

Chapter 5

Democratic Preferences of the Indirectly-Elected Mayor, Open or Locked-In: A Contribution to the “Difference Hypothesis”

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ABSTRACT

The Directly Elected Mayor (DEM) model is a prominent manifestation of global efforts to innovate and strengthen local democracy. According to the established reformist claim, a DEM generates an array of advantages for local democracy (e.g., personalization, visibility of power, an increase in accountability, more inclusion, even direct involvement of citizens in local decision making). The DEM model seems to overcome the democratic deficits of the Indirectly Elected Mayor (IEM) model; this is the core assumption of the “difference hypothesis”. The aim of the empirical part of the study is to allow the analysis of the democratic orientation and styles of actions of the IEMs in the city of Vienna from 1973 until 2013. They all asked to the citizenry to express their opinion in consultative referenda. The longitudinal study shows the clear preference of the mayors for representative democracy and the majority principle to decide local issues. The analysis provides evidence that indirectly supports the reformist claim promoting the DEM model in local democracy.

INTRODUCTION

If one wanted to characterize the politics of local governments of the past 25 years with a single phrase, it would be multi-faceted change. Local governments have developed both comprehensive strategies and individual projects to improve their service provision while additionally reforming their political decision-making institutions and procedures. In particular, large cities act as sorts of on-going laboratories and test areas for a wide array of innovations. The opportunity for the “renewal of policy from below” (Hesse, 1986) has long been discussed.

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The operational and strategic modernization of local organizational structures under the flag of New Public Management is a prominent area of reform that began earnestly in the 1990s and is distinct from functional and territorial reform paths (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2011). The strategic objectives of NPM such as privatization, corporate management, decentralization, regulation and political control are highly ambitious and represent an “eternal” reform program (Bevir & Rhodes, 1999, pp. 221-222). In practice, the NPM implemented only rudimentary “recipes”; however, adverse experiences in operational implementation processes at times obscured the value of the NPM.

The “polity policy” of the institutional system sits at the heart of local democracy (Wollmann, 2000, pp. 199-200). Local government, at least in an idealized understanding, is the seedbed of democracy. The local level is predisposed to take into account citizens’ wishes and needs in the decisions of the representative bodies and to practice a ‘better’ model of democracy. As According to Borraz and John (2004) the urban political crisis debate refers to citizens’ low election turnout and other forms of indifference regarding the local political arena. Organized citizen participation is designed to link the strategic and operational decision-making bodies of urban policy with citizens’ political preferences to provide efficient solutions to urban issues. However, the full potential of participatory democracy according Pateman (1970) has not been exploited, and radical service decentralization, neighborhood government, true local referenda, and assistance with empowerment strategies still demand reform (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998).

In the range of options to strengthen local democracy, the most significant institutional innovation in the view of a number of local-government academics is the direct election of a mayor (Pilet, Delvit, Steyvers & Reynaert, 2009, p. 401). A number of motives and arguments establish the need for an institutional change (Larsen, 2002, p. 119) but do not describe the precise details of any change. Steyvers (2013) speaks of the “reformist claim” that points to the DEM, and in essence, English academic Kevin Orr (2004, p.338) polemically states, “Directly elected mayors are good, ergo, mayors are the answer”. Supporters and reformist actors stress—often with an eye on the English setting—the growing and cross-system requirements for enhanced accountable, executive and strategic local leadership to react to new challenges of local governments (Steyvers et al., 2008, p. 135; Steyvers, Reynaert & Valcke, 2012, p. 231). The answer to the leadership deficit is the joint political dream of a new type of local leader: the powerful executive mayor imbued with ballot-box authority (Dudman, 2008). The executive component and the arrangement of the selection of the mayor by direct popular vote merge. Real debates and reforms in each country often bring focus to one or both of the two components, depending on, e.g., the national political culture and constitutional conditions, which naturally results in a non-uniform reform process (Larsen, 2002, p. 113).

According to an early official document of the Council of Europe (2004) the DEM offers a number of advantages. These advantages include the greater political, democratic and moral legitimacy of the mayor implied by the popular choice, which raises the opportunity of a mayor to act more or less independently; greater identification because the mayor can be seen as a symbol of what inhabitants want; greater responsibility of the local executive, which changes political leadership; and greater visibility of the person of the mayor, which helps provide a much more immediate, and apparently effective, response to local concerns.

According these expectations of the DEM, the IEM in conceptual terms is the contrary model, characterized by, e.g., poor visibility and poor accountability. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to provide support for the arguments.

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