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Exploring Local Democracy Profiles: Perceptions of Participatory Practices and Roles among Lithuanian Municipal Councilors

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Abstract:

Local democracy has been widely discussed as a crucial element for developing the normative background of local institutions, where political skills and capacities are advanced. Nevertheless, there is less knowledge of the mechanisms connecting local democratic institutions with citizens' voices and community engagement practices. Local politicians are considered mediators between ordinary citizens and local political processes. Following the discussion on the distinction between representative and participatory elements of local democracy, we empirically examined the relationship between local democracy notions of councilors and their roles and functions as local political representatives. Our empirical results suggest that the more councilors employ participatory democracy elements, the higher their perception of community engagement and facilitator roles for local politicians. On the contrary, the policy-making roles of councilors are less supportive of the notion of participatory democracy. The theoretical and empirical results also contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between local political powers and local autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Without a doubt, the background of local representative democracy is the municipal council and elected councilors who have legitimate power for local decision-making. Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated that council members do not unambiguously endorse a version of democratic engagement consistent with the representative democracy concept, highlighting the need for electoral legitimacy and the ability of elected representative bodies to make local decisions (Egner et al., 2013). Instead, mayors and council members adhere to somewhat complex interpretations of democracy, consistent with the distinction between a broader understanding of participatory democracy defined by Barber (1984). In his classical study on the roots of liberal democracy, Benjamin R. Barber argues that citizen empowerment, participatory practices, proximate self-legislation, and communication processes should comprise the framework of a strong democracy (Barber, 1984). By reviewing many years of research on participatory democracy scale and quality, strategies and opportunities (Geissel, 2016), policy-making processes, and local agenda-setting (Heinelt & Egner, 2022), trust deficit (Carr-West, 2018), the complexity and dynamics of local democracy notion can be argued. The research in this field also deals with the impact of the institutional and normative context, such as the participatory democracy elements and their normative discourse (Raytcheva, 2023), self-governance challenges in enabling higher citizen involvement in local governance, public service design, and quality of the non-governmental sector (Carr-West, 2018; Hertting & Klijn, 2017), population change, and impact of social policies for participatory practices (Eroğlu et al., 2023). The other significant challenges concern integrating participatory practices with the existing self-governance system and bureaucratic boundaries (Bandeira & Ferraro, 2016). Role perception of local political actors is one of the key concepts in analyzing political leadership, policy-making, and local governance quality, including trust, efficiency, and responsiveness (Jon, Cole, 1999; Egner et al., 2013; Heinelt et al., 2017). The other external actors (business and civic sectors) who are beyond the elected political representatives also impact local decision-making (Swianiewicz, 2024).

Moreover, the discussion on local democracy notions reflects the trend that is identified as the shift from traditional local government structures to new forms of local governance (Denters & Rose, 2005). In a representative democratic system, councilors are responsible for political functions such as allocating resources, balancing the needs of interests, and debating residents' quality of life in their municipalities. At the same time, the changing role of councilors is also linked to the broader context of municipal reforms, the implementation of new public management reforms, and the growing relevance of participatory democracy (Smith, 2005). Councilors who perceive their roles

as more community-engaged would be more facilitative of citizen participation instruments. In contrast, those aligned with representative democracy may view their role as more decision-making and policy-focused.

Focusing on the theoretical distinction between representative and participatory democracy and its constituents on the local level, the paper discusses the following issues: What are the different versions of local democracy found among municipal council members in Lithuanian municipalities? How do the different conceptions of local democracy correlate with councilors' roles and functions perceptions? It also examines how local politicians consider political representation, how they interpret the notion of local democracy, and citizen empowerment strategies, looking at the context of recent self-government and local democracy initiatives in Lithuania. Our primary concern is relatively simple: Is there a relationship between municipal councilors' notion of democracy (representative or participatory) and their self-perceived roles as a part of councilors' responsibilities and functions?

