WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR LOCAL DEMOCRACY? DISENGAGEMENT, BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND DIRECTIONS FOR REFORM

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Regional and municipal elections are “second-order elections”. As such, they attract less interest among residents, resulting in a comparatively low voter turnout, in Canada as elsewhere. Despite some outliers (e.g. Waterloo 2010: 41 %; 2014: 36 %; Guelph 2010: 33.9%; 2014: 44.9%), the voter turnout in recent elections has ranged between 25-30 %. The 2022 elections, however, marked a new low: Turnout for Regional Council elections dropped from 31% in 2018 to 25%. The City of Kitchener registered a turnout of only 20.26 % (2018: 28 %), with a significant gap between downtown wards (above 25%) and suburban wards (below 20%). Earlier in 2022, the provincial election had already signalled this downward trend: Only 43 % of eligible voters went to the polls, compared to 56% in 2018 – a new historical record.

Considering that we live in times of heightened political polarization and multiple crises, the electoral disengagement of a large majority of residents appears like a paradox. Although voter turnout is always a function of structural and circumstantial factors, this trend is a symptom of a deeper problem: A large – and obviously growing - share of the population is not willing to engage in key practices of democratic self-government.

Creeping alienation is a multifaceted challenge and won’t be easy to fix in the short term. It requires – first of all – to understand what democracy actually means, and how we can identify potential deficits (perceived or real). Second, building on this brief discussion, I present key findings on the factors that encourage or discourage political participation in general, and voting in particular. Third, I summarize this discussion by suggesting general considerations that can provide guidance for reforms.

Democracy and “democratic deficits”

Let’s start by taking a step back to look at the bigger picture. What do we intuitively believe is democracy, and how can we identify potential deficits?

The notion of democracy underlying statements in public debates or newspaper articles is often rather narrow, or “thin” (Barber 1984). Essentially informed by a simple principle-agent model, democracy appears to work very much like the market. Individuals (rather than citizens who are part of a larger political community) hold preferences, which we believe can be determined through snapshot polls. There is no need for debate, the justification of arguments and the potential that preferences may be transformed in light of the “the unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1992). If political decisions don’t seem to align with the however aggregated and measured “will” of “the” people, we are quick to portray this angrily as “undemocratic”.

Consider, for example, the rather mundane case of speed limits. Waterloo City Council’s decision to introduce a speed limit of 30km/h sparked considerable public pushback and outrage. Jeff Outhit, in a Waterloo Region record article from September 29, 2022, refers to an unrepresentative survey by Waterloo Region Polling suggesting that 79 % of residents are opposed to the speed limit.

The article also quotes Councillor Diane Freeman, who initially supported the legislation, but changed her mind while canvassing for the municipal election, stating: “I think I’ve sufficiently had the life beat out of me by the people in my ward”.

Because of a speed limit of 30km/h? This looks like tantrum democracy at work.

Moreover, in a Letter to the Editor a concerned writer asks rhetorically if this decision is a threat to our democracy and responsible for apathy and low voter turnouts:

> “…city traffic planners *warned* against the 30 km/h speed limit and that the public input also rejected *it as too slow.* It seems to me that the decision *may not be so “democratic” after all* [….] We elect our politicians as our representatives. When those *politicians decide that they should ignore the input of those they represent*, and ignore the expert advice that citizens pay for (after all, we employ those traffic experts), *are they really being democratic?* Could this be the *reason* why people seem *apathetic about politics and voter turn outs are low?* Is this the *threat to our democracy?*
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> Source: Bob St. Cy, Waterloo Region Record, Waterloo council ignored experts and its own citizens, Thursday, June 16, 2022 (italics mine).

