

# Varieties of local participation? A survey experiment on how local executive politicians perceive different participatory arrangements.<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

It is often argued that democracy is increasingly taking on a hybrid form. Therein, representation is complemented with participatory mechanisms and practices. This holds in particular at the local level allegedly closest to the citizens. Therefore, other actors, such as citizens, are given wider and deeper opportunities to participate in the policymaking process. This phenomenon is also present in local politics in Flanders (Belgium), the context of our research. Our study takes the hitherto understudied perspective of local executive politicians, as crucial stakeholders spanning the boundaries of representative and participatory democracy. It aims to examine their attitudes toward different participatory arrangements.

The research was conducted by means of a survey experiment that used a vignette followed by different ways to decide upon a fictitious case of repurposing a vacant school building in the center of town. The first arrangement was the representative model in which the local authority initiated and decided. Six participatory arrangements followed for which we employed a mixed-factorial design in which we included two different types of initiator (government or citizens; as the between-subjects factor) and three different types of citizen involvement (consultative, co-decisive, and decisive; as the within-subjects factor). In order to let respondents assess the arrangements, statements were offered to determine how legitimate these were perceived. We found that executive politicians assessed government-initiated arrangements as more legitimate than citizen-initiated ones. Moreover, the co-decisive arrangement was perceived as being the most legitimate. Finally, an OLS regression analysis was conducted to determine the intra-group variation. We found an indication that local executives are a less heterogeneous group when it comes to assessing the different arrangements than we expected.

**Keywords:** *Local Democracy; Participatory Arrangements; Legitimacy; Executive politicians*

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## Introduction

Fluctuating levels of citizens' trust in politics, political alienation and dissatisfaction, declining voter turnout, and decreasing numbers of membership of political parties are seen as major threats to traditional democratic systems and politics in general. As a consequence of this perceived disapproval, representative democracy seems to be challenged and supplemented with varieties of participatory initiatives. As a result, it is often argued that democracy takes on a hybrid form (Bua, 2019). In addition to the classical representative and electoral processes in democratic systems, citizens are given wider and deeper opportunities to participate in policymaking. This occurs in different forms. The shape of citizen involvement may vary on the participant selection method, mode of participation, and extent of influence (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Fung, 2006). These varieties of participation have also come under the attention of scholars.

With this study, we aim to provide a contribution to the accruing research field of democratic innovations that can also increasingly be found at the local level (often seen as closest to the citizens and an overall school of democracy). Previous research has often focused on specific participatory models or logics (Danielsson, Hertting & Klijn, 2018) or on particular participatory practices and mechanisms for example deliberative mini-publics (Goldberg, 2021; Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021; Rojon & Pilet, 2021), participatory budgeting (Oross & Kiss, 2021; Wampler, 2022), referendums (Rosema, 2009; Qvortrup, 2018), advisory councils (Brugué, Font & Ruiz, 2020; Devuyst & Hens, 2000) or online participation (Kersting, 2013). From ladders to cubes, participatory models have thus made their appearance in the literature on citizen participation. Recent accounts furthermore attempted to systematically define and typologize these models into families of democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). We thus have a rather robust view on the theoretical features of these varieties of participation.

However as yet, we do not dispose of a comprehensive and integrated account on how certain democratic stakeholders (including those at the local level) perceive them in empirical cases of decision-making. Are some seen as more legitimate than others (as this is a central issue in any assessment of decision-making)? To what extent and under which conditions does that hold? This is the innovative part of our research, focusing on executive politicians as key stakeholders in democratic decision-making. As there is a growing interest in the position and the role of citizens, elected representatives remain understudied particularly as it comes to the variation within this group (Thompson, 2019).

We have tried to build on the extant research and combined some features into a typology with different forms of participation. Eventually, we included six types of *participatory arrangements* (i.e. modes of public decision-making that provide different shapes of citizen involvement). All

six were subdivided by two variables: the initiator on the one hand and the degree of citizen involvement in these participatory arrangements on the other. A baseline arrangement without citizen involvement in the policymaking process has also been included in our study. The respondents in this research, local executive politicians, could assess the legitimacy of each arrangement through a comprehensive and integrated measure with items including the three often discerned dimensions of the concept (input, throughput, and output). Although specific participatory practices can be allocated in our framework, we have opted to define and examine the arrangements rather theoretically. No reference is made to concrete instruments (such as those mentioned above).

The main research question in this paper is: *“What is the impact of various participatory arrangements on the perceived legitimacy of decision-making among local executive politicians?”* with three sub-research questions:

- RQ1: *Does the initiator of a participatory arrangement affect the perceived legitimacy among local executive politicians?*
- RQ2: *What is the impact of the extent of involvement that is given to citizens in participatory arrangements for the perceived legitimacy among local executives?*
- RQ3: *Which variables can explain the intra-group variation among local executive politicians in their perceptions of legitimacy toward different participatory arrangements?*

The first part of this paper will focus on the evolution toward a local participatory governance system. Subsequently, the connection between the core actor studied, local executive politicians, and citizen participation will be outlined. This will be followed by some research hypotheses and expectations related to the above research questions. Fourth, the methodology and data section will be discussed. The penultimate section contains the results. Finally, the conclusions and discussion follow.

### **Toward a more participatory and executive local governance system**

Local government in Europe is said to be changing toward a local ‘governance’ system (Daemen, 2012). Political and administrative reforms are implemented to improve the working of local government (Kuhlmann & Bouckaert, 2016). These reforms differ in substance which is to a large extent related to the type of local political system, of which local executive mandataries are an essential part, within which they are implemented (Geissel, 2019). However, some overarching motives appear. One of the important and frequently seen causes of the reforms is the failure of representative democratic institutions. Some countries are challenged with low voter turnout during local elections. Others (often with compulsory voting)

face a growing share of blank or invalid votes (Hennau & Ackaert, 2019; van Ostaaijen, van Zuydam & Epskamp, 2019).

The existence of democratic concerns is not concentrated in a particular area. It is a common phenomenon and a relevant issue all over the world. Widespread crises, whether natural, economic, or conflict-related, are putting democratic governance under pressure but also provide opportunities to involve citizens in the policymaking process (Fraser-Moleketi, 2012; Vetter, Klimovský, Denters & Kersting, 2016). Despite this increased focus on civic participation, it is often complicated to institutionalize such initiatives. Established ways of working and representative democratic features are questioned by participatory mechanisms. Embedding these mechanisms is therefore often challenging (Bussu, Bua, Dean & Smith, 2022; Escobar, 2021; Hertting & Kugelberg, 2018; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016).

The classical representative model is thus highly challenged and taking on a hybrid form through a variety of participatory mechanisms and practices to improve and strengthen local democracy. Citizen participation causes allegedly numerous positive effects. It increases the commitment of citizens, brings diverse opinions to light, and provides a higher level of legitimacy for decisions. On the other hand, the degree of citizen input is often limited to providing information and vision upon which the government eventually decides. Another weakness concerns the participating citizens, who are not always a representative sample of society (Glimmerveen, Ybema & Nies, 2021; Michels & De Graaf, 2010).

