMethod software was used (Schmolck and Atkinson 2014) to create the correlation matrix and run a principal components analysis (PCA)<sup>ii</sup> in order to identify common variance, whether the Q-sorts are grouped in a manner that would indicate the existence of shared viewpoints. After conducting a series of statistical tests<sup>iii</sup> to guide how many principal components (PCs) should be extracted. The researchers’ own assessment of the substantive interpretation – acknowledged to have primacy (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012) – was used to optimize comprehensiveness and parsimony.

A four principal component (PC) solution was determined upon, varimax rotated to achieve a simple structure that maximizes each participant’s loading on one PC whilst minimizing it on the other three. This solution was comprehensive in covering all the participants in this study, each had a statistically significant PC loading at the 1% level. This solution accounted for 67% of the explanatory variance, and resulted in four PCs that believed to be substantively meaningful and unlikely to be statistical artifacts. Four PC arrays were then calculated from the weighted average statement scores (z-scores) of all those Q-sorts that significantly load onto the respective PC, but are not confounded by similarly large

loadings on another PC<sup>iv</sup>. These z-scores are used to create an ideal Q-sort that demonstrates the distribution of statements for someone loading 100% on the PC.

### **Step 5: Interpretation**

The fifth step was to interpret the four PC arrays, referred to hereafter as viewpoints. Unlike traditional survey methods, which commonly derive opinions from one or two survey items, interpretation takes the full set of statements as gestalt, focusing on the relationships of the parts to the whole. Particular attention is paid to ‘characterizing’ statements, those at the extremes of the distribution and the ‘distinguishing’ statements, those placed uniquely on each viewpoint. Exemplar key informants with high PC loadings were identified for each viewpoint, and their free text comments were analyzed both to check the validity of the initial interpretations and to enrich the interpretation of the PC arrays through greater depth of analysis.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the Q-data identified four distinct, statistically significant viewpoints on preferences for forms of decentralized decision-making. Each viewpoint, summarized in Figure 5, is considered in turn, before a summary analysis of their similarities and differences.

### **FIGURE 5 HERE**

#### **Viewpoint One: Elected representation**

Whilst the value of citizen participation was recognized, this viewpoint reinforced the role of local elected representatives as the primary decision-makers. The viewpoint was

distinguished by the statements, 'Local councillors make decisions on behalf of constituents, acting in their best interests' (S01/Q=1/Z=0.39)<sup>v</sup>; 'Local councillors should listen to and value the contributions of others, then make a fair and just decision (S08/Q=4/Z=1.77) and 'Local communities should be able to inform decision-making, but local politicians are ultimately responsible' (S09/Q=3/Z=1.22). This viewpoint does however perceive a role for citizens and is positively characterized by the statement, 'we should acknowledge the power of participatory, as well as representative democracy' (S05/Q=3/Z=1.38). According to one exemplar 'better outcomes and improved decision making' (P04)<sup>vi</sup> can be 'extracted' (P04) when elected representatives are informed by citizens' views. As another exemplar explained further, 'Politicians need to be open to new ideas which challenge the status quo... sometimes politicians feel constrained about the options, people can challenge that and help them see that things can be done differently' (P06). However, decision-making clearly rests with the elected representatives. As one exemplar posited, 'Ultimately local councillors are representatives, so their first duty is to listen widely and then they need to weigh up different perspectives and try and make a decision in light of the balance of opinion but also using their own judgment (P06). Other exemplars of this viewpoint emphasized their 'electoral mandate' (P04), with another acknowledging that 'councillors are elected to make tough choices' (P05).

Criticisms of local elected representatives were hotly contested, as illustrated through two negatively characterizing statements (i.e. statements with which this viewpoint *least* agrees), 'Local councillors are just out for themselves' (S24/Q=-4/Z= -2.14) and 'Local councillors only account for themselves when an election is looming' (S25/Q=-3/Z=-1.47). As one exemplar strongly refuted, 'I fundamentally disagree with the idea that people go into politics for themselves... Most people, I would assume, are motivated by being able to make a contribution' (P06). Other exemplars agreed, 'I believe people stand for election because

they want to improve things... they are not just out for themselves' (P04); 'these [councillors] are people who really care, and that's why they've entered local politics' (P02).

