

Stumbling blocks in the path of small-scale democratic politics: lessons from the experiences of parish councils in England

With the advent of localism as a policy preference across partisan lines and with increasing academic and policy emphasis on the value of a “thick” deliberative form of citizen participation, it would appear that the institution of small-scale-politics is in a positive moment. Using evidence from one of the most established practices of small-scale politics in England- parish councils - we argue that there may be some elemental flaws in micro-political engagement that cannot be overlooked. Drawing on a qualitative study of the electoral recruitment process in 21 parish councils in England we show that notwithstanding the lower barriers to entry to localised politics, modest power vetoes can (sometimes unconsciously) block the engagement of ‘others’. We find that issues about what is socially acceptable block engagement in close-knit communities and that crucially, elections struggle to function as a democratic tool where the conflict that is so central to political dialogue is absent. We find smaller scales exacerbate status concerns and costs for individual and groups leading to inertia in recruitment. The issue is not whether “small is better or even beautiful” but rather whether we can understand fully and address the pathologies around political participation in small-scale politics.

Introduction: Complex made simple? The rising tide of localism

This paper reports on research that started its life as a pilot study in advance of a large-scale field experiment, the purpose of which was to increase the number of contested elections in local parish councils in England (see AUTHORS 2018). In the course of several months working with parish councillors to prepare the experiment, we found that the institutional arrangements and practices of parish councils in England where competitive electoral democracy is required in very small-scale polities provide for unique insights into democratic pathologies at scale. After reflecting on some of the key contributions political scholars have made to the question of size and democracy, we present evidence that provides vivid exemplars of a number of pathologies which may be pervasive within the practice of small-scale democracy. We contrast parish councillors and clerks genuine aspirations for democratic deepening in their neighbourhoods, with a) prevalent perceptions that elections do not represent value for money; b) perceptions that democratic competition is bad for effective management in parish councils; c) weaknesses in political competition reducing further the likelihood of diverse recruitment, and d) capacity constraints that frustrate increased transparency. We ask whether these pathologies we have identified represent elephants in democracy's room when interventions are designed for democratic deepening. We discuss whether the pathologies are unique to, or exacerbated at smaller scales. Drawing on evidence from one of the most established practices of small-scale politics we examine what resonance these pathologies have and where they could be addressed or minimised.

What is the optimum size of a democratic polity? If we asked those who have not spent long hours worrying deeply about the purpose of political scholarship to offer a moment's thought on what political studies might usefully provide for wider society, we could reasonably assume that answers to this question would be high on any list. Simple questions rarely yield simple answers, but it is perhaps surprising the extent to which the size question has fizzled in and out of fashion with political scientists over the years. When size has appeared to the forefront of concerns, its scholarship has taken many forms, from abstract conceptual argument and in-depth ethnographies, through behavioural studies to a more recent trend of exploiting natural experiments.

Within policy circles, small-scale institutions have certainly enjoyed a popular renaissance more recently, as solutions are sought to some of the ills of modern democracy. A highly stylised account goes something like this: A rapidly increasing sensitivity to the overlapping nature of policy concerns necessitated a hurried transition to governance not government. The contradictions and complexities of resulting centralisation in national executives, supranationalism, and reliance on quasi-autonomous agencies etc. have blurred lines of accountability and pathways to understanding collective decisions for regular folk. This fetish for complication is perceived to have contributed to declining participation among citizens in a competitive electoral politics that has moved further and further away from their lives. Citizen participation at the small-scale can at least be hoped to empower citizens who are, after all, experts in their immediate local concerns. More boldly it may serve as a 'school of democracy', re-engaging citizens with a clear system of representative delegation. Smaller, it is hoped, can begin to make democracy beautiful once again.