In parallel with the emergence of participatory elements, power positions within local government are also shifting. During local elections, voters choose their representatives, the municipal councilors. Formally the most important decision-making actors, but often weakened by their executive counterparts in practice (Daemen, 2012; Van Bever & Verhelst, 2010; Verhelst & Van Bever, 2010). Regardless of reform strategies to reinforce the position of the council, the executive dominance remains and is even strengthened (Steyvers, 2016; Heinelt, Magnier, Cabria & Reynaert; 2018). Whilst some might feel threatened by the emergence of participation, other executive politicians may try to connect this to the strengthening of their own position. Many have realized that they can no longer solve various complex problems on their own, the so-called wicked problems (Head, 2022). As a result, an increasing number of local authorities are making the transition from a representative democracy to a system that provides more opportunities for participatory practices, whereby individual and organized citizens are more involved in policymaking.

The change on the political side is thus characterized by two apparently contradictory tendencies: a focus on more citizen participation and a stronger executive. Therefore, in the next section, we will focus on the connection between local executives and citizen participation.

## Local executive politicians and citizen participation

At the same time, elected politicians can have different attitudes toward citizen participation. They can plainly be against, in favor, or adopt a more nuanced view. If they are not outright against a certain level of civic involvement, their support can be motivated either normatively, instrumentally, or through a combination of both. Normative motivations refer to a personal belief that citizens should be actively participating in policymaking from an ideological point of view. Instrumental motives rather refer to the use of participatory practices to reach a predetermined objective (Danielsson et al., 2018). Furthermore, local executive politicians can adopt various roles in participatory processes. They can only initiate but also actively participate in them. They can be merely responsive to the outcome, act as boundary spanners throughout or even institutionalize participatory processes (Sørensen, Hendriks, Hertting & Edelenbos, 2020). Those with a negative attitude toward these participatory mechanisms can also take a more resistant position (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Thompson, 2019). Whereas these attitudes and roles may hold for non-executive councilors as well, the focus of our research is on their executive counterparts who apparently gained momentum in the era of participatory governance.

Furthermore, we are particularly concerned with Flanders as the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium as our research context. Politics in Flanders, including at the local level, is typified by its partocratic nature where political parties dominate in all spheres of decision-making. For a long time, partocracy has been associated with pillarization. Parties were the extension of a pillar in the representative institutions (with the well-known intermediary exchange). Citizen involvement took shape in the first instance through pillar affiliation (i.e. indirect exchange with the political system) supplemented by party membership and involvement in elections. Consequently, for a long time, the image was that citizens had the opportunity to make their concerns, wishes, and needs known through the pillars and that the system responded to this (Pauly, Verschuere, De Rynck & Voets, 2021). This image changed after the de-pillarization. The more recent shift toward individual citizen participation is related to this. Subsequently, elected politicians in the federal and regional parliaments often combine their position with a representative or executive mandate at the local level, i.e. *cumul des mandats* (Dodeigne, Krukowska & Lazauskiené, 2018; Vandeleene, De Winter & Baudewyns, 2019). Despite the strong presence of national parties at the local level, there are numerous non-national counterparts with elected representatives. Non-national parties at the local level represent 26% of seats on local councils and almost 30% of the mayors (Copus, Wingfield, Steyvers & Reynaert, 2012; Steyvers, 2022). Moreover, Flemish municipalities are characterized by their diverse profile for example in terms of population and urbanization.

Furthermore, a monistic system in which local executive politicians are also members of the municipal council in addition to their membership in the board of mayor and aldermen (BMA) is at stake at the local level in Flanders (Steen & Wille, 2005; Verhelst, De Ceuninck & Peters, 2019). Formally, the municipal council has greater decision-making power. In practice, the executive body has a dominant position vis-à-vis the council (Verhelst, Reynaert & Steyvers, 2011). In addition, a collective form system in which a collegiate body, the BMA, takes on the executive tasks is in place (Steyvers, 2016). This is usually comprised of various parties in a formal coalition. In practice, there is a tendency toward a presidentialization of the position of the mayor who is gaining importance (Rodenbach, 2017; Steyvers, Reynaert, De Ceuninck & Valcke, 2006; Steyvers, 2010). Executives in Flanders, either political or administrative, shape the municipality through their leadership and professionalism (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002).

We can expect that the above features will have an effect on the legitimacy perceptions among executive politicians. Considering for example the (national) partocracy, the presidentialization of the mayoralty, and the features of the monistic system, there are indications that executive politicians in Flanders will generally not be extremely supportive toward forms of participation in which they lose, to a large extent, power. In the section below, we will further discuss this and formulate a number of hypotheses and expectations regarding the research questions.

### **Hypotheses and expectations**

As noted in the introduction, researchers have been extensively focusing on particular participatory strategies and practices. We have tried to establish a theoretical model integrating these insights. This study is concentrated on a theoretical framework that includes two features of participatory arrangements: the initiator and the extent of citizen involvement.

We examined the extent to which the initiator and the level of citizen involvement influence the attitude of executives as a group of democratic stakeholders and what factors can explain potential intra-group variance. The government itself can invite citizens to participate, on the one hand, often termed political participation (van Deth, 2014). Furthermore, an individual citizen or a group of citizens can invent their own participatory space, dubbed as civic participation (Kersting, 2013). In addition, citizens can be involved in policymaking in four fundamental ways. The first, which is indirect, takes place during elections. Elected politicians make decisions without citizen participation during the policy process. Secondly, citizens can be consulted and give advice on policy issues. Thirdly, citizens can cooperate with the government by means of a partnership. Finally, citizens can be authorized by the government to act in a decisive manner (Arnstein, 1969; De Waard & Rodenburg, 2007; Fung, 2006). In practice of course, in the co-deciding and deciding type, the government will often have to formally validate the decision in the municipal council.

Previous research did not particularly focus on the importance of the initiator of participatory arrangements in the shaping of politicians' attitudes. Although executive politicians often initiate participatory arrangements, they do not seem to be entirely supportive toward them in general. The fear of losing their political primacy remains prevalent and thus they try to stay in power (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). To achieve this, they can initiate more citizen participation themselves and consequently have more influence on a lot of questions (for example, the topic, the application, the terms and conditions...). Citizen-initiated arrangements, therefore, risk being even more ignored or unanswered (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). In any case, local politicians are strongly involved in shaping or accommodating participatory mechanisms and initiatives. Therefore, political support is an important factor in any participatory success (Caluwaerts, Kern, Reuchamps & Valcke, 2020; Vetter, 2009). In sum, we expect politicians to be more positive toward government-initiated arrangements than citizen-initiated ones.

*Hypothesis 1:* Local executive politicians assess government-initiated arrangements as more legitimate than citizen-initiated initiatives.