Why is the Lithuanian case considered a relevant example for studying local councilors' notions of democracy? We can distinguish two main reasons for the specificity of the case. First, the launch of direct mayor elections in 2015 was followed by a higher turnout in the following years of local elections (e.g., in 2011, the total turnout was 44,8%; in 2015 - 47,17%; 2019 - 47,90%, and in 2023 - 46,86%, accordingly) (Central Electoral Commission, 2024). Second, in 2023, the new legal framework in the electoral system changed the political power balance between the mayor and local councilors. The mayor has become the chief executive and has acquired much more political power by heading the municipal administration. The mayor cannot vote at council meetings, but he/she has a veto right. Third, the new amendments to the law have given more rights to the opposition parties in the municipal councils and independent election committees, as their statute becomes more similar to that of political parties. Thus, the role of the council is changing, and its influence in the processes of shaping the political agenda is becoming even more dynamic (Lazauskienė & Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2022). From a more general approach, Lithuania also serves as a good case study of the post-communist transition to local-level democratization and decentralization, including different local participatory practices (such as participatory budgeting and discussions around the direct election of elders in municipalities), decision-making procedures, and community engagement. The country faces institutional and policy-making challenges in local governance similar to those of other countries in the CEE region. The country's ability to navigate between centralized governance and the need for more decentralized local democracy is a case of political compromise. The findings from the Lithuanian councilors' approach to local democracy can also be generalized to other CEE countries.

The Lithuanian case was used to set up the hypothesis using empirical data from the nationwide survey of local councilors. Recent research on Lithuanian self-governance, the quality of local democracy, and local political leadership have demonstrated relatively low local democratic engagement in decision-making and local

agenda-setting (Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2021; Lazauskiene & Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2018). Empirical data derive from the research project “Changing role of local councilor in self-governance: leadership, institutions and communities” (No. S-MIP-23-17), which aims to analyse the phenomenon of local political dynamics and local political leadership and examine how normative, institutional, and democratic leadership is changing in Lithuanian municipalities. Referring to the survey data on the local councilors implemented in February-March 2024 (n= 638), we make assumptions about the specific notion of local democracy among councilors in Lithuanian municipal councils, which reveals the institutional and normative ambiguity of democratic values, citizen expectations, social norms, and trust challenge. It also uncovers the roles and functions of the council members as active local policymakers, their approach to democracy and citizen participation, and the representation of political interests in horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms.

Survey data were used to test the hypothesis on the direct and indirect relationships between the notion of democracy, councilors’ role perception, and their support of citizen engagement practices as part of their daily functions. First, theoretical discussions on local democracy notions, citizen empowerment, and municipal governance quality were introduced following the recent political changes and initiatives to foster local democracy practices in Lithuania. The methodological section introduces the analytical framework that identifies exogenous and endogenous variables and the expected pathways between them using the SEM (structural equation modelling) approach. Finally, we discuss the empirical results of the statistical model and finalize the paper with the conclusions.

2. Theoretical discussion on local democracy and political representatives

The paper relies on the normative tradition of representative and participatory approaches to local democracy (Sharpe, 1970; Stoker, 1996; Held, 1995; Pratchett, 2004; Stoker, 2004), which emphasizes the changing systems of political power and highlights different strategies for political consensus and the reconciliation of political interests. Research on local democracy argues that ‘representative devolution’ (Judge, 1999) is one of the key conditions of representative democracy, supporting a coherent decision-making process between the electorate and local, regional, and national tiers. In a representative democratic system, councilors are responsible for political functions such as allocating resources, balancing the needs of competing interests, and debating the public good and the quality of life of residents in their areas.

Theoretical insights into how democratic governance can be enhanced through participatory mechanisms and citizen empowerment develop a broader understanding of the quality of local democracy (Warren, 2001; Fung, 2004). Different strategies and

approaches to strengthen local participation at different governance levels have been thoroughly analysed (McLaverty, 2017; Klijn, 2008). The systematic overview of academic literature about citizen participation has demonstrated the need to shift from a service-oriented to a citizen-oriented participatory approach (Ianniello et al., 2019). According to the authors, context-sensitive participatory design, local innovations, supporting networks, and collaborative capacities facilitate civic inclusion through different instruments, strategies, and institutional settings (Ianniello et al., 2019)

Nevertheless, the challenges and opportunities for local democracy concerning citizen participation strategies are important to uncover. The key elements of citizen participation strategies in local democracy include the impact of organizational resources and managerial capacities (Alonso & Barbeito, 2016), the level of institutionalization and institutional boundaries limiting the inclusions of citizens (Kurkela et al., 2023), citizen participation efforts understood as a form of interactive governance in terms of organizational and managerial practices (Jäntti et al., 2023). The insufficiency of resources, weakness of cross-sectoral and multilevel coordination instruments, and a predominance of the interests of stronger social groups over collective interests are challenges in effectively implementing citizen participation (Ruano & Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2022).