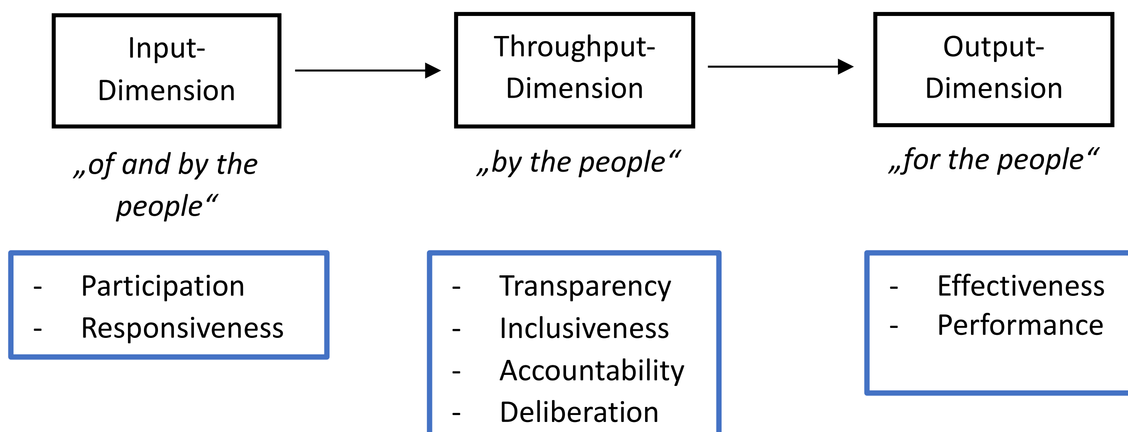
Let me be clear: I do not think that this decision represents a threat to our democracy, or that it was “undemocratic” after all. The debate surrounding the decision reveals, however, a limited understanding of what democracy actually is, and how it (should) work(s). Reducing democratic legitimacy to pseudo responsiveness is problematic – but it is a dominant conception and

perpetuates the problem of disengaged citizens. It is also a key feature of populist conceptions of democracy, which rest on the premise that established elites (the "few") deliberately ignore the uniform, homogenous pre-existing will of the ordinary people ("the many") (Urbinati 2019; Zürn and Schäfer 2020).

But what, then, is democracy and democratic legitimacy?

In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln defined democracy in 1863 "as government of, by and for the people". This quote captures the complexity of democracy. Political scientists reformulated Lincoln's idea by distinguishing three interdependent dimensions: Input-, throughput- and output-legitimacy (Scharpf 1970, 1999; Schmidt and Wood 2019).

Figure 1: Dimensions of Democratic Legitimacy



a) Input Dimension:

Democratic governance rests on the premise that those who are affected by political decisions should have meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, which in turn ensures responsiveness. Different mechanisms facilitate participation and responsiveness, most notably the right to vote and the right to stand for election, consultation, but also agenda setting and interest aggregation (e.g. through political parties or candidate platforms).

Political decisions, therefore, need to reflect the preferences of citizens. But how can we ascertain if this is the case?

Certainly not through snapshot polls. The "will" of the people is not only fallible but, more importantly, an artefact of the processes that seek to measure it (Offe 1992). Moreover, responsiveness also means that decision makers need to be mindful of those who cannot express their preferences through consultation, polls or elections, like children or future

generations. In addition, political decisions are the endpoint of a longer deliberative process (see also “throughput dimension”), an important element not required for taking a survey.

One way to gauge the responsiveness of elected decision-making bodies like municipal and regional councils, but also provincial or federal governments, is to ask whether decisions – such as the 30km/h speed limit - align with broader political mandates as articulated in a strategic plan, an electoral platform, or a throne speech. Considering that policy goals like safe streets, more equitable public infrastructure or the commitment to reduce GHG emissions by promoting active transportation enjoy high priority in such documents, it is safe to say that Waterloo City Council’s decision did not violate the criterion of input-legitimacy.[1]

b) Throughput Dimension:

A second constitutive element of democratic governance stipulates that all political decisions should be the result of public reasoning, and based on justifiable arguments.

The Council decision clearly met the requirements for throughput legitimacy. It resulted from lengthy deliberations by an elected, representative body. Councillors considered all arguments in favour and against the 30km/h speed limit, including the staff report’s recommendation against it. Five Councillors voted in favour, three opposed it.

The arguments advanced by those in opposition did not convince. They essentially rejected the speed limit simply because it was supposed to be “too slow” (in relation to what?), or because drivers would not obey. These arguments lacked substance.

Moreover, the outrage is difficult to understand considering the costs of the decision. Councillor Royce Bodaly demonstrated that it would be minimally invasive and only a minor inconvenience, adding, on average, just a few minutes to the commute. We also know from an abundance of empirical evidence and best practices that 30km/h on residential streets, and not 40km/h, yields multiple benefits, if implemented properly.

c) Output Dimension:

The arguments in favour of a speed limit of 30km/h point to the third criterion for good democratic governance: output legitimacy. Accordingly, political decisions not only require responsiveness and procedural adherence with standards that ensure deliberation and transparency. They also need to improve the general welfare of the population.