Previous studies have shown that over time the level of support for participatory practices among local executive politicians in Belgium has strongly increased while the representative model became less supported (Vetter, Heinelt & Rose, 2018). However, this is based on general notions of democracy. Our study aims to give insights into what extent and for which specific types of participatory mechanisms executives have a positive (or negative) attitude. Consultative practices are often criticized because they are not responsive and rather non-binding (Bua, 2019). In Flanders, consultative structures are frequently used and strongly embedded at the local level, some of them being mandatory (Van Damme, Jacquet, Schiffino & Reuchamps, 2017). In combination with executives who are afraid of losing too much power, we expect them to be in favor of consultative arrangements (where the room for maneuver remains significantly larger for elected politicians than citizens). Consequently, the choice for consultative practices is mostly based on instrumental motivations. The use of citizen advice is seen as an instrument rather than it is based on a personal belief that citizens should be actively involved. Furthermore, we expect mayors and aldermen to have a less positive attitude toward co-decisive and decisive arrangements. Citizens are being given more voice and influence in this context. When citizen involvement rises, executives are effectively losing decisional power. The attitude toward participation will subsequently become less positive.

*Hypothesis 2:* Local executive politicians consider participatory arrangements without extensive decision-making power for citizens (i.e., consultative arrangement) to be more legitimate than when citizens have equal or more decisional power (i.e., co-decisive and decisive arrangements).

Extant research has already identified a number of factors that could explain politicians' attitudes toward the different arrangements included in our study. However, most have not been scrutinized conjointly in empirical research, left alone that this differentiated between initiator and involvement in participation. Therefore, we will not formulate hypotheses for each arrangement with respect to all of the potential explaining factors. Nevertheless, we will construct some expectations about those factors based on findings of previous studies and differentiate them into three levels: the micro, meso, and macro levels.

At the *micro* level, we have a number of variables with regard to the individual features of local executive politicians that could explain the intra-group variation. First, the ideological position of local executive politicians on the left-right axis might play a role. We expect left-wing executives to assess more extensive citizen involvement as more legitimate than right-wing politicians (Caluwaerts et al., 2020; Junius, Matthieu, Caluwaerts & Erzeel, 2020; Vetter et al., 2018). Second, the role conception of mayors and aldermen in the representative system can be of importance. Often, three types are discerned: trustee, delegate, and partisan. A trustee acts from his or her own convictions while a delegate wants to be responsive to constituents. The partisan usually tends to follow the party line. We expect delegates and partisans to be more positive toward a greater extent of citizen involvement compared to trustees (Junius et al., 2020; Thompson, 2019; Pitkin, 1967). A third factor is seniority. Executives who are more experienced tend to be less skeptical toward the representative system (Vandeleene et al., 2019). Previous studies inserted this factor as a control variable and didn't find a significant effect (Junius et al., 2020). Nevertheless, we might expect experienced executives to go for the participatory balance because they have experienced that too much citizen involvement is not desirable. They support it, but it should not go too far. Newcomers may be more optimistic about more far-reaching forms of citizen participation in which citizens can (co-)decide. Furthermore, we have also included the policy area 'participation'. Previous studies have not considered this factor, but we expect that mandataries who are responsible for the field of citizen participation will have a more positive attitude toward participatory mechanisms in which citizens are to a greater extent involved. Finally, we expect that executive politicians who are more positive toward the representative local democracy system and local elections will consider forms of extensive citizen participation as less legitimate (Steyvers et al., 2006).

At the *meso* level, we focus on party family, on the one hand, and the age or origin of a party, on the other. We will first discuss the party age and differentiate this into traditional and new parties. The traditional parties include the three oldest parties and the ones that have been extensively pillarized. We expect that representatives of traditional parties will be less critical of the classic and advisory arrangements and that they will consider the (co-)decisive arrangement as less legitimate than executives of new parties (Vandeleene et al., 2019). In

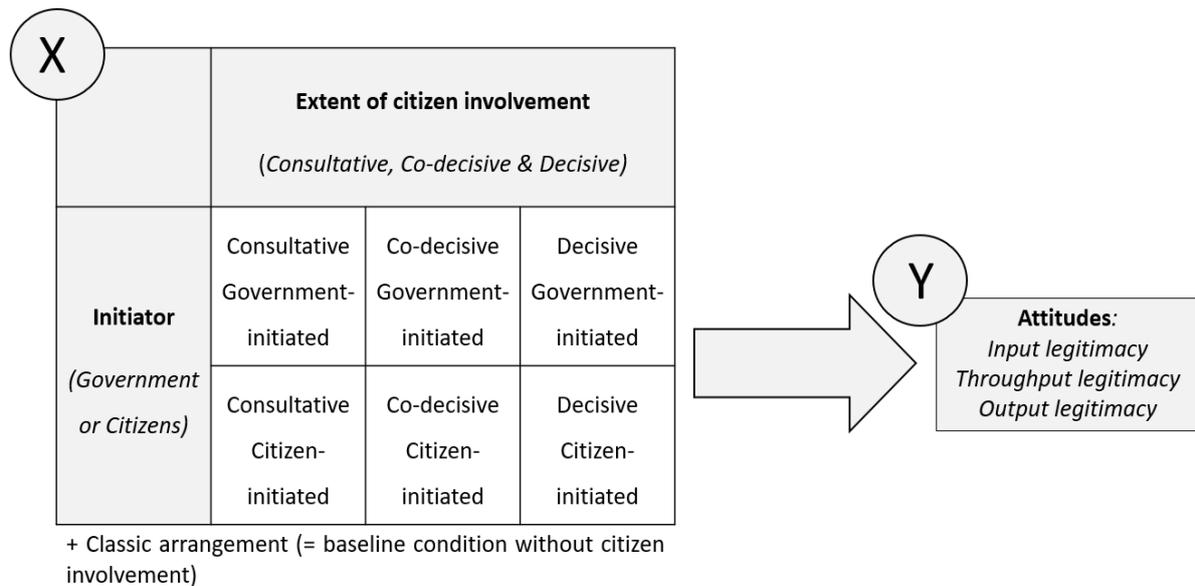
addition, we expect that executives of local parties will be more supportive toward greater citizen involvement because of their local origin, independence from national party structures, and ideological concern with non-partisan decision-making along a common sense (Copus et al., 2012). Second, we can distinguish between the party families. In our research context, we can identify six meaningful categories of party families: three traditional party families (Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals) and two new ones (Regionalists and Greens). A sixth residual category includes other parties that do not fit into the previous ones. We expect the left-wing parties (socialist and green) to be more in favor of participatory arrangements with extensive citizen involvement in contrast to right-wing parties (Caluwaerts et al., 2020; Devillers, Biard, Vandamme, Jacquet & Reuchamps, 2022; Junius et al., 2020; Klausen, Vabo & Winsvold, 2022).