In examining the question of participatory democracy advantages on a local level, the limitations, such as the representation of wider social groups, inclusiveness, management, and use of resources, the scale of participatory practices, and elitism, should also be considered (Fischer, 2000; Fung, 2004). The institutional imbalance between participatory and representative democracy practices underlines the question of political representation and elected politicians' legitimacy (Barber, 1984). Participatory practices increase the involvement of diverse social groups in decision-making but may also lead to the limitations of expertise, information resources, and skills to effectively manage participatory processes (Fischer, 2000). These risks suggest the importance of the principle of complementary institutions and mechanisms that ensure effective local participation.

Based on the theoretical assumptions of local representative democracy, the leadership developed by councilors as an empirical object of research is an essential element of local representative democracy, linking ordinary citizens with local decision-makers (Haus & Sweeting, 2006; Sweeting & Copus, 2012). Municipal authorities and local political representatives are critical in forming the local democracy profiles. As a result of this, the municipal councils work as an intermediate between political decisions and local communities. Previous research has demonstrated that municipalities play a crucial role in enhancing citizen participation, addressing societal and instrumental factors that affect citizens' abilities to participate at the local level (Jäntti et al., 2023; Haesevoets et al., 2023). Decision-making often occurs beyond the municipal council, emphasizing the significance of participatory democracy and different notions of democracy among civic, business, and political actors involved in local processes (Heinelt & Egner, 2022).

At the same time, the changing role of councilors is also linked to the broader context of municipal reforms, the implementation of new public management initiatives, and the relevance of participatory democracy (Smith, 2005). Councillors' attitudes towards local democracy (Heinelt, 2013; Sweeting & Copus, 2013), their leadership styles, and their strategies for reconciling interests (Getimis & Hlepas, 2013) are also included as critical determinants in explaining the democratic legitimacy processes. Theoretical considerations for exploring the connections between different notions of democracy, citizens' empowerment, and governance quality contribute to local democracy quality. This idea also emphasises that self-governance structures that favor active citizen participation and empowerment can explain higher levels of public satisfaction, trust, and the overall effectiveness of the democratic process at different governance tiers.

In conclusion, the notion of democracy of local actors (political representatives, community actors, and authorities) depends on the governance arrangements in which they are participating and might be distinguished into two conceptually distinguishable models of participatory and representative democracy (Vetter et al., 2017; Heinelt & Egner, 2022). However, it remains unclear how to evaluate the impact of such complementary obstacles as decreasing citizen participation, insufficiency of economic and political resources, and predominance of powerful political coalitions in local councils on local democracy change. Second, the research suggests that institutional settings, institutional power, and hierarchies are essential preconditions to balancing local policy decisions and the efficiency of citizen engagement strategies. Therefore, local councilors mediate between institutional political structures and diverse interest groups by transgressing the boundaries of conflicts and tensions. Our question is whether the normative framework is necessary to assess the effectiveness and use of local democracy practices and how political representatives are embedded into these processes. The following sections discuss and explain the framework between councilors' local democracy notion and their attitudes towards civic participatory functions.

3. Model and hypothesis

In this paper, we focus on the assumption that there is an explanatory framework between councilors' local democracy notion and their attitudes towards participatory democracy roles and functions. We suggest that local politicians who support the participatory democracy notion may perceive their roles as more community-oriented, integrative, and linking different interests. In contrast, councilors who support representative democracy aspects may view their role as more politically agenda-oriented and as a mediator of conflicts between diverse interest groups.