For this viewpoint, the perspective on accountability was negatively characterized by the statement 'Politicians should avoid justifying unpopular decisions as it makes them look worse than if they didn't try' (S29/Q=-3/Z=-1.53). In contrast, the statement 'The outcomes of decisions should be published more widely, including the reasons behind them' (S13/Q=2/Z=1.02) was positively characterized. As one exemplar noted, 'this is what accountability is all about' (P06).

### **Viewpoint Two: Informed consultation**

This viewpoint retained a belief in the role of local elected representatives as ultimate decision makers. But this commitment to representative democracy belies a more critical position on existing democratic arrangements that were perceived to fall short of ideals. The positioning of this viewpoint is revealed in the juxtaposition of the distinguishing statement, 'Local councilors are just out for themselves' (S24/Q=-1/Z=-0.18) and the reflection by one of its exemplars, who cited a quote from British politician Winston Churchill: 'I'm with Winston [Churchill], "democracy is the worst possible way of running things... apart from all the other ways"' (P18). This critical yet moderate position underpinned the call in this viewpoint for enhanced consultation with citizens. From this viewpoint, effective and transparent consultation is conditional on mass citizen education, realistic expectations by citizens of decision-makers and participatory processes and genuine motivations by formal power holders for engaging citizens.

This viewpoint was negatively characterized by (i.e. *least* agreement with) the statement 'Politics is far too important to leave it to amateurs' (S27/Q=-4/Z=-2.21). Strong reactions from key exemplars included: 'elitist, paternalistic and wrong' (P19), and 'politics

is something we as a country need to engage in more, we should all become more informed amateurs [...]’ (P17). This viewpoint noted the limits of the electoral systems, for example, ‘if you are in a safe seat constituency, the implication that you as an individual can vote someone out is misguided’ (P17). In this context, the viewpoint also emphasized the importance of local elected representatives, ‘communicating honestly... and being clear about motivations’ (P17) and that they should be able to be ‘called to account’ (P18).

Citizens need to know how their ‘views are taken into account in decisions’ (S14/Q=3/Z=1.33) to inform decision-making, with positively characterizing statements including, ‘People’s day-to-day experiences are important in coming up with solutions to difficult issues’ (S22/Q=4/Z=1.48). Yet, negative characterization by the statement, ‘If local councillors set the direction, then everyone else can just crack on and make things happen’ (S06/Q=-3/Z=-1.66) highlights the limits to the role of citizens from this viewpoint.

The viewpoint was positively characterized by, ‘Councils need to carry out meaningful consultation with residents and not know the answers already’ (S33/Q=4/Z=1.53). Exemplars explained, ‘If you’re not honest about it [consultation], and it’s already effectively a “done deal” it just increases cynicism and reinforces apathy’ (P18). However, this viewpoint noted the risks of consultation in ‘rais[ing] expectations’ (S30/Q=3/Z=1.30) and ‘decision-making being hijacked by special interests and self-appointed community leaders’ (S34/Q=2/Z=1.05). As one exemplar explained, ‘Locally, there are a lot of ‘gatekeepers’ [which] makes it difficult to see how informed decisions are really made’ (P17).

### **Viewpoint Three: Formal citizen engagement**

This viewpoint proposed structured citizen engagement in decision-making as a corrective to the limits of electoral representation. Citizens were seen as equal to elected representatives in decentralized decision-making, based on their local knowledge and experiential expertise.