Even states renowned for centralising tendencies have joined a growing global trend to embrace politics at the smaller scale over the last ten years. In the UK, former Prime Minister David Cameron

declared on introducing the ‘Localism Act 2011’ that he wanted to see a “fundamental shift [of power] - to local people and local institutions.”¹ This act opened avenues for the transfer of powers from central government to core cities, as well as introducing provisions for neighbourhood plans tied to local referenda. The approach does not differ remarkably from its immediate predecessors under alternative governments, building on the ‘new localism’ of the New Labour government in the early part of the century (Stoker 2007). More recently the conservative government under Boris Johnson has declared a priority ‘levelling up the regions’ of Britain by empowering those regions who are seen to have been left behind others.

As far back as 2002, ‘democratie de proximité’ was introduced in French law creating neighbourhood councils and involving citizens in local public management. Across Europe, the enthusiasm for local agenda 21 initiatives of the late 20th century has been built upon by an even greater spread of participatory budgeting, an ever-more-popular practice of neighbourhood and city participatory governance originating in Brazil in the late 1980s and diffusing rapidly worldwide (Sintomer et al. 2008). Across the world interest in deliberative mini-publics that are “small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic” (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p. 220) has increased (See Gronlund et al 2014; Elstub and Escobar 2019). These institutions are seen as a corrective to traditional democratic fora that privilege vested interests and the politics of large-scale public opinion surveys that act on unreflective public opinion. Mini-publics often involve a quasi-randomly selected group of 15 to 500 citizens deliberating in an ‘independently facilitated safe space’ for a day or a number of days on issue(s) that might usually involve highly technocratic decision-making procedures (see Ryan and Smith 2014). For Fishkin, real democracy based on informed consent of the governed is impossible without this democratic selection and opportunities for deliberation in small groups (1993). More recently these novel institutional forms have been effectively embedded in wider political systems where they have contributed to tangible social change (Farrell et al., 2019).

Is this a fad? Some might say that these ‘newer’ institutional designs learn from the lessons of the old failures. While none alone achieve an ideal of democratic goods, optimists may claim we are gradually coming closer to institutional designs that recreate the Athenian ideal (if there ever was such a thing). But it may be that ‘small is beautiful’ is a slightly suspect trendy response to a mixture of boredom and frustration with existing mainstream styles. Like other fashion items these new institutions may only provide a solution for some, for a while, once in a generation, but look like others uncomfortable in the long-run.

Here we provide evidence from one of the most established forms of contemporary small-scale politics that provide several insights and warnings for new institutional designs and agendas. We find that personal costs are exacerbated at smaller scales, and that small groups working together effectively over time may strongly resist change. Furthermore, personal and institutional resource limits over time can reduce the capacity for outward-looking and innovative democratic governance at smaller scales. The next section provides an overview of the political science of size and democracy. We follow that discussion with a discussion of the case, and data we gathered, before

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/17/cameron-decentralisation-local-government>

presenting key findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for theories and practices of small-scale democracy.

Studying size and democracy

There is an impressive body of work on size and democracy, which draws some interesting if conflicting conclusions for scholars to build on. The most renowned wave of debate within the political science community arrived in the 1970s and early 80s. The classic text which addresses this question is Dahl and Tufte's 1973 'Size and Democracy'. Their take-home finding is that there is some kind of trade-off between opportunities for meaningful participation at the small-scale and effective capacities for certain types of collective action at the large scale (for example engaging in warfare and developing more independent economies).

Dahl and Tufte begin by summarising the key ideas in the history of political thought on the subject of size and those are worth briefly revisiting. Smallness for the Greek philosophers allowed citizens to develop genuine "friendly feelings" to one another (Dahl and Tufte, 1973 p.5). The value of fraternity and creating the ideal conditions for loyalty to the common good has remained a concern for democratic theory throughout the ages. A long list of political philosophers have evoked both romance and essentialism in their calls for small-scale politics. These including Rousseau, De Tocqueville, Dewey, Arendt, Pateman, and Barber, whose intuitions are often reflected in the rationale provided by politicians such as David Cameron when advocating local empowerment.

