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De levende werkzaamheid. Politieke betrokkenheid van burgers bij het lokaal bestuur

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SUMMARY

This thesis focuses on the involvement of citizens in local politics. The supposition that special political involvement exists at the local level is the starting point in this. This supposition is based on two approaches derived from different theories which are indicated as the 'area bound' and the 'articulated' approaches.

The area bound approach is directly linked to ideas and opinions which were common among liberals such as Thorbecke in the mid-19th century. Thorbecke introduced changes to the constitution which back then had a highly conservative character. 'His' local government act followed shortly thereafter. This approach is based on the fact that municipalities form the local government reflection of socially and territorially linked communities. The members of this community share a common bond, on the basis of which they are pre-eminently involved in local government. According to this approach, local government arises from the community and continues to be part of that community. The representatives of the community's inhabitants manage this local government themselves. The liberal Thorbecke strived for a democratic, albeit restricted form of local government. Prosperous citizens were allowed to be involved in 'their' government, or according to Thorbecke, were 'expected' to be involved in it.

According to this line of thought, the municipal management, or town council, forms the political government concretisation of the communities involved. Communities existed long before municipalities. The supposed overlap of community and municipality ensures the special involvement of citizens in their community's government, the municipality.

Question marks and comments are regularly posed in this approach to the relationship between citizens and their municipality. Van Poelje (VNG, 1954), Brasz (1960), Alberts (1966), Van Reijen (1979) and many other specialists in Dutch political science doubt whether there is such a self-evident involvement of citizens in the community's local government. Van Poelje is of the opinion that citizens are incapable of such an attitude themselves and that local government must stimulate this involvement. Brasz points out that social changes have changed the classical community structure and with that have damaged the supposed self-evident involvement in local politics.

Alberts and Van Reijen emphasise that the local government organises certain interests through its very existence. Citizens familiarise themselves with these interests and through this also with the organiser of these interests: the municipality. The municipality forms the articulation of local matters. This line of thought has therefore been called the articulated approach in this thesis.

Citizens are directly involved in matters which take place in the local environment. This is why they are stimulated to gain insight in local political matters and their social and political behaviour will be determined by and focus on the municipality, more than with national or international politics. Citizens develop a high level of involvement in the municipality's state of affairs and eventually develop a strong involvement in the municipality's government as a result of interaction with others within the municipality also confronted with interests arising in it.

Whichever approach is used, both cases suppose that special involvement in local government occurs particularly at a local level. Both approaches assume the same result. They only differ in distinguishing the causes of that special involvement.

Neither approach is fully clear as to what is so 'special' about the involvement. It is obvious that this concerns the level of involvement, which differs from the level of involvement in other layers of government. However, this is not the only thing. It is supposed that involvement is also realised in a different and special way, than when an analysis would be made of other levels of government linked with political involvement.

Although different aspects of how local government functions have regularly been examined, there has been no systematic test before as to whether citizens really feel, to a large extent, involved in their municipality's government. Determining the special involvement in this thesis is not only limited to the level of involvement. The focus also lies on any special patterns and links with various characteristics of the citizens or the municipality in which they live.

In order to determine whether special involvement exists, it has been stated that involvement in local politics must firstly be distinguished from involvement in national politics. There is also a second frame of reference. If the special character of citizens' involvement is influenced by factors which arise from the local context, this character will not be the same in every municipality. The relevant factors and circumstances will differ per municipality. This means they will have a different influence on both extent and nature of involvement in local administration. A second possibility to identify a special character of political involvement in local politics is to analyse differences in the patterns of political involvement in different municipalities, or otherwise in types of municipalities. These differences once again

relate to both the level of involvement and the patterns and their various characteristics of municipalities or citizens.

The survey focuses on three aspects of political involvement: political attitudes, political knowledge and political behaviour of citizens. Such a broad approach, derived from the work of Sigel and Hoskin (1981), has been chosen because involvement is not only expressed by political activity. A lack of visible political activity does not exclude interest in, confidence in and knowledge of politics. An involved person will be interested in the state of affairs within the political community, gain insight in it, and if there is a reason for this, focus his or her attention on it.

There are various data files available, each of which offer possibilities to test aspects of the (supposed) special character of local political involvement. These sources distinguish themselves both regarding time of survey and the municipalities' nature in which surveys have taken place. Nevertheless a strong common picture comes up in the findings. Especially in view of the differences between the files the highly similar results can be viewed as reinforcing each other.

There are four points of interest in testing the different suppositions which lie in both approaches. The first point concerns the difference in the extent of involvement in local and national politics. According to the area bound and articulated approaches the involvement in local politics will be greater than involvement in national politics. All usable files show differences in the amount of involvement in local politics and national politics. Chapter 6 reports on this.