Crucial to this viewpoint is the sense of the complementary nature of participatory and representative democracy, as noted in the positively characterized and distinguishing statement, ‘We should acknowledge the power of participatory, as well as representative democracy’ (S05/Q=4/Z=1.75). One exemplar reflected further, ‘Rep[resentative] democracy is the skeleton of democracy but participative democracy is the lifeblood’ (P23). Exemplars challenged criticisms of participation as ‘paralysis and nimby-ism’, noting: ‘participatory democracy can actually lead to more getting done. Active citizenship, mutualism and cooperation [are] what get things done; not leaving it to others’ (P25). Exemplars of this viewpoint argued ‘it is not enough to consult. People should be actively engaged in raising issues, asking questions, and coming up with answers’ (P23). This perspective was underpinned by the positively characterizing statement, ‘peoples’ views matter and they should be involved in shaping the questions as well as giving the answers’ (S20/Q=4/Z=1.67). . This positioning recognized that ‘local people are the experts in their local areas and their day-to-day experiences can add value to theoretical and professionalized solutions’ (P25), as acknowledged in the positively characterizing statement, ‘people’s day-to-day experiences are important in coming up with solutions to difficult issues’ (S22/Q=3/Z=1.30). As implied, there was a strong emphasis in this viewpoint on the equality between elected and non-elected in decision-making, as illustrated by the positively characterizing and distinguishing statement, ‘Community representatives should be included as equal partners in decision-making and the allocation of resources’ (S10/Q=3/Z=1.39), and echoed by an exemplar: ‘Participatory democracy is about everyone being equal, and all playing a role’ (P25).

This viewpoint was negatively characterized by the idea that, '[...] local politicians are ultimately responsible' (S9/Q=-2/Z=-0.95), with the comment, 'It is dangerous to see councilors as the ultimate arbiters, we need a mixed economy of democratic decision making' (P23). The statement 'If local councilors set the direction, then everyone else can just crack on and make things happen' (S06/Q=-3/Z=-1.34) was negatively characterizing. Exemplars actively encouraged, 'an honest and transparent process [...]' (P22), with clarity on how citizens' views were used (S14/Q=3/Z=1.12), where citizens held 'those in authority responsible' (P26); ensuring that all were 'answerable for actions, doing what you say you will do, walking the talk' (P25).

#### **Viewpoint Four: Informal participation**

This viewpoint emphasized the necessity of informal modes of participation in decentralized decision-making. Active involvement of wide range of citizens, beyond organized interests, offers opportunities for effective collective action. This viewpoint asserted that accountability is relationally held, where human interactions are a method for greater transparency and accountability in decision-making.

A distinguishing and positive characterizing statement was 'It's relationships that matter, like having a chat over a brew<sup>vii</sup>' (S17/Q=4/Z=1.70. As illustrated by one exemplar: 'Often it seems local democracy...has become colonized by bureaucracy, and councils seem to want to expunge all human-ness from their operations' (P43). Another such statement was, 'You get more power, by giving it away' (S12/Q=4/Z=1.96), explained as, 'Power shared is power gained' (P45). This viewpoint was negatively characterized by the statement, 'Politics is far too important to be left to amateurs' (S27/Q=-3/Z=-1.35), instead, 'engage [...] with those who do rather than [...] talk' (S16/Q=3/Z=1.51), because, 'building relationships with citizens who like getting things done is much more productive than another consultation

process' (P44). The viewpoint is negatively characterized by the statement, 'involve community and voluntary groups in decision making as they are closest to their members' (S21,  $Q=-2$ ,  $Z=-0.94$ ), indicating that it is crucial for this viewpoint to engage beyond organized or formal interests. This viewpoint had least agreement with criticism of participation (S26/ $Q=-2/Z=-1.27$ ). For example, 'I think top-down democratic processes are as vulnerable to [paralysis, nimby-ism and inequalities] as participatory democracy - but [participation] can unleash extra energy to make civic things happen' (P44).