Those ideas are at odds with, for example, Jefferson and Madison whose concern with getting the best and not the worst out of factions led them to recommend the larger unit. The influence of liberalism is clear in that thinking. Larger units avoid monopolies that risk autocracy, avoid heated conflict by allowing multifaceted and malleable identities, and thereby force governors to be attentive and responsive to diversity. Representative government, it is argued, undermines the pathologies of small-scale democracy. It can take advantage of the imagined community of nationalism, leveraging familiarity between citizens who will never meet one another. That vision for liberal democracy is to an extent borne out later by Robert Dahl (1961) and other pluralists' studies of large American cities.

Jane Mansbridge's influential work (1983) taught us though that the aspiration for community democracy is still strong even if finding institutions that deliver 'consensual' or 'adversary' politics at the right moments is still a problem. She asks what 'the limits of friendship' are in political decision-making. She highlights the harms of pressures to conform, influence of dominant personalities and the effect of social positions on participation in her ethnography of small-scale democracies where participants are well-known to one another. Later Frank Bryan would suggest that some of these social costs are overcome when people recognise clear opportunities for change (2004). These debates speak again to complex relationships between meaningful participation and recognition of effective capacity.

Newton (1982) urged caution against those who would imagine a simple linear relationship between size and efficacy or quality of democracy. Evidence he says is simply inconclusive or sometimes 'flimsy'. Despite bemoaning the lack of evidence at the time, he is keen to use what evidence he can find to decry what he sees as romanticism of smallness; suggesting that bigger is probably more

advantageous on both counts of efficacy and democracy. Larger economies of scale allow for organised provision of more specialised services (he gives the example of services for specific disabled populations in large urban centres). This capacity in turn increases the likelihood that more issues will be more salient for more people in the political unit. Moreover, Newton suggests that recruitment of political candidates is more diverse precisely because of the increased diversity of organisational participation in larger units, including but not limited to organised political parties.

Dahl and Tufte (1973: 140) also took political theorists to task for their insufficiency of ideas for appropriate relations amongst units of government. In the meantime, theories of multi-level governance have tried to fill this gap. However, there remains work to be done to understand relationships between size and a unit's relative authority. Pratchett (2004) in his discussion of New Labour's 'new localism' agenda highlights the irony of trying to inculcate a local autonomy using institutional innovation that simultaneously increases the layers and complexity of multi-level governance.

In contrast, Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) called into question the classic 'trade-off', and...

Regardless of relationships among institutions, size may be of little consequence where the issues over which a political unit has jurisdiction are not salient for citizens or authority is simply unclear. This is perhaps why Pateman and others have focused on workplaces or associations as potential schools of democracy, rather than spatial units that may long since have lost their resonance. For Dahl and Tufte in any case "finding space for truly significant activity in the very small unit is obviously going to be difficult," (idem).

Size and Democracy in the 21st Century.

Fruitful empirical contributions to the debate during the last fifteen years of the 20th century are hard to find. One exception is Mouritzen's (1989) work on Danish local government, which contradicts Newton by finding significant associations between homogeneity and citizen satisfaction as well as responsiveness. This research is the forerunner to a number of later studies, which take advantage of an analogous trend, particularly strong in Northern Europe, that contradicts the localism agendas elsewhere. There large numbers of local authorities have been amalgamated, allowing the use of quasi-experimental methods to test citizen satisfaction and behaviours before and after the intervention.

A second important contribution around this point in time is John Gastil's work on democracy in small groups (1992, 1993). He draws out some useful insights from his in-depth ethnographies of workplace democracy that we return to in the discussion of our case. Chief among these is a discussion of the role of what he calls 'cliques and mini-consensus'; the results of informal meetings outside meetings. It is reasonable to assume that in all political fora, some members of the forum will meet from time to time outside the forum and discuss their politics. In larger units where adversarial democracy is the norm, this is obviously useful (e.g. a party caucus). Gastil shows that in smaller units however, which are meant to benefit from their homogeneity of purpose, meetings outside meetings create asymmetries of information which when they later become apparent within official fora lead to frustration and mistrust. The bitterness of personal conflicts may also be exacerbated at smaller scales (Gastil 1993).