[1] It is also noteworthy that voters did not “punish” councillors in favour of the speed limit in the municipal election.

In other words: policy outcomes need to address existing problems, minimize negative externalities (e.g for people living in other jurisdictions or future generations) and contribute effectively to the provision of equitable public goods.

The input and output dimension of democratic governance can, under certain circumstances, create tensions. Even if a majority of the population rejects a certain policy measure (for example through a referendum), decision makers still have an obligation to take into account its general implications. Notably, does a decision – or non-decision, for that matter – generate negative effects for future generations or children? Can it be implemented?

It is true that the introduction of 30km/h may encounter difficulties in the implementation process. No one seriously claims that simply replacing speed limit signs would result in compliant behaviour. However, we also know that engineering, enforcement and education can nudge drivers to slow down.

Overall, from an output perspective, the speed limit clearly is an important step towards a more equitable public infrastructure both, if compared to the status quo and the alternative proposal of 40km/h. The decision is also in line with similar initiatives in municipalities across the globe, the United Nations' 2020 resolution "Improving global road safety", the UN and WHO Global Plan for the Decade of Action (2021) and the Stockholm Declaration adopted at the Third Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety: Achieving Global Goals 2030 (2020).

To summarize: The Council decision was not illegitimate, on the contrary. It adhered to all three benchmarks of democratic decision-making.

This illustrative example, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that nothing is wrong with our democracy. Representation deficits are real, and many residents feel alienated for different reasons. The distinction above offers a starting point to identify shortcomings and deficits in the functioning of mechanisms that facilitate input-, throughput- and output-legitimacy.

In the following sections, I will focus on the input-dimension to discuss some of the deeper reasons behind the disengagement of residents we have been observing in the Region of Waterloo.

Input deficits: Why do residents refrain from participating and voting?

According to most (not all) normative theories of democracy, political participation is not just a purely instrumental activity through which rational individuals seek to promote their preferences by choosing among competing programs, similar to consumers on the market (or the often evoked "taxpayer", for that matter).

Ideally, political participation should be conceived as a (more or less) ongoing, expressive and emancipatory activity through which citizens “identify with the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own instead of feeling alienated from them” (Lafont 2020: 4). This process entails learning and mutual justification, and rests on the premise that citizens are wiling and able to change their preferences through deliberation (Barber 1984; Elster 1998; Habermas 1992; Lafont 2020).

In liberal democracies, however, only a small proportion of citizens actively engages in politics beyond voting. Roughly, these “gladiators” usually comprise between 5 and 10 percent of the population. The large share (about 60 percent) of “spectators” usually votes (at least at the national level), but is not interested in participating actively otherwise. Finally, a significant share (about 30 percent) of “apathetics” are not engaged at all (Milbrath and Goel 1977).

The act of voting is one key element of democratic participation. It should be the endpoint of a deliberative exchange, rather than just a punctuated, periodical activity. We know that the cultural norm of the “duty to vote” has lost importance since about the 1980s. However, political engagement often displays a cyclical pattern: Periods of heightened political engagement are often followed by periods during which citizens revert to pursue primarily private goals (Hirschman 1982). Despite an overall decline, the voter turnout still fluctuates considerably. For example, the turnout for the 2015 Canadian federal election was almost 10 points higher (68.3 %) than in 2008 (58.8 %).

There are different factors at work, some structural, some circumstantial, that require closer analysis. Identifying the factors that prevent residents from participating more actively in local politics is a prerequisite for sounding out directions for reform. Although it is important to acknowledge constraints and the fact that the potential for mobilizing “spectators” or even “apathetics” has limitations (most of them certainly won’t turn into “gladiators”), we should be ambitious nevertheless. Targeting systemic barriers should enjoy priority.

The literature generally agrees that three factors are key to explain dis-engagement and non-participation (e.g. Brady et al. 1995; Schäfer and Zürn 2021):

a) citizens don’t want to participate;

b) citizens can’t participate and

c) no one asks citizens to participate.

Ad a) Citizens don’t want to participate because they have no interest in politics and/or they perceive politics as opaque, too complex and inaccessible. While it is difficult to mobilize “apathetics”, that means residents who are notoriously not interested in politics, there should be potential to address the second barrier to participation.