We consider a few theoretical arguments to support our assumption of the

relationship between local democracy perception and how local councilors perceive their roles as mediators and facilitators. First, we follow the normative political science tradition of local democracy as a multi-dimensional concept that represents the diffusion of power, political accessibility, and engagement, and it is represented in a specific institutional setting – local government (Pratchett, 2004). The scope and reach of participatory practices and their effectiveness become delicate when considering the variety of political factions and interests and the diversity of self-governance systems. As for the notion of local democracy, Barber's classical work on participatory democracy argues for a governance model that emphasizes citizens' active and continuous participation in decision-making processes. This reference is critical for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of participatory democracy concepts and their contrast to representative democracy (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989; Pateman, 1970). Research has been done to examine how participatory democracy concepts may influence council members' perceptions of local democracy as an expression of their beliefs and subjective norms, including also other social-demographic characteristics such as gender or age (Heinelt, 2013). Fung's exploration of participatory governance models in various urban settings offers insights into how participatory democracy can be operationalized in decision-making practice. This notion is particularly relevant for a better understanding the councilors' perceptions of their roles, which impact facilitating or hindering citizen participation (Fung, 2004). In practice, both participatory and representative democracy notions could complement each other. Some steps of local policy processes, such as deliberations, public discussions, or agenda setting, might include both aspects of democracy, with the significant role of elected politicians. They act as intermediaries in decision-making for the public interest (Heinelt, 2013, p. 86).

Second, the institutional structures and governance mechanisms, mainly horizontal and vertical coordination relations, define the range of councilors' roles regarding community participatory initiatives. Vertical governance relations define the scope and range of councilors' functional responsibilities embedded in the national legislation system on self-governance. Horizontal power relations between local politicians, mayors, local administration officers, communities, and other local stakeholders are also defined by the specificity of the self-governance system, including the local autonomy level. The typology of Mouritzen and Svava (2002) could be a valuable tool for understanding institutionally determined relations between local political actors (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). However, it needs to explain the relationship aspect of policy-making mechanisms. The embeddedness of participation in the local decision-making process is one of the most important roles associated with local politicians (Lowndes et al., 2001). However, our assumption emphasizes the importance of councilors' attitudes towards many participation mechanisms beyond institutional constraints, such as electoral systems, party affiliations, or local bureaucracies (Copus, 2004). Participatory democracy practices may change the image of elite decision-makers to a more flexible and adaptive role as local community representatives and democracy innovation facilitators. Different tasks and roles of councilors might change because of

long-term democratic legitimacy (Vabo & Aars, 2012). Traditional representative 'input-based democracy' may give way to 'output-based democracy,' where the emphasis is less on the representative roles of the councilors and more on their roles in delivering the tangible outcomes that citizens expect (Haus & Heinelt, 2004).

Thus, we hypothesize that the extent to which councilors perceive their participatory and community facilitator roles will be positively related to a better understanding of participatory democracy. On the contrary, the higher support for representative democracy could lead to a more instrumental and capacity-based notion of councilors' engagement.

4. Method

4.1. The research context: How to make democracy work on a local level in Lithuania?

Many European countries ask if there is enough space for local democracy and what can be done better. Regarding the idea's relevance in the Lithuanian context, it is essential to mention the ongoing changes in the local government and policy-making field. The relevance of the topic is acknowledged both by the changes initiated by the central government (the Electoral Code of the Republic of Lithuania, the Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 1994) as well as by the ongoing discussions in regional politics on the change of the role of the mayor and the members of the council, the representation of the voter's interests, the increased participation of the population and the local communities, the quality of life and the public services. The introduction of direct mayors' elections in 2015 has changed the balance of political power between mayors and municipal councilors. The turnout in local elections has increased since 2015, explained by the positive effect of a directly elected mayor as the primary political representative and mediator (in 2011, the total turnout was 44.8%, 2015 - 47.17%, 2019 - 47.90%, and 2023 - 46.86%, accordingly) (Central Electoral Commission, 2024). Often, residents recognize mayors in public spaces or debates and everyday life, but need to know their councilors, which leads to a complex understanding of their political leadership in the municipality (Lazauskienė & Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2018).