Recognition of the limits of electoral mechanisms (S32/ $Q=-4/Z=-1.59$ ) was illustrated by comments such as 'the numbers in some [electoral areas] means [it]s is not at all true' that unpopular politicians can be voted out (P43). This viewpoint instead emphasized the necessity of holding those with formal power to account through informal relationships; arguing that 'you must always explain your decision' (P43) and have the 'courage to be open when things are bad for you, not just good' (P44) and concluding, 'if you find it cannot in the end be justified then back down and change it' (P43).

Two negatively characterizing statements challenged the traditional role of elected representatives, showing least agreement with statements that local politicians should control decision-making (S01/ $Q=-3/Z=-1.35$ ; S06/ $Q=-2/Z=-1.00$ ); but there was also empathy for their position (S24/ $Q=-3/Z=-1.51$ ). For example, 'Most local councilors are sincere active citizens in their own right and many of them find the stifling of the system just as frustrating as others do' (P44).

### **Summary of differences and similarities between viewpoints**

Within a general presumption in favor of more participation in decision-making in the context of decentralization, there were marked and perhaps surprising differences in emphasis about who should be trusted with control over decentralized decision-making. In *Formal*

*Citizen Engagement*, the preference that power between the elected and non-elected should be distributed more equally differed from *Elected Representation* where the preference was for a clearer hierarchy, based on an electoral mandate. *Informed Consultation* cautiously supported a consultative approach - conditional on citizenship education - with local politicians leading and being held to account. *Elected Representation* posited clear and distinct roles for representatives and officials and citizens, with little friction between them.

Another set of differences between viewpoints was in level of critique of traditional systems of electoral representation, and therefore the extent to which these systems should be reformed locally. *Elected Representation* was arguably the closest to the status quo of local decision-making in England. Accountability is produced through transparency of the elected officials to citizens through clear communication of their decisions and at the ballot box. It did not feature the ferocity of critique of the limits of electoral representation seen in *Informed Consultation* or *Informal Participation*. In contrast to *Elected Representation*, *Informed Consultation* was mistrustful of elected representatives, who could not, in this viewpoint, be assumed to always act in the public interest. *Informed Consultation* was pragmatically skeptical about how different forms of decision-making might each have negative consequences and potential risks, and therefore advocated incremental change rather than major transformation. Whilst there was dissatisfaction with the limits of traditional decision-making in *Formal Citizen Engagement*, the emphasis in this viewpoint was on making more participatory practices work effectively rather than promoting major institutional change.

*Informal Participation* offered the most strident critique of the limits of traditional decision-making, perceiving existing structures as static and ossified, stifling both the good intentions of those elected and failing to mobilize those lacking formal power. *Informal Participation* emphasized the necessity of informality and human interaction, seeing

accountability as mutually and relationally held. Active involvement of citizens – not just organized interest groups – was perceived to offer a positive-sum means for effective, collective decision-making. While *Elected Representation* and *Formal Citizen Engagement* were focused on improving the process of decision-making, the focus of *Informal Participation* was characterized by a less formal approach to local decision-making.

Differences between the viewpoints, surprisingly, did not transfer into radically different conceptions of transparency and accountability. For *Elected Representation* accountability is primarily secured through electoral mechanisms and transparent communication from elected representatives to voters and citizens, rather than from dialogue between them.. *Informed Consultation* is skeptical of the ability of local elections to produce accountability, yet is similarly skeptical about the ability of citizen participation to address this issue.. Thus the potential scope for strengthening accountability rests both on transparency in communication beyond the ballot box and citizenship education to enable holding to account between elections. *Formal Citizen Participation* proposes a more inclusive group of decision-makers that goes beyond elected representatives to include citizens. As such, it *de facto* reduces the importance of electoral mechanisms of accountability. Accountability again rests on the transparent communication of decisions within and from this grouping of decision-makers. *Informal participation* does take an alternative perspective, based more in the power of inter-personal relationships to mutually hold to account. Nevertheless a critique of this approach may view these arrangements as a weakening of public transparency and accountability. As such, despite the quite different conceptions of power and the role of citizens in decision-making in decentralization, citizens' roles in decentralization, notions of accountability encompassed only slight variations centring around the idea of improved communication between elected representatives and citizens.