At the *macro* level, 'central city' is a possible explanatory factor. Flanders counts 13 central cities ('centrumsteden'). These cities play an important regional role and provide meaningful recreational, employment, and educational facilities. They house a large proportion of the population in a dense pattern. Municipalities with a rather small size tend to have higher levels of traditional citizen participation, i.e. higher voter turnout, while large municipalities face more (electoral) contestation (Kouba & Dosek, 2021). Despite the high level of such citizen participation in small municipalities, executive politicians from large municipalities tend to be more in favor of wider and deeper citizen participation (Vetter et al., 2018). In addition, municipal size is connected to the capacity of the administration to deal with municipal challenges. Strongly professionalized local administrations seem to be more willing to introduce democratic innovation (Kübler, Rochat, Woo & van der Heiden, 2019). Central cities tend to have higher levels of professionalized administration but also have larger sizes. We, therefore, expect local executives of such cities to assess the (co-)decisive participatory arrangements as more legitimate.

## **Data and method**

The section below outlines the research method used in this study. To answer our research questions, a survey experiment on how executive politicians perceive the legitimacy of different participatory arrangements has been conducted. This method allows determining the attitudes of large groups of respondents whereby the effects of certain variables can be systematically ascertained (the factors). In addition, information about other characteristics of our respondents can also be collected which in turn is especially useful for determining the intra-group variation. In this section, first, we will discuss the measurement of the independent and outcome variables. Second, the data collection process and the sample will be outlined. The figure below summarizes our study by focusing on the relationship between the independent variable (X) and the outcome variables (Y).

Figure 1: Participatory arrangements



### **Measurement of the independent variables**

The study used a vignette<sup>6</sup> that focused on a repurposing case of a school building in the town center. This vignette was followed by different ways to decide upon the case. First, there was an arrangement with a representative model in which the local authority took the initiative and decided (baseline condition). Furthermore, six participatory arrangements were included varying in two dimensions. To introduce these participatory arrangements to the respondents, we employed a mixed-factorial design in which we included two different types of initiator (government vs. citizens) as the between-groups factor and three different types of citizen involvement (consultative vs. co-decisive and vs. decisive arrangements) as the within-subjects (repeated measures) factor. During the survey experiment, respondents were always first presented with the baseline condition (classic scenario), which was followed by three participatory arrangements (which were either government- or citizen-initiated). The order in which these three participatory arrangements were presented to participants was randomized.

### **Measurement of the outcome variables**

In order to let respondents assess the different arrangements, statements were offered to determine how legitimate they perceived these. Previous research on perceptions of democratic innovations or participatory arrangements mostly focused on a specific dimension of legitimacy or on the general assessment of how good or bad it is perceived to capture the whole concept of legitimacy. The theoretical literature, however, calls for a more encompassing measure of legitimacy including different dimensions at the level of input, throughput, and

<sup>6</sup> See appendix for wording of the vignette.

output of the political system (Easton, 1965; Hendriks, 2021; Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2013). Therefore, the statements in our research have been formulated around the perceived input, throughput, and output legitimacy of the arrangements. In this way, a comprehensive and integrated perception is captured. This would also allow us to include the perception of respondents that something is perceived as positive in terms of the input and the process but not in terms of the outcome. The table below shows how these different legitimacy perceptions have been formulated in the questionnaire. These statements were equal for each arrangement assessed by the respondents.

Table 1: Dimensions and measurement of legitimacy perceptions

Legitimacy dimensions & statements	
<b>Question</b>	To what extent do you agree with the following statements (0-10)? This way of deciding what will happen with the old school building...
<b>Input</b>	...allows as many points of view and interests as possible to be taken into account.
	...gives citizens from all walks of life the opportunity to be heard.
<b>Throughput</b>	...gives everyone a clear view on how the decision is made.
	...is a fair way of decision-making.
<b>Output</b>	...provides a solution that will work.
	...provides an efficient solution.

Legitimacy is the outcome variable and thus includes its three dimensions often discerned in the literature. The subsequent statements are based on two normative frameworks focusing on the concept of legitimacy and the concomitant input-throughput-output sequence (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013):

First, *input legitimacy* is one of the most extensively examined legitimacy dimensions. The concept refers to the participation of the citizenry and the variety of their contributions. It is shaped by the involvement of societal demands and points of view, whether individual or organized (Strebel, Kübler & Marcinkowski, 2019). Furthermore, the input-oriented legitimacy can be set out for the people or by the people, i.e. through representatives or through citizen participation in the decision-making process (Schmidt, 2013; Scharpf, 1999; Hendriks, 2021). The statements in table 1 regarding the input side are focusing on two features. First, it examines whether as many points of view and interests were taken into account. Second, it considers how diversified the input is and if citizens from all walks of life got the opportunity to be heard. This latter describes the openness and inclusiveness of the input (Schmidt & Wood, 2019).

Second, procedural features are described through the *throughput legitimacy*. This legitimacy dimension has a relatively recent history and was added on top of the two others. The throughput legitimacy describes the variety of interactions between all actors that occur in policy processes (Schmidt, 2013; Strebel et al, 2019). In addition, procedural legitimacy focuses on features like accountability, inclusiveness, and openness. The latter is related to transparency and considers the degree of procedural openness. It describes who has an insight into the way decisions are made, in our study the participatory process (De Fine Licht, Naurin, Esaiasson & Gilljam, 2012; Schmidt & Wood, 2019). We limit our scope to the transparency and fairness of the decision-making process. Openness and inclusiveness have been incorporated into the input legitimacy.

Third, the *output side of legitimacy* defines the (policy) outcomes and achievements and includes values referring to the effectiveness, efficiency, and performance of the decision. It examines how the input with societal needs and questions is managed through a participatory process and eventually results in a solution for the issue at stake. It provides a focus on the problem-solving capacity and is shaped through the inputs. The two statements to be assessed in our survey study look at whether the way of deciding in the case provides a solution that is efficient and will work (Scharpf, 1999, Schmidt, 2013). The focus on effectiveness is equally important to the focus on the input-oriented side of legitimacy. Earlier research demonstrated that assessments of the output-oriented side proved to be the most determining for citizens in their choice for a particular democratic governance model (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018; Strebel et al., 2019).

### ***Data collection and sample***

Before the survey was distributed to all respondents, a pilot phase was organized in which we tested our survey with several potential respondents. After this moment of testing, our survey was adjusted on a limited number of points. Eventually, 1.885 local executive politicians were invited to participate in our survey (298 mayors and 1.587 aldermen). Five percent of the respondents were asked to participate in a soft launch to make sure that the survey worked properly. The remaining 95% received an invitation during the hard launch of the survey. Two reminders helped to enhance the response rate. Eventually, 326 respondents completed at least the first part of our survey, the assessment of the vignettes<sup>7</sup>. This implies a response rate of 18%.