However, it appears that involvement in local politics in many cases is more limited than involvement in national politics. It appears that interest in local politics lags systematically behind interest in national politics. Systematic comparison between the local and national levels is hardly possible for other aspects. Information obtained with a limited number of other aspects of involvement does not indicate that involvement in local politics is structurally greater than in national politics either. The findings point to the contrary.

This is surprising, seeing the certainty with which in both approaches a greater extent of involvement is supposed in local politics. Earlier empirical studies have been carried out into how local democracy works (see Denters and Geurts [et al.], 1998 and Dekker, 1994b) in which interest was paid to involvement in local politics, albeit in a less systematic way. Findings from those studies indicated that involvement in local politics could lag behind involvement in national politics. The findings in this thesis are less remarkable with this in mind. This does not alter the fact that the image of the city council as political government of a flourishing social

community, in which this government is seen as a part of the community or as very 'close' government layer, is current systematically enfeebled. The area bound approach strongly loses its value with this. From the articulated approach it must be determined that the locally bound interests are not that significant that citizens show more involvement in local than in national politics. In other words the results cannot be considered a basis for this approach either.

As second point of interest in testing suppositions in both approaches, chapter 6 focuses on the question whether patterns and relations between various characteristics of citizens and aspects of involvement possibly differ depending on whether the context is local or national. This is hardly the case. Different patterns only occur with two indicators of involvement in one of the data files used. With regard to the two indicators where different patterns occur, there is only a weak political dimension. This concerns survey questions where respondents were asked if they are interested in local or national news and/or if they read about local or national events. The questions do not refer explicitly to political news or political events. The fact that different patterns and connections only occur with these indicators at the local and national levels is insufficiently convincing to conclude that special political involvement occurs.

The general conclusion is therefore that differences between citizens, in level of education or age for example, have an equally strong effect on involvement in national politics as in local politics. The fact that local politics can be considered to be 'closer' does not lower the threshold for those groups of citizens who are generally little involved.

The third point of interest concerns differences in the amount of political involvement between municipalities or groups of municipalities (chapter 7). This occurs incidentally. No differences have been encountered in the amount of political activity between respondents from specific municipalities or groups of municipalities. A number of differences do occur for other aspects of involvement. In general, respondents in smaller municipalities show a greater interest in local politics, are sooner satisfied with the government and have more confidence in its responsiveness. However the connections are not very strong and the differences are not that large. They are certainly not always the same either: there is often a so-called extreme category (the largest or smallest municipality or size class), which distinguishes itself from the rest.

The fourth and last point of interest is the question whether there are other patterns between respondents' characteristics on the one hand and indicators for involvement on the other, in the various municipalities or municipality size classes. The findings in chapter 7 indicate that this in general is not the case.

Summary

The results in chapter 6 and 7 are particularly disappointing for the area bound approach. Characteristics of individuals such as period of living in a municipality or house ownership hardly appear to be relevant for political involvement. Within this context these characteristics are considered to be an indication for strong solidarity with the social community. On the basis of this assumption this should also have consequences for involvement in local politics. This is not the case.

The finding, in chapter 7, that there are large groups of people who have close ties with the local community and also act on this politically is more in line with this approach – people who are involved in their municipality, generally are also more involved in the municipality's government. In a certain sense this is not that surprising. If the municipality is viewed as being important this will probably also apply to the municipality's government. Though the effect of this relationship is not that strong that citizens who feel close with their municipality are more closely involved in local than in national politics.

Assumptions and suppositions which are included in the articulated approach are hardly or not confirmed by the findings. Although for example there is a positive relationship between the amount of activity in local social associations and organisations and the amount of involvement in local politics, this does not mean that involvement in local politics is greater than in national politics. It also appears that people who attach more significance to the state of political affairs in the municipality are generally more closely involved in local government. This does not result in an extraordinary amount of involvement however. Similar argumentation applies to other characteristics which are considered important within this articulated approach, such as integration in the local community or viewing the local government as a relevant community of interests.

The following conclusions can be drawn:

- Despite common and widespread assumptions on the relationship between citizens and their local government, citizens do not appear to have a special strong amount of involvement in their local government. Different aspects of political involvement, political interest in particular, where local politics is concerned regularly occur on a lower level than when national politics is concerned.
- Patterns and relationships between various characteristics of respondents on the one hand and aspects of involvement on the other hand in local context are generally equal to patterns and relations in the national local context.
- Patterns and relationships between various characteristics of respondents on the one hand and aspects of involvement on the other hand are similar in different municipalities or groups of municipalities.
- People who feel socially involved in their municipality generally appear to be

Summary

more closely involved in their municipality's government. This does not mean that these peoples' involvement in local politics is more than their involvement in national politics.

- Interaction with others in local associations and organisations has a positive effect on the amount of involvement in the municipality's government, but once again not in that measure that involvement in local politics is greater than involvement in national politics.
- People who feel that the local government is a relevant community of interests show more involvement in local government than those who do not.