In Lithuania, the elections for municipal councils and mayors occurred on 5 March 2023. The change in the legal framework has led to a change in the institutional set-up of the municipality. The mayor, elected for a maximum of three terms, has become the executive and has acquired much more power (Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of Lithuania, latest amendments approved in July 2023). The municipal administration, headed by the directly elected mayor, drafts council decisions. The mayor will not be able to vote at meetings, but he or she will have a veto right. He or she can give reasons for referring to the municipal council for

reconsideration of the legislation adopted by the council. The mayor, not the council, will choose the director of the administration, his deputies, and vice-mayors. Mayors elected in March 2023 no longer have a mandate as municipal councilors and will, therefore, not count toward the total number of elected councilors. The council's role is thus changing, and its influence in shaping the political agenda of local government is becoming very dynamic. However, it should be noted that the amendments to the law have increased the rights of the opposition in municipal councils by providing the possibility to elect an opposition leader. The council's minority has the right to include its concerns on the agenda of one municipal council meeting every six months.

Another direction of discussion on local democracy concerns the direct election of elders to elders' councils (administrative sub-units of local authorities) as part of the decentralization discourse. There are proposals to change the local government electoral system so that residents would not only have directly elected representatives in the Parliament but would also elect elders and councils of elders. The proponents of direct election of elders extend the idea of a higher level of functional autonomy of elders, but do not support direct elections. The discussion includes arguments for extending higher functional autonomy to the elders. The opposition presents counterarguments about the administrative and bureaucratic burden of organizing direct elders' councils and elders' elections, as well as the questionable necessity of introducing two levels of self-government. There are 543 elders' councils in Lithuania, which would have a higher level of political responsibility regarding functional autonomy and democratic representation (Association of Elders of Lithuanian Municipalities, 2021). In 2019, an attempt was made to implement this proposal with the law's introduction on the election of elders to the Seimas. The project was submitted but was not approved after deliberations. The Committee on Local Self-Government of the Seimas held hearings on the draft mentioned above law with representatives of interested institutions - the Association of Lithuanian Municipal Elders, the Association of Municipalities of Lithuania, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The participants decided not to adopt the law, as the direct election of elders would not solve the fundamental problems of local self-government, and only a comprehensive solution to local self-government issues could bring positive results. It was also proposed to strengthen municipalities' financial autonomy and test pilot projects of direct election of elders in several municipalities. Since 2018, municipalities have started to develop the idea of participatory budgeting, which makes it possible to allocate part of the municipal budget to projects agreed upon by the local community. Local citizens have positively accepted the idea, but only a minority of local authorities have started implementing this new approach.

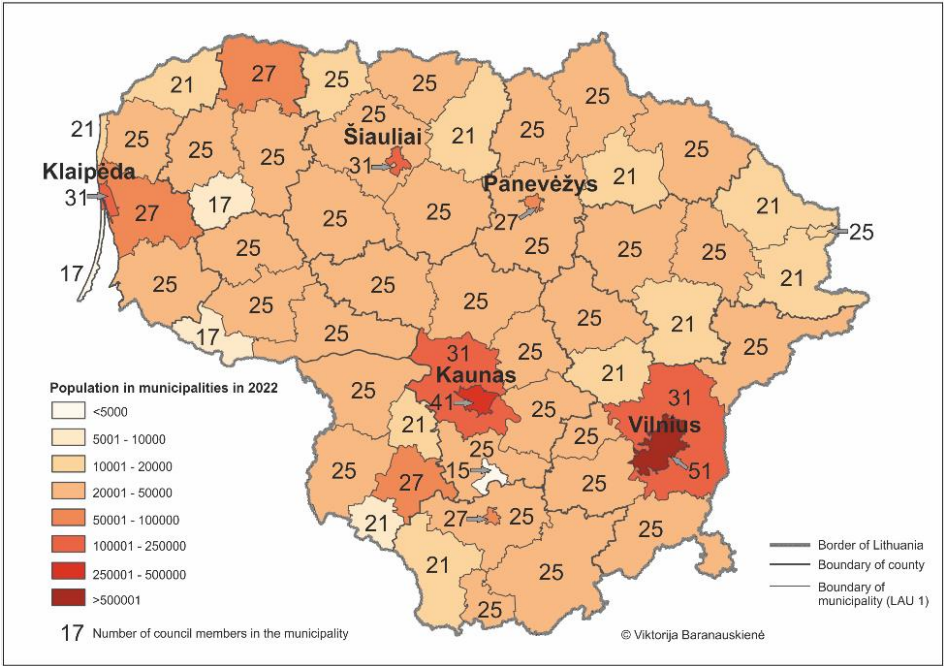
4.2. Survey data and sample

We test our hypothesis using quantitative data from the online "Lithuanian Councilors" survey implemented in February-March 2024. The survey is a part of the comparative European project on the Return of Councilors. Initially, we had a personalized list of