### **Conclusion: Understanding Local Preferences in Decentralized Decision-Making**

This paper challenges the conflation of decentralization with participation in decision-making. In questioning this assumption, the paper draws attention to and addresses a critical empirical gap, namely the absence of in-depth, systematic, comparative analysis of the preferences of those local actors involved in shaping local policy and structures. This focus enables the identification and interrogation of distinctive local viewpoints on different forms of decision-making in the context of decentralization.

Using an institutionalist lens, the paper highlighted a perspective within the debate on central-local relations where the formal rules originating in the center are seen to continue to shape the terms and scope of local reform and experimentation. Rules are understood to have formed routinized practices or path dependencies, where institutional forms are reproduced or replicated in smaller units or lower spatial scales and more participatory forms of decentralized decision-making remain marginal. An emphasis on formal rules in isolation can result in a static, overly-homogenized, interpretation of the center-local relationship, with one set of actors – the center- initiating change, and the other set of actors – the local – passive and reactive. Using an institutionalist analytical lens draws attention to the possibility of heterogeneous local response in both practices, and also preferences and narratives expressing preferences. It sees those narratives and preferences alongside formal rules as having a role in institution shaping.

In the English context, and elsewhere, moves towards decentralization from central government to city-regions, and in some areas, below city-region scale to neighborhoods are understood to reflect a broad consensus and mandate for reform (Fenwick and Gibbon 2015). Decentralization has not in itself catalyzed widespread changes in forms of decision-making. Therefore, the paper asks, what does this consensus amount to and what is the extent of the

reform mandate? It is in a decentring of understandings of any consensus that exists locally, coalescing around different viewpoints, giving particular focus to oft neglected local actor's narratives on decentralization, that our paper is able to offer an original contribution to debate.

To address these questions, Q methodology was used to offer an empirically nuanced, systematic and comparative analysis of local actor's intentions and preferences for decentralization. This analysis surfaces and identifies latent yet distinct, rich and statistically significant composite viewpoints and in doing so, challenges existing assumptions, opening up new agendas for research. In retaining the richness of qualitative approaches in combination with the systematic rigor of quantitative analysis, the Q-methodology enables a novel yet robust contribution to this debate. The use of Q-methodology in this study adds to a growing literature within public administration and political science seeking to offer a distinct contribution and balance for often normatively infused debate. Further, it supports a re-invigorated debate on methods of discovery to inform policy and practice (Stoker and Evans 2017).

All four viewpoints arising from the study were broadly in favor of some form of citizen participation within decentralized decision-making. Yet this broad consensus belied differing positioning for such participation, for example, whether it was perceived as a complement, critique, corrective or challenge to traditional forms of decision-making, with different levels of control accorded to citizens within decision-making across the viewpoints.

Although the empirical findings are set in a specific English context, they raise questions that may apply across contexts, to academic debates in the field more broadly. Discussions about the lens through which decentralization has been viewed, the primacy of perspectives of different actors and the extent to which decentralization is participatory are not restricted to the English case.

These viewpoints presented in this study have implications for how we understand central-local relations and local agency. The viewpoints may be interpreted as reflecting the persistence and reification, including at the local level, of what is termed, the ‘British Political Tradition’ of hierarchical government by a centralized power-hoarding executive (Gamble 1990; Hall 2011) with citizens participating primarily as voters. Multiple waves of critique of this ‘nostalgic’ ideal (Norris 2001) have not necessarily lessened its influence in the practices of decentralized decision-making and indeed, perhaps constrained narratives of local experimentation. However, the viewpoints also provide an empirical grounding for more challenging local practices and narratives, which do suggest heterogeneity in terms of central-local debates and at the local level itself concerning preferences for decentralized decision-making. As such, the focus here on the intentions and preferences of local actors has the potential to re-fresh central-local debates.