In recent years, the number of publications addressing the issue of size and democracy has increased considerably. Leaving aside the burgeoning literature on democratic innovations, which focuses on democratic procedure within smaller-scale institutions, we can identify three clear sets of contributions to the comparative study of large and small units of governance.

The first is in the plethora of publications evidencing an increasing interest in micro-states. Anckar notes that there is plenty of evidence suggesting that smaller states are more democratic than larger ones (2010), even if it is very difficult to find a clear causal mechanism. In a survey of the case literature on microstates Veenendal and Corbett (2014) however, argue that the conventional wisdom that small is beautiful is not supported by evidence of chronic clientelism and marginalisation of minorities in these states. These findings, though an important part of the puzzle, are difficult to generalise to other smaller sub-state units. The nature of being a state, coupled with the geographic remoteness of many island and mountain-top microstates, suggests there are important variables interacting that are not present in many smaller democratic units.

A set of increasingly relevant findings comes from the literature on social movements where practitioners have tried to reify the familiar slogan 'think global act local'. Saunders (2009), writing in the context of Global Justice Movement Organisations, (p. 150 -151), defines 'beautiful decision-making' as "open, inclusive, transparent, and accountable." Her findings in campaign organisation politics support Newton's claim that the relationship between size and democracy is likely to be imperfect. In support of Mansbridge's findings in earlier eras, she finds that the absence of appropriately tailored, sophisticated decision-making procedures can lead to 'informal oligarchs' in small-groups. Nevertheless she finds that where certain procedures are institutionalised, including appropriate and transparent delegation procedures across levels of organisations, they can serve to prevent oligarchy in larger ones.

The third set of recent contributions, focus specifically on local government and employ more systematic comparative methods. Hansen (2013) takes advantages of the natural experiment allowed by amalgamations of local authorities in Denmark to show negative trust and satisfaction associated with larger jurisdictions. A number of protagonists of comparative research on political attitudes and behaviours and size in local democracy in Europe (Denters et al. 2014), conclude that there is a slight negative correlation between size and some measures of citizen effectiveness. However, this finding is most pronounced when moving from very small to slightly larger units and evidence becomes inconclusive at other ends of the scale. Again the answer to the question of appropriate size for decision-making is less than simple.

Much of the focus of political science's explanations of political participation is on group formation, voting, protest and other direct signals to decision-makers. The other essential participatory role of representative systems; i.e. standing for election and recruitment of decision-makers, is relatively neglected in this literature. Voting is more common and frequent among populations but when thinking about intense forms of political participation the focus is more often on 'activists' in general or on elected leaders rather than on candidates per se.

Ryšavýa and Bernard's (2012) comparative study of Czech municipalities, which can still be very small, finds limited choice among candidates and very high incumbency rates at the smaller scale. This dovetails nicely with evidence from across the Atlantic. Eric Oliver and his colleagues have

provided a number of thoughtful contributions using evidence from local government in the U.S. (2013). They are keen to point out the differences between competitive electoral politics at the smaller, local-scale when compared to larger scales (at which they include medium-sized and large cities, as well as states). The same factors they say do not drive a local election as a national one; contentious issues are hard to identify and there is a lot less internal variance in factions (p.184). There is simply a smaller pool of people with innate ambition to serve in representative office to choose from. Oliver et al. characterize American local government as a 'managerial democracy'. Elections held in small, homogenous places where minority rights or interest group wrangling over planning spoils are not of concern, become decisions about managerial competence in getting the best for the locality. "Local democracy in suburban America is less about intramunicipal political struggle than it is about intermunicipal political exclusion" (p. 186).