councilors elected for the Councils during the last self-governance elections in May 2023. The personalized email list was collected from the municipal authorities' websites. In total, there are 60 municipalities in Lithuania. Their functions, roles, and responsibilities are regulated according to the Law of Self-governance of Lithuania, initially approved in 1994. According to the recent local election results, there are 1498 councilors in total in Lithuanian municipal councils (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). Accordingly, according to the Law of Self-governance of Lithuania, each municipality has a different number of councilors elected in the area (Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Population in Lithuanian municipalities and number of councilors, 2022



Source: Authors' own, 2024

We have used online survey software Qualtrics to collect data through the survey questionnaire, sending personalized invitations and several reminders. The main idea of the survey was to measure different aspects of local political leadership and councilors' positions in horizontal and vertical governance structures. The questionnaire consisted of several thematic blocks, including the profile of political leadership of councilors, the perception of their roles and responsibilities in local agenda-setting, views on participatory and representative democracy practices, political

affiliation, and professional career aspects. The survey covered such questions as: what the notion of democracy among the actors is in local state-society relations; what role perceptions of municipal councilors are; what their view of the role of local government is; what they understand as core problems or challenges to be addressed; which policy objectives (or policy choices) do they pursue with priority. The survey is part of a comparative survey on “European councilors” implemented in 29 European countries from 2023 to 2024. The joint questionnaire for the current survey was agreed upon and translated by the partners into the languages of their respective countries. The survey started in June 2023 and finished in May 2024. All covered 29 European countries in total. First, each national team selected a sample size that was considered reasonable for the survey, considering an expected response rate of completed questionnaires and practicable implementation.

Six hundred thirty-eight councilors have completed the questionnaire, considering a response rate of 42%. Among them, 48.7% were male, and 28.1% were female. Most of the respondents have higher education (77.3%). Regarding councilors’ experience, two large respondent groups are represented; among them, 33.9% of respondents were elected for the first time, and 27.3% had more than 20 years of political experience. The largest share of the respondents is older than 44 years old and comprises 85.2% of the total sample.

Table 1:
Sample characteristics

Demographic characteristics	N=638	
	N	%
Sex		
Male	311	48.7
Female	179	28.1
Prefer not to say	24	3.8
NA	124	19.4
Education		
Secondary school or equivalent	21	3.3
University, college or equivalent	493	77.3
NA	124	19.4
Experience in councilor position, years in total		
1-4 years	216	33.9
5-1 years	162	25.4
11-20 years	86	13.5
Over 20 years	174	27.3
Age		
Over 1997	10	1.6
1996-1981	85	13.3
1980-1965	211	33.1
1964-1946	193	30.3
Below 1945	139	21.8

Source: Authors’ own, 2024

5. Measures and variables

We use the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach provided by SmartPLS software for the analysis. Structural equation modelling (SEM) is a comprehensive statistical approach that analyses complex relationships among observed and latent variables. The SEM framework was used to test the hypothesis that councilors' notions of democracy predict their approaches to citizen empowerment practices and their participatory roles. The framework includes the components of endogenous and exogenous variables. We have calculated pathways between different combinations of variables and conducted mediation analysis to test our hypothesis. Then, we included the endogenous and exogenous variables to test the construct.

5.1. Exogenous / independent variable

It included items that assessed different views of councilors on local democracy. The question was asked to evaluate aspects such as direct residents' participation in local decisions, different elements of the decision-making process, the importance of local elections in determining local policies, and public discussion on important decisions. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 not important at all to 5 = of the utmost importance. The question measures their beliefs and values regarding different participatory and representative democracy processes on a local level. Three items captured the importance of participatory democratic initiatives. The other two items documented the importance of representative democracy. We have included the items on participatory democracy elements that fit the reliability measurement.