This article situates literature on central-local relations in the context of an institutionalist lens which draws attention also to both homogeneity and heterogeneity in local narratives, within the constraints imposed on localities by formal rules set by the center, and taking account of the path-dependencies and potentialities of local practices. It builds on other studies which emphasize the importance of local actors’ roles in shaping institutions, It attempts to address a neglect of understanding of preferences, rather than local actors’ responses to the preferences of others. The empirical findings from the specific case in this study are a broader critique of explanations using analytical approaches which do not situate understandings of formal rules in the context of local practices and narratives, and which thereby can incorrectly homogenize ideas of the center, the local, and central-local power relations. By re-situating the literature on central-local relations in the context of an institutionalist lens, we can see heterogeneity. Understandings of the motivations and preferences for decentralization need to re-focus on the role of local actors’ preferences.

This work offers a wider contribution in questioning the prima facie case for the coupling between decentralization and participatory reforms in decision-making. It offers a critique of assumptions that decentralization per se catalyzes other sorts of transformations in decision-making forms and processes. Where decentralized decision-making does not result in change towards more participatory forms this may illustrate local preferences, not local preferences being thwarted.

The findings from this study also raise questions for future research that concern not only the prevalence and distribution of these viewpoints empirically in both the English context and more widely, but also their coherence and internal consistency. Looking across the viewpoints, the substantively different ideas about power in decision-making were not mirrored by similarly differing conceptions of other critical aspects of decision-making, such as how accountability may operate or transparency might work. The findings further suggest a series of interesting implications for practice focusing on how decentralization outcomes have and may be shaped and informed at a local level. The viewpoints offer a tool for practice, providing a heuristic to enable local actors to understand the perspectives of others, perhaps helping them to think of other ways of working or to deliberate on different institutional solutions. The viewpoints also offer a means of self-reflection, highlighting, for example, local actor's own biases and the limits of their own viewpoints. Whilst this heuristic application does not imply any particular set of outcomes, it could help contribute to outcomes which are more conscious, consistent and locally-determined.



## Footnotes

i. The concourse was determined by: 1. synthesis literature review of over 100 cross-disciplinary reviews of academic, policy and grey literatures commissioned by a U.K. research council, with supplementary literature from political science and public policy. 2. 20 exploratory interviews with figures from national research funding bodies (including charitable foundations) and lobbying, umbrella and networking organizations working on decentralized decision-making in England. 3. A research workshop with 45 participants including national and local activists and voluntary organizations, local government officers, and local elected representatives. 4. Data collection by the authors during five relevant policy and practice events, involving over 200 individuals.

ii There is an extensive debate within Q methodology regarding the merits/demerits of PCA over the more commonly employed (in Q) technique of centroid factor analysis (CFA). PCA was chosen because of its greater clarity on the process for extracting components, and because CFA demands unfounded assumptions about test-retest reliability.

iii. Humphrey's rule; two significantly loading Q-sorts, Kaiser Guttman Criterion, Scree test.

iv. Online appendix available with detailed scores held at: [anonymized]

v. The quoted scores demonstrate a statement's position in the respective PC array, e.g. S24/Q=-4/Z=-2.14 means that statement S24 is positioned in the least agree column in the PC array for Preference 1, hence is negatively characterising. The Z-score, here Z=-2.14, provides a more precise description of the statements rating, to compare against Q-scores. A

complete list of the full statements with all their PC array scores are available as an appendix online at: [anonymized]

vi. Exemplars are each numbered and labelled as Participant number X, or P01 etc

vii. A 'brew' is a colloquial English term for a hot drink of tea or coffee.

viii. The 'other' category contained a range of people who did not define themselves as taking up one of these roles, mainly consisting of those in paid employment in locally-focused NGOs or public sector local bodies.