Important factors that add complexity in the Waterloo Region and may hamper political participation in general, and discourage voting in particular are:

- **Synchronous elections for multiple jurisdictions and bodies** (municipal, regional and school board). Although simultaneous elections for a maximum of two governmental tiers may be beneficial (e.g. higher provincial turnout because it is on the same day like a federal election), the combination of elections for executives and councillors of two levels, in addition to the election of school board trustees in 2022 can be overwhelming.
- Key policy domains (e.g. housing, climate, traffic) are not only **shared jurisdictions** between the regional and municipal level, but also include the provincial and federal level. In a similar vein, the responsibilities of the WRDSB are limited through the Ministry of Education's jurisdiction. Not many residents, however, seem to be aware of these jurisdictional boundaries.
- **Lack of party politics**: party politics reduce complexity and make it easier (and less time consuming) for voters to identify candidates that align with their preferences. They also help to mobilize. In Quebec and British Columbia, where party politics play a larger role in local politics, the voter turnout tends to be higher. However, parties are only one factor that can explain differences in turnout (Lucas and McGregor 2021). It is noteworthy that it also trended downwards in most recent local elections in both provinces.

Ad b): Citizens can't participate because they lack the resources required for meaningful participation. Research has shown for decades that this is, arguably, the most important factor.

The so-called standard model of political participation has been confirmed many times in very different contexts: **Socio-economic status is crucial for explaining political engagement.** Participation correlates clearly with income, education and occupation. Put differently, many residents can't participate because they lack the resources that come with socioeconomic status, that is: **time, money and civic skills** (Brady et al. 1995). Meaningful participation requires time – to get informed, to partake in engagement opportunities and, eventually, to run for an office. It requires money to make contributions, to fund a campaign or to subscribe a quality newspaper or two. And it requires civic skills to understand politics, policy issues, and to articulate preferences.

In other words, social inequality is an important obstacle to political participation. Representation gaps between elected representatives and the electorate have persisted. In a recently published meta-study on the economic background of politicians the authors conclude: "To our knowledge, every study ever published in this literature—every country, every time period, every institutional context, every measure of economic status—has uncovered the same basic descriptive inequality: Politicians everywhere are significantly better off than the people they govern." (Carnes and Lupu 2023: 11.4). Likewise, a longitudinal analysis of Canadian

elections between 1984 and 2015 confirms (with some nuances) the significance of social inequality for explaining declining voter turnout (Polacko 2020).

It is reasonable to expect that these trends have been replicated in the Region of Waterloo. The more pronounced social inequalities and inequities – and we see many indicators pointing in this direction in the Waterloo Region – the more challenging it is to engage especially those who lack adequate resources, but whose participation would be all the more important.

Ad c) Somewhat related, citizens don't participate because no one encourages them. Unlike b) this factor captures not resources per se, but the **recruitment mechanisms** that bring citizens into politics. On the provincial and federal level, party politics is the main mechanism, and it is a highly selective one. **In this respect, the absence of political parties on the local and regional level in Ontario is an advantage.** We have seen excellent examples for (successful and unsuccessful) campaigns in the Waterloo Region by fantastic candidates that may not have run within a system dominated by party politics. Yet, the absence of party politics doesn't mean that candidates work within a vacuum. Without a solid network and – again – resources (time, money and civic skills) most residents won't be able to consider engaging more actively beyond voting.

3. What can we do? Parameters for reform

In this final section, I identify two elements that could provide some guidance for reforms.

a) In order to address disengagement, alienation and polarization, we need to mobilize education: It may sound rather trivial, but the development of civic skills and knowledge is a necessary condition for a functioning democracy. This prerequisite can't be underestimated, and such skills need to be cultivated over time at all levels – in particular in times like these.

Fragmented social media echo chambers are a serious threat, undermining and eroding an informed, respectful public discourse based on mutual justification, and the ability to reconsider and change preferences through deliberation. Addressing this challenge through education will require a lot of creativity and perseverance.

One particular way to build civic skills and competencies is to offer more opportunities for **experiential learning** through meaningful participation.

Offering online engage opportunities (e.g EngageWR) alone is not sufficient. They lack the element of deliberation, and they usually serve the interests of the "gladiators", rather than extending the channels for broader participation – in particular for marginalized and dis-engaged residents.