5.2. Endogenous/dependent variable

We included the survey questions on the task's perception of councilors for the endogenous variables. The question was asked to evaluate the importance of the councilor's tasks, indicating their importance on a Likert scale. Measurement indicators included survey items on their perceived responsibilities, such as policy-making, community engagement, and facilitation of citizen participation. The scale ranges from 1 = not important at all to 5 = of the utmost importance. An exploratory factor analysis confirmed the two-factor structure, indicating one factor as a 'Community facilitator' item. This factor refers to the councilor's tasks based on the mediator role between the local community and political interests. The other factor was defined as a "Policy-making" item that measures the importance of the councilor's role as a political representative. The other endogenous variable included the question of the councilors' engagement in strengthening citizen roles. The respondents were asked to evaluate the councilors' roles regarding setting up initiatives to increase and deepen citizen participation in local decision-making. The question included several items to evaluate their importance using the Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree').

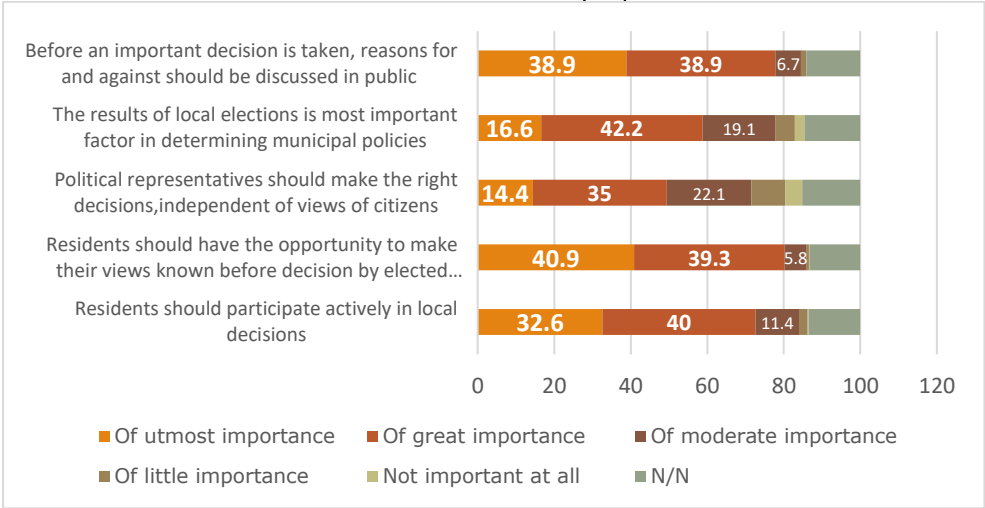
6. Empirical results

We suggested that the extent to which councilors perceive their civic participatory and community facilitator roles towards the community relational aspect will be positively related to a better understanding of participatory democracy. Our data indicates the statistically significant correlation between municipal council members’ perceptions of local democracy (representative vs. participatory approaches) and their self-perceived roles and tasks as municipal council members. We hypothesized that councilors who support characteristics of participatory democracy, such as engagement, networking, responsiveness, and trust, might see their role as more community-oriented, integrative, and linking different interests. In contrast, those supporting representative democracy might see their role as more politically party-oriented and as mediators of conflicts between diverse local groups.

As shown in Figure 2, the participatory and representative democracy aspects are important for all respondents. The aspects such as public discussions before the decision process (77.8% evaluated as utmost importance and of great importance), resident’s with to the deliberations (80.2% evaluated as utmost importance and of great importance), residents’ right to active engagement (72.6% evaluated as utmost importance and of great importance) was highly supported by councilors. The results of local elections are the most critical factor in determining municipal policies, and the independence of political representatives in making the right decisions is less important.