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**Figure 1. Structured Q-sample grid**

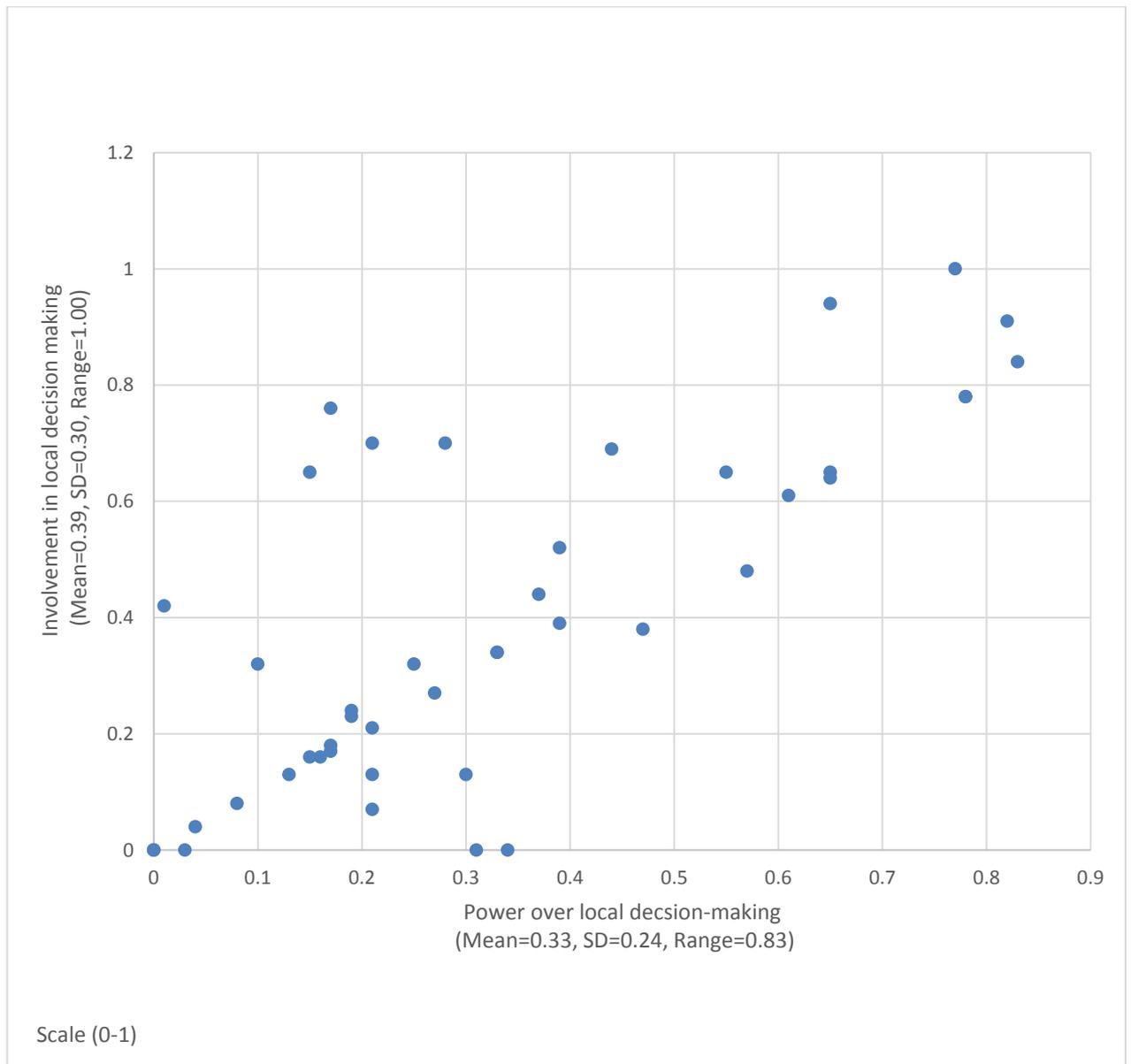
Ideal type	1. Electoral	2. Electoral with communication	3. Consultative	4. Corporatist/interest groups	5. Co-productive
<b>Citizen role</b>	If citizens want to have someone to represent their views they need to bother to vote 018	The people are accountable for those they elect, they need to be constantly vigilant 019	Peoples' views matter and they should be involved in shaping the questions as well as giving the answers 020	Involve community and voluntary groups in decision making as they are closest to their members 021	People's day-to-day experiences are important in coming up with solutions to difficult issues 022 People are natural born problem-solvers, everyone has something they can contribute 023
<b>Power in local decision-making</b>	Politics is far too important to leave it to amateurs 027 People don't know what is good for them sometimes 036	People in power should explain their decisions to those with less power 007	Local councillors should listen to and value the contributions of others, then make a fair and just decision 008 Local communities should be able to inform decision-making, but local politicians are ultimately responsible 009	Community representatives should be included as equal partners in decision-making and the allocation of resources 010	Making communities accountable includes them having the freedom to take risks 011 You get more power, by giving it away 012
<b>Transparency</b>	If people don't like it they can vote them out 032	The outcomes of decisions should be published more widely, including the reasoning	It is crucial that the public knows how their views are taken into account in decisions 014	Communities of interest must have a way of making their views known 015	We need to engage more with those who do rather than those who talk 016