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<sup>7</sup> Ten respondents were excluded because they did not correctly fill in at least four on a total of eight 'vignette check questions'. These questions focused on the initiator and extent of citizen involvement in each arrangement and were presented after the respondents had been reading the description of each arrangement. These questions made it possible to see whether respondents understood the core focus of our research.

In this paper, we will also address the differences within our research population. To have an impression of who is represented among our respondents, we will give a descriptive indication of the group diversity on the basis of a number of features regarding the demographic, partisan, and municipal characteristics<sup>8</sup>.

First, we have included demographic variables that might help in order to differentiate the features of the respondents. These demographics can be put in comparison with the features of the initial research population. In total, 64 mayors and 262 aldermen filled in the questionnaire and finished at least the vignette. The average age of the respondents is 50 years. 60% of the participants were male, 40% were female or preferred not to say. In Flanders, 66% of the members of the board of mayor and aldermen are men and 34% are women (Pinakes, 2022). 16 percent of the respondents are short-educated while 84 percent are high-educated. 50 percent of the respondents indicated they have a university degree. 96% of respondents do not identify themselves as members of an ethnic-cultural minority group.

Second, partisan features will help to describe the population in terms of party membership and party family. Respondents were asked whether they were a member of a national political party and if so which political party. A second question had a look at the elected list of mayors and aldermen in the previous local elections. We can describe the political party share within local executives but comparing this with the number of executives for each political party is more difficult because this data is only partially available. Four percent of our respondents were not a member of a political party. To describe the share of executives for each political party, we will focus on the share of elected executive politicians for each national party and also distinguish the proportion of local lists and cartel parties. Christian democrats represent more than one third of the participating local executives. The liberals and socialists, the two other mainstream parties, represent 16% and 12%. The regionalist party has a share of 18 percent among our respondents while the greens represent more than six percent. The communist party and the far right party are absent in our study. The former only has two local executives and the latter is excluded from executive mandates and party coalitions as a result of the '*cordon sanitaire*' (an informal agreement between all other national parties not to form majorities with the far-right). Almost 11% of the respondents indicate membership in another, non-national, political party. When we describe the responses to the question with regard to the local lists, we find that the share of national parties shrinks. Over 25% of the respondents indicate that they were elected on a local list (21%) or cartel list (5%). When we compare the numbers with regard to the local lists with the data of the research population as a whole we

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<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to compare all of the features of the respondents with those of the initial population because for some features there is no information available. The online database *Pinakes* and a response to a parliamentary question (Vlaams Parlement, 2020) partially helped with comparing some of the features.

can conclude that we have more or less a representative group of respondents (see figure 2 in the appendix). Cartel lists are only half the number of respondents in the population, while the number of respondents on a socialist list is twice the number of those in the research population (Vlaams Parlement, 2020).

Third, we have included municipal features. On the one hand, we inserted a variable 'province'. The respondents are equally spread across the five Flemish provinces. The numbers roughly correspond to the number of local executive politicians in each province. The Province of West-Flanders and Flemish Brabant are slightly under-represented while the Province of Antwerp and East-Flanders are slightly over-represented. On the other hand, the number of respondents with an executive mandate in a central city is representative in comparison with the research population in general, i.e. six percent. One in four people in Flanders lives in a central city, but only six percent of the executive mandates belong to these central cities (Vlaams Parlement, 2020).

## **Results**

The research results will be discussed in this section. These are based on the available data from the 326 participating local executive politicians in our survey study. Three essential elements will be examined. First, we will analyze if and how the type of initiator (government vs. citizens) impacts executive politicians' attitudes toward the different arrangements (*Hypothesis 1*). Secondly, we will examine if and how the extent of citizen involvement (consultative, co-decisive, and decisive) influences executive politicians' attitudes toward the different arrangements (*Hypothesis 2*). Finally, we will try to determine the covariates of participatory attitudes beyond the characteristics of the arrangements. As outlined in the previous section, there is a broad diversity among the participating executive politicians. Therefore, our analysis examines this variation with regard to a number of features by inserting variables that might explain this variation within the population of executive politicians.

### ***Analysis of the outcome variable***

Before delving into the core results, we focus on how the attitudes are considered in the analysis. In the methods section, we already outlined the three legitimacy dimensions. In order to prepare the analysis, we will first examine the extent to which the three dimensions form a reliable measurement. For this purpose, we are performing a reliability test and a factor analysis.

With our research design, we differentiated our outcome variable between three legitimacy dimensions (measured using two input, two throughput, and two output statements). Working with various items shows that there are differences in the conception of legitimacy according to the degree of involvement that citizens are given or the aspect that is considered. The overall

level differs but it is also configured differently, with the most apparent differences occurring between the baseline arrangement (which scores significantly lower on the input dimension than on the throughput and output dimension; both  $p$ s < .001) and the decisive arrangement (which scores significantly lower on the output dimension than on the input and throughput dimension; both  $p$ s < .001).

We conducted a reliability test and factor analysis on the six assessed legitimacy statements. The reliability tests found high Cronbach's alphas for the four arrangements (see table 2). Furthermore, a factor analysis using input, throughput, and output legitimacy revealed that, for all four arrangements, around 70% of the variance is explained if we consider legitimacy as a single concept. Therefore, we found evidence to take the average assessment of the six items as a single factor, legitimacy. In our further analysis, legitimacy is captured as the average of the assessment of the three dimensions.

*Table 2: Cronbach's alphas and explained variance*

	<i>Baseline</i>	<i>Consultative</i>	<i>Co-decisive</i>	<i>Decisive</i>
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	.91	.92	.93	.90
<i>% explained variance</i>	70.87	73.18	73.93	66.57