The varied review we provide here cannot even begin to tackle other important concerns, such as the relationship between direct democracy and small-scale government. Our focus now turns to evidence on how representative democratic institutions organise politics at the very local scale. The next section introduces a distinctive test case for the question of size and democracy – Parish Councils in England. As we shall see, Parish Councils, due to their relative size combined with institutional arrangements designed to support competitive electoral democracy, provide a unique leverage to explore dimensions of size and democracy debates.

Parish Councils in England: Explaining our case, and what it is a case of.

Civil parishes today have grown out of ad hoc amendments to the administration of governance at the local level throughout the last 200 years. Not merely an anachronism of a time when church vestries levied rates and administered poor law, civil parishes represent the closest level of government to the people in England and Wales. More than four out of five parish councils have jurisdiction over less than 2,500 residents (Local Government Boundary Review Commission 2010). These councils are mainly found rural areas as urban local government took on a different character through successive legal reforms, however recent legislation has allowed again for urban parish councils, bringing to number of UK citizens governed by a parish council above one quarter of the population. Parish councils are funded by levying a precept on the council taxes collected by district councils, and while day-to-day responsibilities revolve around maintaining local amenities in the public realm, they have responsibilities to represent parish interests to representatives at the district level. In parishes of less than 200 residents, governance takes place through the medium of an annual parish meeting, a form of direct democracy not unlike New England town meetings though there has been much less noise made in about parish councils' claims to pure democracy. However, an elected council of no more than ten volunteer residents rule the vast majority of councils, with size of council varying roughly in proportion to the electorate it serves. Elections are due to be held every four years and often parishes hold their elections in line with national general election cycles.

However, the tier of government 'closest' to the people seems to be the least accessible to them. Important citizen groups are chronically underrepresented on parish councils at a worse rate than at other levels of government. In fact the pool of those who engage continues to decline. The headline figures from a 2006 national census of all local authority councillors (IDeA/LGA/LGAR 2007; CLG 2008) show that councillors are disproportionately old (only 8% under forty and just over 1% under thirty) and disproportionately white males (29% women and 4% black and minority ethnicities). All

evidence suggests that figures are likely to be even less descriptively representative of the population if we consider parish councillors only.

In June 2013 the investigators on this project first met with a group of five chief executive officers of county associations of local councils (CALCs) in the south of England with the aim of devising an intervention to increase the number of contested elections held by parish councils. While councils are scheduled to hold elections every five years, often they do not get enough nominations to fill every seat on the council and co-optation is regularly used to fill vacant council seats. This runs the risk that parish councils are seen as self-selecting elites by the wider citizenry. The CEOs expressed a particular desire to increase the number of contested elections as this would go a long way to increasing the legitimacy of the councils they represented. The county associations that were invited and agreed to be involved in the project were Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Northamptonshire and Suffolk.

Given that large numbers of councils across these counties were due to hold elections in May 2015 (just under 1000), we were keen to implement an intervention using a randomised control trial to measure any increase in contested elections as a result. The results of that study is reported elsewhere (Ryan et al 2018). 60 councils in these counties were operating an alternative electoral cycle and held elections in 2014. These included 31 Hampshire councils, 20 Northamptonshire councils and 9 in Hertfordshire. In the process of considering the best options for an intervention, we sought to take advantage of this by implementing a pilot study with these councils.

Randomised controlled trials (RCT) are often thought to be at the pinnacle of a positivist hierarchy of social science methods. Our experience in conducting several field trials is that the iterative process of trial design and implementation involving several stakeholders produces a significant repository of reflective interpretations. This data informs novel understandings of phenomena every bit as much as the measurements of the effects of standardised interventions.