I believe political scientists can and should take on a more active role here. After World War II, political science in Germany was reinstated with a mandate to educate and promote democratic norms and skills ("Demokratiewissenschaft"), with considerable success. Political scientists and graduate students from Simon Fraser University also played a significant role in British Columbia's Citizen Assembly "Making Every Vote Count" in 2004.

We should consider reinvigorating such a responsibility, and we already see more appreciation and acknowledgment of the benefits of community-based research that includes academics and non-academic stakeholders. Such a community-based project could, for example, test and develop participative opportunities that foster civic skills and democratic literacy on the local level.

Research on experiments with citizen assemblies or "minipublics" demonstrates that the opportunity to interact with other residents, elected representative and staff profoundly alters the experience for all participants and the quality of debates (e.g. Lafont 2020). Advisory committees on the municipal and regional level are a good starting point, but we need to envision such opportunities much more broadly.

b) Addressing equity issues. This is another huge challenge that will require a lot of effort. Again – resources are the main barrier to participation. American political scientist Elmer Schattschneider's verdict (1960) still holds: "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."

Although the most recent election indicates some notable changes and increasing diversity, the socio-economic representation gap is still profound. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that growing socio-economic inequalities will further perpetuate this problem. How can we empower residents who lack resources such as time and money, and who are vulnerable and marginalized? Only if we are able to mitigate such barriers for participation.

Our commitment to multi-culturalism conceals that our policies have been ineffective to address, in particular, **racial inequalities**. As Keith Banting and Debra Thompson (2021) recently demonstrated in a powerful article, this is a historical legacy. Key social programs underpinning the Canadian welfare state were established between the 1940s and 1980s, when the Canadian population was overwhelmingly of European descent. The authors show that these programs were never substantially adjusted in light of shifting immigration patterns: They are still "…fundamentally premised on the principles of universalism, which tend to render race and racism as either incidental or antithetical to the operation of Canadian liberalism." As a consequence, racial inequalities have persisted.

While regional policies are limited in terms of their capacity to tackle this problem, we need to be mindful of its implications for participation. Empirical evidence from local elections shows that racialized voters remain absent as long as white incumbents and candidates

dominate the political landscape (Tolley and Rayment 2021: 160). At a minimum, we need to foster more resolutely relationships with key stakeholder associations that represent racialized communities, and to build on most recent achievements to consolidate these efforts.

In this regard, we must also put particular emphasis on **Indigenous representation** and **self-government** within the Region. Canada is a multi-national democracy, and different levels of government have committed themselves to establishing a nation-to-nation relationship, to decolonialization and reconciliation. If we are serious about decolonialization, we need to acknowledge the notion of **shared sovereignty,** despite all uncertainty what this exactly means in practice. Accordingly, we need to have a more honest dialogue with our Indigenous communities that is based on the acknowledgment that **Indigenous peoples have a special constitutional relationship** – similar to Québec within the Canadian federation – **with the majority population in our Region.**

If we want to establish (the so far non-existent) representation of Indigenous community members *within* our institutions of local democracy, we must provide them with the resources they need to establish some form of self-government in the first place. Therefore I believe that the proposed Indigenous Community Hub (former Charles Street terminal) is one important step in this direction.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize t**hat reform options need to make sure that**

- they are **meaningful and not primarily symbolic**, which would only widen the gap between rhetoric and reality, and, therefore, lead to further alienation and disengagement;
- they **target social inequality and inequity** as the key barriers to participation;
- they seek to **reduce the representation gaps** between residents and representatives and
- they **do not primarily satisfy the needs of those who are already privileged enough to participate as "gladiators"**, i.e. the well-informed, educated and affluent voters.

I am glad that Councillor Deutschmann takes the low voter turnout seriously, and initiated the Townhall series. It is crucial to create a space for debate through meaningful community engagement, instead of ignoring the problem and doing business as usual.

Again, we should be ambitious, while managing our expectations. As the late Benjamin Barber put it so aptly in his programmatic 1984 book *Strong Democracy*:

A strong democracy "*envisions politics not as a way of life but as a way of living – as, namely, the way that human beings with variable but malleable natures and with competing but overlapping interests can contrive to live together communally not only to their mutual advantage but also to the advantage of their mutuality*" (Barber 1984: 118).

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