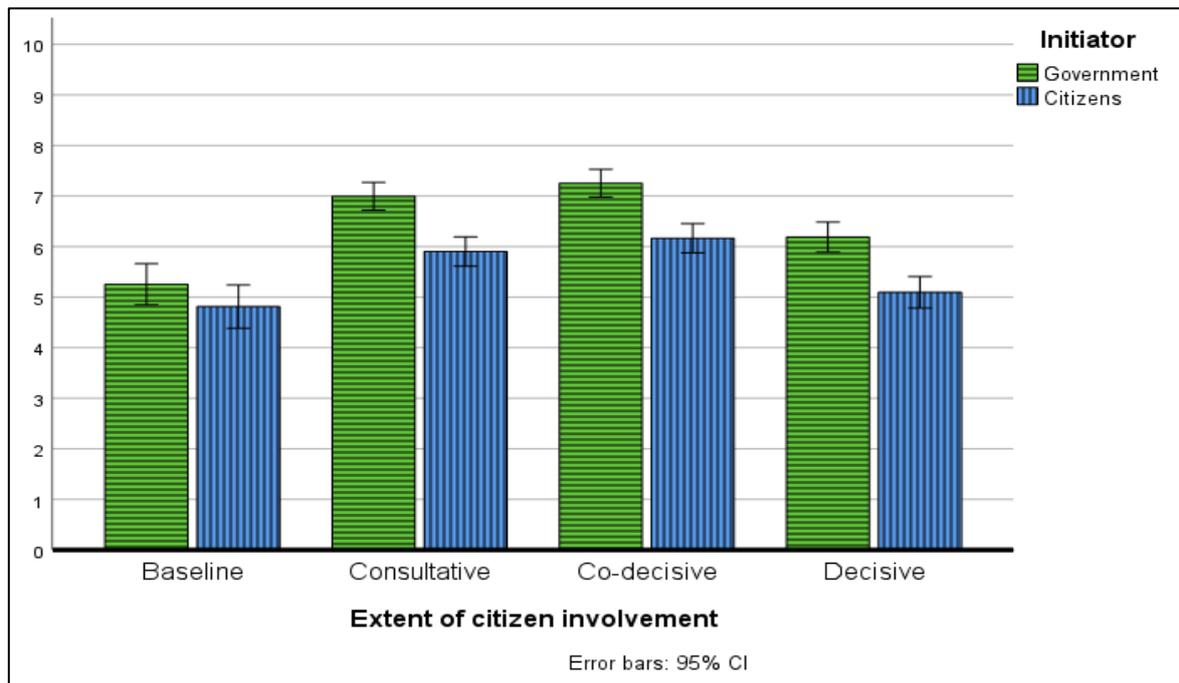
### ***Analysis of the initiator and the extent of citizen involvement***

The first research hypothesis addressed the effect of the initiator of the arrangements on executive politicians' attitudes. We tried to find evidence for this hypothesis by applying a repeated measure ANOVA test. In this analysis, we focused on perceived legitimacy as the outcome variable. We included the four different levels of citizen involvement (classical, consultative, co-decisive, and decisive) as the within-subject factor, whereas the type of initiator (government or citizens) was included as the between-subject factor. Figure 3 depicts the results. As expected, we found a significant main effect of the type of initiator,  $F(1, 324) = 29.73, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .084$ . Government-initiated participatory arrangements ( $M = 6.42, SE = 0.12$ ) were perceived significantly more legitimate ( $p < .001$ ) than their citizen-initiated counterparts ( $M = 5.50, SE = 0.12$ ). This provides us with evidence to confirm *Hypothesis 1*: local executive politicians assess government-initiated participatory arrangements indeed as more legitimate than citizen-initiated initiatives<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Please note that the classic arrangement was shown to all respondents first and the distribution of the initiator has been done afterward. As expected, we did not find significant differences in the assessment of the baseline arrangement between the government and citizens' conditions ( $p = .142$ ).

Figure 3: Effect of the initiator and the level of citizen involvement on the perceived legitimacy (N = 326)



The second research hypothesis addressed the effect that the extent of involvement has on executive politicians' perceived legitimacy. In line with our expectations, we also found a significant main effect of the extent of citizen involvement,  $F(3, 322) = 83.39, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .437$ . The assessments across government and citizen-initiated arrangements tend to follow a similar pattern (although the overall level of legitimacy differs according to the previously established pattern). Across the two initiators, the baseline arrangement ( $M = 5.04, SE = 0.15$ ) is assessed significantly less legitimate (all  $ps < .001$ ) than the consultative ( $M = 6.45, SE = 0.10$ ), co-decisive ( $M = 6.71, SE = 0.10$ ) and decisive ( $M = 5.64, SE = 0.11$ ) arrangement (all  $ps < .001$ ). The co-decisive arrangement is perceived as the most legitimate (all  $ps < .01$ ). The consultative arrangement is considered more legitimate than the decisive ( $p < .001$ ). *Hypothesis 2* can thus be partially confirmed. As expected, we found that mayors and aldermen indeed consider some extent of citizen involvement as legitimate. However, contrary to our expectations, the co-decisive arrangement (together with the consultative arrangement) was perceived on the highest level of legitimacy, and significantly more legitimate than the decisive. In other words, we identified an inverted U-curve in which the assessment is positive until a certain point. The curve reaches a plateau in the consultative and co-decisive arrangements, after which it decreases again when the citizens act as deciders. In sum, local executive politicians perceived the consultative and primarily the co-decisive arrangement as more legitimate than the classic representative and decisive arrangement, independent of who takes the initiative.

### ***OLS Linear Regression, explaining intra-group variation***

In order to explain the variation in the assessments of the four arrangements, we added a number of independent variables which can be categorized at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Additionally, three demographics were added as control variables. At the *micro level*, we added seven independent variables. A dummy was made of the variable 'seniority'. Respondents who have been a local executive for more than three years (i.e. they are serving at least their second legislature) were given a number 1, the others with less experience a 0. The policy area has also been dummied up, with respondents working in the 'participation' area receiving a number 1 and other respondents receiving a 0. At the *meso level*, reference categories were used. Respondents within the Christian democratic or one of the traditional parties belong to the largest group in the research population and among the respondents and thus form the reference categories. This has also the advantage of taking those of the party traditionally in power in local representative democracy as a benchmark. Finally, we made a dummy of education level where the high educated received a number 1. Table 3 summarizes the results of the OLS regression analyses<sup>10</sup>.

First, we will focus on the independent variables at the *micro* level. The results, first of all, revealed some indication that experienced mandataries assess the classic arrangement as more legitimate than new executive politicians. Furthermore and also in line with the expectations, those with a positive attitude toward local elections evaluated the classic arrangement as more legitimate, whereas those with a positive attitude toward the local representative democracy evaluated the consultative arrangement as more legitimate. Finally, in terms of role conception, the decisive arrangement was evaluated somewhat more legitimate by partisans. Left-right orientation was found to be a good predictor of attitudes in previous studies, but this turned out not to be the case in this research.

Second, we consider the *meso* level by examining party family and party age. Our findings indicate that local executive politicians from the Socialist, Liberal, and 'other' political parties seem to assess the classical arrangement as somewhat more legitimate than Christian Democrat mandataries. Additionally, executive politicians from 'other' political parties also seem to assess consultative arrangements as somewhat more legitimate than Christian Democrats. Respondents from the regionalist party rated the co-decisive and decisive arrangement less legitimately than Christian Democrat executives. Furthermore, it was found that new parties perceived the co-decisive arrangement as more legitimate than traditional parties. The above findings partly correspond to a number of our expectations. However, it is striking that significant differences are often absent or not detectable across the arrangements.

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<sup>10</sup> In these analyses, the data were collapsed across the two initiators.