In late November 2013 each of these 60 councils was invited by letter via their CALC to a workshop-style meeting with the research team within their county to discuss recruitment of parish councils. Meetings took place in January 2014. 12 clerks/councillors attended a meeting in Hampshire and 18 clerks/councillors attended a meeting in Northamptonshire. In Hertfordshire, only one councillor responded and therefore the research team chose to engage by phone with that councillor. At meetings the researchers presented a summary of findings from the literature that tried to explain recruitment and barriers to recruitment of political volunteers. All of our communications emphasised the importance of grassroots, experiential politics for democratic legitimacy and increased citizen understanding of local issues. We briefly introduced a range of stimuli for and barriers to participation e.g. being asked; identifying with collective goals; personal cost-benefit calculations etc. We also tried to draw attention to the idea that recruiters tend to value the same characteristics that they themselves possess (Crowder-Meyer 2011, Brady et al. 1995) and that this leads to a limited pool of potential recruits.

We then asked the attendees to discuss their experiences of trying to recruit parish councillors. Following on from this, we tried to come up with a set of ideas aimed at improving recruitment to parish councils. Emerging themes included increases in the use of social media, 'buddy mentoring' and endorsements from sitting councillors, roadshows outside schools, and tying recruitment drives to parish events. We asked those representing the councils present to take these ideas back with

them and try to implement the ones that their councils felt were most likely to provide rewards. Following the meetings 18 councils agreed to take part in the pilot. The research team provided some support and follow up over the months leading up to the election where councils requested it. After the recruitment period had closed in April 2014, we asked the participants to report to us on what successes and failures they had had with interventions that were trialled. The next section discusses the responses, some of which were surprising to us. We try to draw some general insights from the pilot study that elucidate some of the pathologies of small-scale democracy in these cases.

Why small might be bad for democracy: evidence from Parish Councils

Recruiting volunteers to serve for the public good is difficult at any level. Things that engender people to stand for election usually include some intrinsic psychological benefits, the perceived power to do something, combined with good timing and identification of opportunities. We know that a stimulus is usually generally necessary in the form of an ask (McLeod 1999) and that a personal stimulus works best (Brady et al. 1995). Recruiters generally recruit within networks of family (Van Liefferinge 2012) or those who they can identify as having a shared purpose (Lim 2008). One of the most obvious barriers to putting oneself forward is time (Norris 1997). Time-richness and a feeling of having a stake in a society where they have lived for a long time helps retirees for instance to overcome barriers to being recruited.

Many of those findings are drawn from recruitment to political parties, interest group or social movements. They focus on the well-understood institutions of representative democracy at the national level. However little has been done to ascertain how or if small-scale, non-partisan representative institutions like Parish Councils might fit this recruitment mould. Here we outline some pathologies identified in some of the literature, and confirmed in our pilot study. We argue that these pathologies are not exclusive to small jurisdictions but their pernicious influence may be heightened at smaller scales. In the final section, we discuss what might be done about them.

- a. Financial and personal costs of competitive elections are more profoundly felt at the smaller scale.*

Councils themselves made regular complaints to us about the costs of holding elections. In particular, parish council elections are often organised by principal (usually district) councils and the fees recharged to the parish councillors. Parish councillors were aggrieved at the excessive charges, given the extra capacity available at principal authorities. One council told us that they recently had to spend 1000 GBP (7%) of their annual budget on a single by-election. A full election can cost between 5000 GBP and as much as 14000 GBP depending on council size. Increased postal voting is increasing costs. Therefore, there are incentives for both recruiters and recruits to avoid elections.

A more obvious cost to the potential recruit is the costs associated with running for election. But these costs are not only financial. As reflected in the earlier work of Mansbridge and Gastil there are usually social costs to certain behaviours within the politics of small groups where opponents are known to one another. This brings us to a second pathology evidenced in the quote below and in much of our experience of working parish councils.

We advertised the Parish Council 'elections' and actually 1 of our councillors would not be nominated as she did not want the expense of an election (although willing to be co-opted if a vacancy occurred). We had 9 seats and we had 8 nominations so we shall co-opt to fill the vacancy. As I said before, we are a mixed council of 1 or 2 longer standing members and the rest quite new and working very hard- it is a very good mix and all working together- as well if not better than I can remember it. It would have been quite sad if we had lost a team that are just getting to grips with things and understanding what goes on. Obviously each parish differs! – Councillor Herts.