		behind them 013			It's relationships that matter, like having a chat over a brew 01
<b>Account-ability</b>	Local councillors make decisions on behalf of constituents, acting in their best interests 001	Local councillors need to defend and justify their decisions 002	Local councillors need to consult, listen and hear what people have to say 003	It is good to include organised groups and voices in decisions, like ethnic minorities who might usually be left out 004	We should acknowledge the power of participatory, as well as representative democracy 005 If local councillors set the direction , then everyone else can just crack on and make things happen 006
<b>Specific local governance practices</b>	Local councillors are just out for themselves 024 Local councillors only account for themselves when an election is looming 025	The explanations people get given for bad decisions are just a whitewash 028 Politicians should avoid justifying unpopular decisions as it makes them look worse than if they didn't try 029	Councils need to carry out meaningful consultation with residents and not know the answers already 033 Consultation can raise expectations in an unhelpful way 030	There is a danger of decision-making being hijacked by special interests and self-appointed community leaders 034 Interest groups do not really represent their communities: they are self-appointed gatekeepers 031	It's tough to be accountable when you don't have access power and resources 035 Participatory democracy ends in paralysis, nimby-ism and inequalities 026

**Figure 2: Key informants by role and sector**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Voluntary or community worker</b>	11
<b>Active citizen</b>	7
<b>Activist</b>	3
<b>Local authority officer</b>	7
<b>Local councilor</b>	2
<b>Researcher</b>	5
<b>Other</b>	10 <sup>viii</sup>
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

**Figure 3: Key informants' perceptions of their existing levels of involvement and power in local decision-making**





**Figure 5: Summary of the four viewpoints**

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Viewpoint</b>	<b>One: Elected Representation</b>	<b>Two: Informed consultation</b>	<b>Three: Formal citizen engagement</b>	<b>Four: Informal participation</b>
<b>Citizen role</b>		Inform decision-making by elected representatives	Mass participation from an informed citizenry	Assets to shape agendas and problem-solve	Active decision-makers to shape agendas and problem-solve
<b>Power in decision-making</b>		Elected representatives	Citizens check power of decision-makers	Equal between elected and non-elected	Relational
<b>Transparency</b>		Of representatives' decisions	Of representatives' decisions and decision-making processes	Of how citizens' views are taken into account	Of all parties actions
<b>Accountability</b>		Electoral mandate	Decision-makers explain actions between elections	Decision-makers explain actions between elections	Mutual informal accountability.