Table 3: Results of the OLS Linear Regressions (N = 285)

		<i>Baseline</i>	<i>Consultative</i>	<i>Co-Decisive</i>	<i>Decisive</i>	
		B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	
<b>Constant</b>		3.068 (1.74)	4.171 (1.29)	5.930 (1.27)	5.962 (1.37)	
<b>Micro level</b>	Left-right ideology	.135 (.11)	-.013 (.08)	-.126 (.08)	-.053 (.09)	
	Role conception					
		Delegate	-.120 (.18)	.210 (.13)	.128 (.13)	-.023 (.14)
		Trustee	-.030 (.15)	.012 (.11)	.064 (.11)	.101 (.12)
		Partisan	.176 (.18)	.129 (.14)	.138 (.13)	<b>.248+</b> (.14)
		Seniority (2 <sup>nd</sup> legislation = 1)	<b>.557+</b> (.34)	.196 (.25)	-.183 (.25)	-.381 (.27)
		Policy area (Participation = 1)	-.175 (.42)	-.219 (.31)	.282 (.30)	.172 (.33)
	Attitude toward local council elections	<b>.267**</b> (.11)	.065 (.08)	-.006 (.08)	-.061 (.08)	
	Attitude toward local representative system	.193 (.13)	<b>.200*</b> (.10)	-.036 (.10)	-.105 (.10)	
<b>Meso level</b>	Party family					
		Christ. democrat	REF	REF	REF	REF
		Socialist	<b>1.047+</b> (.58)	.297 (.43)	.009 (.43)	.305 (.46)
		Liberal	<b>.825+</b> (.47)	.175 (.35)	.011 (.34)	-.326 (.37)
		Green	1.197 (.90)	-.012 (.67)	-.935 (.66)	-.418 (.71)
		Regionalist	.005 (.73)	-.266 (.54)	<b>-1.644**</b> (.43)	<b>-1.382*</b> (.57)
		Other	<b>1.212+</b> (.65)	<b>.794+</b> (.48)	.144 (.47)	.295 (.51)
		Party age/origin				
	Traditional party	REF	REF	REF	REF	
	New party	.468 (.76)	.322 (.56)	<b>1.267*</b> (.56)	.546 (.60)	
	Local party	-.352 (.54)	-.324 (.40)	.002 (.39)	-.605 (.42)	
<b>Macro level</b>	Central City	.781 (.67)	-.116 (.49)	-.481 (.49)	<b>-.997+</b> (.52)	
<b>Demographics</b>	Gender	<b>-1.070***</b> (.32)	<b>-.441+</b> (.24)	-.094 (.23)	-.342 (.25)	
	Age	-.003 (.02)	.002 (.01)	<b>.032**</b> (.01)	<b>.034**</b> (.01)	
	Education level (High educated = 1)	<b>-1.580***</b> (.44)	<b>-.575+</b> (.33)	<b>-.722*</b> (.32)	<b>-.593+</b> (.35)	
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>		.209	.118	.152	.152	
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>		.152	.055	.091	.091	

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; + $p < .10$ . Effects that are (marginally) significant are indicated in bold. REF = reference category

Third, at the *macro* level it was found that, compared to other cities, respondents from central cities perceived the decisive arrangement as somewhat less legitimate, a finding which runs counter to our predictions. We may be able to explain this because executives from a central city see repurposing in their municipality on a different scale. They may to a greater extent see the complexity of such a choice that they do not want to leave only to a limited group of citizens.

Finally, with regard to the *demographic variables*, we see that men perceived the baseline and consultative arrangement as significantly less legitimate than women. Moreover, we found that older respondents perceived the co-decisive and decisive arrangement as somewhat more legitimate than younger respondents. Finally, it was found that highly educated respondents evaluated all four arrangements as less legitimate than lower educated respondents. Although we did not formulate specific hypotheses or expectations for the demographic variables, some results are remarkable. According to the literature, younger and highly educated executives have more positive attitudes toward participation. However, in the co-decisive and decisive arrangement, we found the opposite result in our study (Vetter et al, 2018; Junius et al.).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper scrutinized the attitudes of local executive politicians toward different participatory arrangements. A trend toward local systems introducing various participatory instruments and mechanisms is noticed in the literature. Moreover, the central actor in our research, local executive politicians, appear to be playing an increasingly prominent role in the local democratic system, in contrast to local councilors. Accordingly, we examined the impact of various participatory arrangements on the perceived legitimacy of decision-making among local executive politicians with a main focus on the initiator, the degree of citizen involvement, and the factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels that can explain the intra-group variation.

First, our research provided some insights into the debate about measuring legitimacy through multiple legitimacy dimensions. Second, the framework was on the one hand distinguished through the initiator of the arrangement and on the other hand through the extent of citizen involvement. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested. *Hypothesis 1* was confirmed. Local executive politicians perceived government-initiated arrangements as more legitimate than citizen-initiated ones. *Hypothesis 2* was partially confirmed. As expected, mayors and aldermen perceived some extent of citizen involvement as legitimate. Contrary to our expectations, however, their perceived legitimacy decreased only when citizens were the deciders themselves (and not when they were co-decidors). In addition, we found that the co-decisive partnership was perceived on a higher legitimacy level than the consultative type (a finding which runs counter to our expectations). Strikingly, those at the heart of the executive power in the representative system perceived an arrangement that only includes elected

mandatories (i.e., the representative arrangement) as the least legitimate compared with the consultative, co-decisive, and decisive arrangements.

Third, the survey contained a range of additional variables to determine other covariates of participatory local executives' attitudes. Although the results of these OLS regression analyses (see *supra* for details) correspond with a number of our expectations, it is quite striking that for many of our included variables no significant differences were found. It is remarkable that e.g. ideological positioning and party family and age generated fewer significant effects to explain the intra-group variance than we expected. In this regard, we found an indication to argue that our respondent group, local executive politicians, is less heterogeneous than we first thought, at least when it comes to assessing these specific choices in decisional arrangements. Despite a number of factors that have proven their explanatory value in previous studies, the perceived level of legitimacy of the (participatory) arrangements appears to be rather on an equal level (the relatively low overall support for the traditional model of decision-making without citizen involvement being noteworthy).

This study has its clear limitations. First, the number of cases (a total N of 285 local executive politicians) can be an explanation for why we found only a limited number of (marginal) significant effects when we delved into the intra-group variation to explain the attitudes toward the different arrangements. However, a larger N may yield more significant results, but the question is to what extent those (marginal) effects would be more meaningful for the findings. The observed effects are rather small. A larger sample will not necessarily make these effects larger (but may therefore be significant).

Second, the variation in the assessment of the arrangements is most clearly present in the classical arrangement. There is more coherence and less variation in the assessment of the consultative, co-decisive, and decisive arrangement. Despite the significant effects found on the main effects, initiator, and degree of citizen involvement, limited effects were found to explain the diversity within the group of local executives. A possible avenue for further analysis could therefore be to focus on legitimacy differences. The three participatory arrangements could then be contrasted with the classical arrangement. This might make it possible to better understand the variation within the research population and to better interpret the independent variables at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

It is less tricky to distinguish between the six participatory arrangements in a survey study than in existing participatory cases. In a later phase of our research project, a case study approach will be taken to further capture the real-life complexities regarding different participatory arrangements. Such a context-sensitive approach may also help us to go beyond mere

attitudes and probe into the effective *roles* and *relationships* of local executive politicians in participatory arrangements.