- b. A team mentality can create a dynamic against change. This type of small-minded inertia seemed endemic in many of the parish councils we studied.*

We should be clear that at least a significant minority of parish councillors we spoke to expressed a desire to see new faces stand, however many see difficulties in how that might work because of what it might mean for those who already have positions on the council. One of the councils in our study was particularly successful in recruiting new candidates and successfully held a contested election. The clerk recounted us a story of excited enthusiasm from councillors who had participated in recruitment, and then a genuine shocked realisation at what might happen if they were to lose the election. When asked directly, most councillors did not think they actively avoided political conflict in parishes, but in practice, this was not corroborated across responses. In councils, which stopped just short of recruiting enough candidates to yield an election, we were proudly told...

I approached six Parishioners to canvass their views on standing as Parish Councillors this time around, as we have already lost one Councillor, due to a move away from the village and 5 other Councillors have decided not to stand again for election. I am pleased to report that 5 out of the 6 whom I approached agreed to stand and were elected, uncontested. This has left one vacant place which is likely to be filled with a co-option. The new Councillors all come from a variety of backgrounds, which will, hopefully, give a good balance to the Council. Needless to say, I am absolutely delighted and would therefore reiterate that as far as I'm concerned, the direct approach always works best. I think this is because it provides potential candidates with the opportunity to ask any questions or raise any issues or concerns, before committing to the role. – Cllr, Northants.

We had 10 seats available in 3 wards and we had 9 nominations so all will be elected without actual voting at election. We had one more possible candidate but he had difficulty getting a proposer and seconder from the ward in time for the deadline, the Parish Council may co-opt him onto the Council. We attracted 3 new candidates the rest were existing Councillors that re-applied, 1 existing councillor stood down – Parish Clerk, Hants.

We were told from the start of the project that inducing contested elections was going to be an uphill battle. Contested elections are not the norm in parish councils – in fact, we were told on a number of occasions by councillors that they preferred 'contested' to any use of the adjective

‘competitive’. It became apparent that democratic renewal of personnel at the small-scale suffers because there is little incentive for those who would ostensibly hold the role of recruiter to recruit. The most obvious candidates for recruiter are councillors themselves and parish clerks. They have an incentive to make efforts to recruit candidates because the legitimacy of their role is called into question without elections. However in both the case of the parish councillor and parish clerk other concerns can outweigh this incentive. For sitting councillors, recruiting enough candidates to force a contested election when they want to continue their role makes little sense. There is also a moral difficulty that arises for parish clerks if they want to get involved in recruitment activity. The parish clerk acts as a secretary to the council. It is usually a part-time role, although some clerks will work full-time for a number of adjoining parishes. As the bureaucratic arm of the parish council², their role may be called into question if they are seen to be attempting to hire their own boss. As one clerk explained

The only issue encountered was that I was unaware of the Purdah period until a District Councillor pointed it out and we were not sure if our flyer with a personal representation was appropriate, we had also prepared a newsletter that was due to be distributed during the Purdah period and I am not sure whether we should have done that as we might have been seen to be promoting existing Councillor” – PC Clerk, Hampshire

- c. *Status concerns can be considerable, and recruitment strategies are based on thick rather than thin networks, creating a self-selecting elite.*

All sorts of people do make good councillors ...but some ‘do say [its] just a middle class thing, not for the likes of me’ – Councillor, Hants.

Whether hanging their reservations on class, age or something else, there certainly seems to be a feeling that at the smaller scale, the pool of people who ‘fit the bill’ is small and a certain image of the characteristic parish councillor is reinforced. This is not an unfamiliar complaint in the literature on political recruitment. Although recruiters tend to remain within their neighbourhoods when recruiting, when moving outside close social networks some information about a potential recruits character is scarce. Therefore recruiters assume that education, income and labour-market position are related to political interest (Stromblad 2008). These characteristics may function as proxy-variables and provide signals to rationalise recruitment efforts. Visible characteristics are employed when recruited and recruit do not know each other whilst more refined ones such as known civic skills and political engagement are used as indicators to approach known prospects.

We argue that these problems may be exacerbated at the smaller scale, simply because if there is someone minded to break this mould, in the parish they are less likely to find a seconder to stimulate or channel their cause. They are potential leaders without potential followers easy to come by. The closeness of ties that serves communities so well in many ways may obstruct their vitality in others. As Dahl and Tufté put it, “the politics of homogeneity serve the citizen best. Yet in

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such a unit the effectiveness of the dissenting citizen is minimized by his difficulty in finding an ally, and by the weakness of political competition,” (p.138).

d. *Limited powers and capacity create an individual inertia; ‘so what, why bother’.*

While three of the eighteen councils in our pilot managed contested elections, and many, as we have seen, managed to generate *just enough* recruitment to avoid a contested election, some did not fare so well

Overrun with floods... afraid that we did not implement any changes in our strategy and so you'll have to use us as the control –Cllr in Hants.

Consensus at council meeting was that many of our suggestions were impractical given time constraints... [agreed to]... mention the vacancies in the Parish Council article in the Parish Magazine for next month - Note that this publication is on subscription, reaches only a minority of residents of the village, and has no website, let alone an on-line edition. – Cllr in Herts.

The clerks and councillors that responded to our call to arms were still in the minority. Many of them were very keen to work hard to give their institution a visible legitimacy, however they were sceptical as to whether any amount of work could convince their council to act collectively. A lack of system capacity can reduce ambition to effect change.

Can we overcome the anti-democratic tendencies of localists and is a certain level of alienation necessary for democracy?

Lamentations of small-scale politics would do well to take the issue of recruitment more seriously. The types of citizens that run for local office are generally local stakeholders with a strong sense of obligation to the community, including retirees but also young families who are settling in an area (see Oliver 2012: 107 for similar U.S. evidence). In representative local systems, democratic reformers may need to find ways to increase stakeholding and obligation amongst populations who are not yet sure how transient they are. Long-term residents are more likely to be motivated by non-partisan issues. For most parish councils though, holding a contest is in itself seen as a major achievement. Many want to avoid elections and, perversely, the same actors who are enthusiastic for new recruits may be able to consider the lack of a contest a success. Yet, in a representative democracy, representatives can only draw their legitimacy from regular elections. What can we draw from these paradoxes?

Some good news may be in order. The dynamic for change does exist among representatives themselves who seek the best for their communities, and there is evidence that we can address at least some of these pathologies. In at least one parish council in our pilot, we did see a remarkable increase in recruitment that led to a contested election. Two things stood out here. One was an extremely dedicated and energetic pair of parish clerks who were very willing to use innovative methods of recruitment, including holding several ‘roadshows’ outside schools to target young parents, as well as greater use of social media. The second was that the council was situated in an area of rapid demographic change; a middle-class town that had seen a strong influx of young families, as both the town and its new residents had moved within the London commuter belt in

recent years. These kind of clear shifts in residency may provide an opportunity structure for innovative recruitment. This may speak to identifying avenues for change when new populations can be recognised as stakeholders in the parish.

On the other hand, it may be that some level of alienation is simply a necessary condition in competitive electoral democracies. “Friendly feelings” lauded by by some democratic thoerists, may never allow the kind of accountability that is designed to arrive through regular ballots. Is there a magic point at which a sufficient level of alienation exists in hand with a strong stake in local communities? The evidence remains more mixed than ever. Here we can only present an elucidating and study of the case of parish councils. Much funding is provided to these organisations and although their managerial function may be clear, their democratic one is still less well understood.

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