As already pointed out, there is a variety of local systems in Western democracies in which local executive politicians operate. Executive politicians are functioning in systems with a number of different features. They may be in a strong position or can operate in a context where they have a rather weak position. The scope of our study is limited to Flanders but in further research, a comparative study might make it possible to scrutinize the differences between and the impact of different local systems' features on the attitudes of local executives toward a variety of participatory arrangements.

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## Appendix

### ***The wording of the vignette***

The description of the scenario

Please imagine this fictional situation:

In the center of your community, a former high school has been vacant for several years now. The building is owned by the municipality. Currently, it is unclear what should be done with this building. There are many possibilities, for example: a library, office spaces, a meeting center, a shopping center, a youth center, a residential care home, housing facilities, etc. Local government funds are available to realize this repurposing.

The decision as to what will happen to the vacant school building can come about in several ways. Four different ways are shown on the following pages.

Followed by four different ways to be assessed (1, 2A, 3A & 4A OR 1, 2B, 3B, and 4B)

*Imagine that this decision is made as follows:*

[1 = Representative arrangement]

The local government takes the initiative to think about the repurposing: They develop a plan themselves. Afterwards, the local government itself also decides what will happen with the school building.

[2A = Government initiative x Consultative arrangement]

The local government takes the initiative to think about the repurposing. They ask residents of the municipality to give advice. Afterwards, the local government itself decides what will happen with the school building.

[2B = Citizens initiative x Consultative arrangement]

Residents of the municipality take the initiative to approach the local government with an idea for the repurposing of the building. The local government receives the advice of the residents. Afterwards, the local government itself decides what will happen with the school building.

[3A = Government initiative x Co-decisive arrangement]

The local government takes the initiative to think about the repurposing: they invite the residents of the municipality to develop concrete plans. Afterwards, these residents decide together with the local government what will happen with the school building.

[3B = Citizens initiative x Co-decisive arrangement].

Residents of the municipality take the initiative to approach the local government with an idea for the repurposing of the building. These residents are given the opportunity to develop concrete plans. Afterwards, these residents decide together with the local government what will happen with the school building.

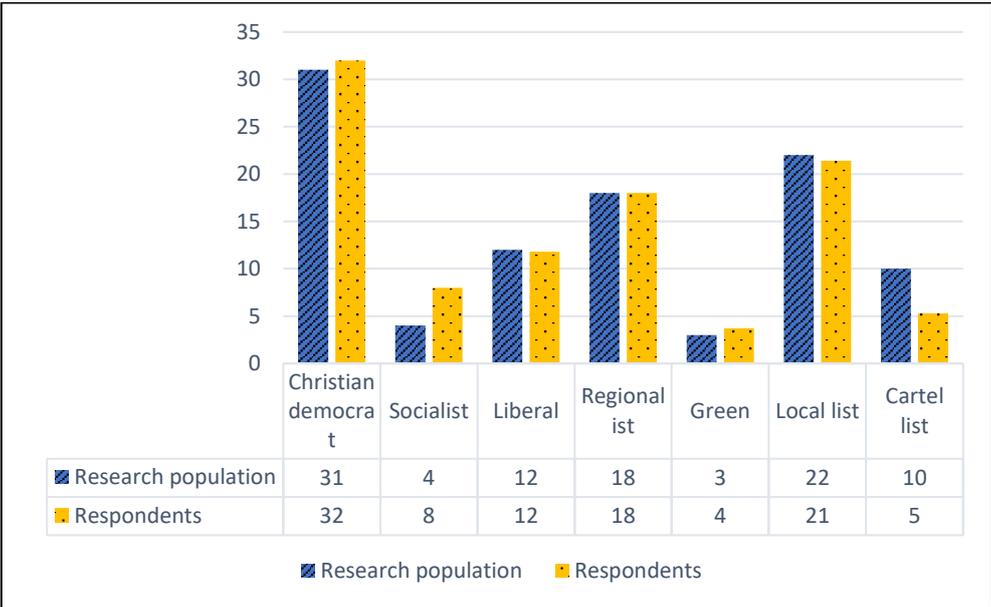
[4A = Government initiative x Decisive arrangement].

The local government takes the initiative to think about the repurposing: they invite the residents of the municipality to develop concrete plans. Afterwards, the residents themselves decide what will happen with the school building. The local government then formally approves the decision.

[4B = Citizens initiative x Decisive arrangement].

Residents of the municipality take the initiative to approach the local government with an idea for the repurposing of the building. These residents are given the opportunity to develop concrete plans. Afterwards, these residents themselves decide what will happen with the school building. The local government then formally approves the decision.

**Figure 2: Elected list local elections: share (%) of research population vs respondents**



**The measurement of variables**

Variable	Measurement Question	Measurement Answer
Zip code	What is the zip code of the municipality where you live?	Open field
Gender	What is your gender?	Man, Woman, Other, I prefer not to say
Age	What is your year of birth?	Open field
Education level	What is your highest level of education attained?	No or primary school, secondary education, College or graduate school, University
Ethnic cultural self-identification	Do you identify yourself as a member of an ethnic-cultural minority?	Yes, No, I prefer not to say
Party membership	Are you a member of a political party?	Yes, No
Party membership national	Which of the following political parties are you a member of?	CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Open VLD, PVDA, Vlaams Belang, Vooruit (previously sp.a), other
Party membership local	On which list were you elected in the 2018 municipal elections?	CD&V, Groen, N-VA, Open VLD, PVDA, Vlaams Belang, Vooruit (previously sp.a), local party list, cartel party
Ideological self-identification and ideological position affiliated party	In politics, the terms "left" and "right" are often used. Can you place your own views and those of your party on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means "left," 5 means "in the center," and 10 means "right"?	0-10 slider
Seniority executive position	How many years in total have you been a member of the college in your community (including previous	Open field

<p>Policy area</p>	<p>legislatures)? Please give a number in years.</p> <p>In which of the following policy area(s) do you have authority in the College?</p> <p>You may indicate multiple options below.</p>	<p>Mobility, public works, land use planning, agriculture, environment, finance, local economy, housing, development cooperation, culture, tourism, youth, education, welfare, human resources, sports, leisure, participation/information/communication, other</p>
<p>Rating municipal representative democracy</p>	<p>How do you assess the current functioning of representative democracy in your municipality (where residents appoint representatives through elections who make decisions in the municipal council and the college of mayor and aldermen)?</p>	<p>0-10 scale (very negative – very positive)</p>
<p>Substantive rating representative role</p>	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As a local politician, I primarily represent the opinions of my constituents.</li> <li>2. As a local politician, I mainly follow the party position.</li> <li>3. As a local politician, I act primarily from my personal opinion.</li> </ol>	<p>1-5 scale (totally disagree – totally agree)</p>