Figure 2:

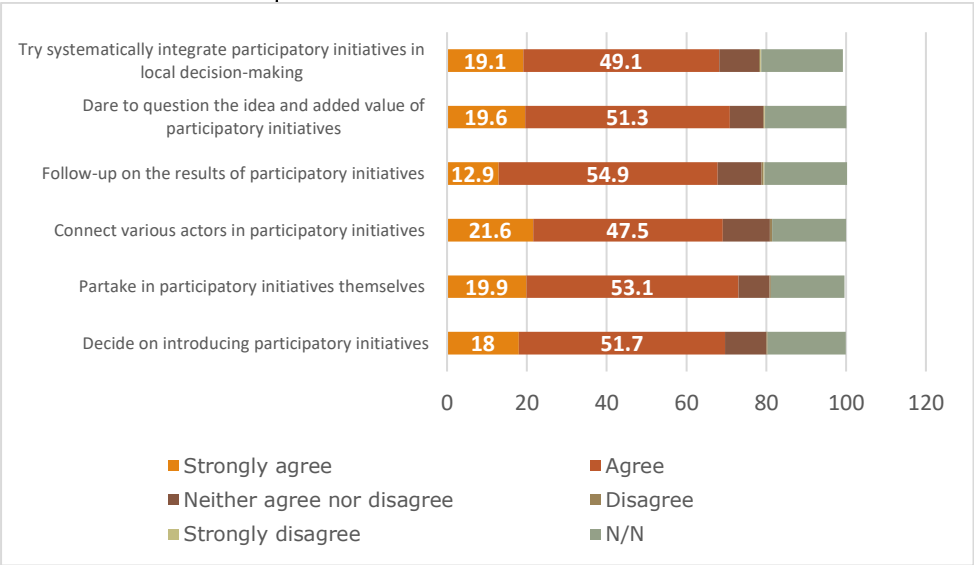
Evaluation of local democracy aspects, %, n= 561



Source: Authors’ own, 2024

At the same time, it is also necessary to consider the importance of different councilors' roles in local policies, varying from planning and integration, participation and engagement, to evaluation, accountability, and networking. Descriptive data indicates the importance of different councilors' roles (Figure 3). Results reveal that the essential roles in municipalities are actions associated with participatory and evaluation processes (for example, the role in systematically trying to integrate participatory initiatives in local decision-making is supported by 68.2% of respondents, and the added value of participatory initiatives is supported by 70.9% of respondents). Nevertheless, in our sample case, the other items are also significant, indicating the multi-layered profile of councilors' roles in municipal settings. It becomes relevant with the complexity of local politics and decision-making processes produced by various horizontal and vertical power relations.

Figure 3:
Importance of different councilors' roles, %, n= 561



Source: Authors' own, 2024

7. Measurement Model

To test our hypothesis, we performed structural equations modelling, which statistically summarized the existing relationships between the determinants of local democracy notion and councilors' roles in participatory initiatives. The model included one

exogenous variable and three endogenous variables. Tables 2 and 3 contain all the model variables' unstandardized parameter estimates and covariation relationships. The structural model shown in the path diagram presented in Figure 4 omits some relations for analytical clarity. The path diagram also provides the relationships indicated with standardized parameter estimates and correlation relationships (statistical loads).

The characteristics of statistical fit indicate a good fit between the model and the observed data. We find the effects among variables are theoretically meaningful. The reliability of our statistical constructs (Cronbach's Alpha) is acceptable, with values ranging from 0.624 (Policy Making Role) to 0.863 (Civic Engagement Role), indicating that your items are well correlated within the constructs. Also, composite reliability (rho_a and rho_c) shows good internal consistency, as indicated by rho_c values all above 0.7, which reaffirms the reliability of your measurement model (Table 2).

Table 2:
Characteristics of the Measurement model
Measurement model

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Civic engagement Role	0.863	0.866	0.898	0.595
Community facilitator	0.719	0.739	0.824	0.542
Participatory Democracy	0.688	0.702	0.828	0.617
Policy Making Role	0.624	0.661	0.793	0.562

Source: Authors' own, 2024

The main model's results assume several statistically significant relationships between endogenous and exogenous variables presented below (Table 3). The table demonstrates the significant pathways between variables. For example, the pathways from **Participatory Democracy** to **Role Perceptions** test the direct influence of council members' conceptions of democracy on their self-perceived roles within the council. It might be assumed that those with a stronger orientation towards participatory democracy perceive their roles as more community-engaged than those with a representative democracy orientation.

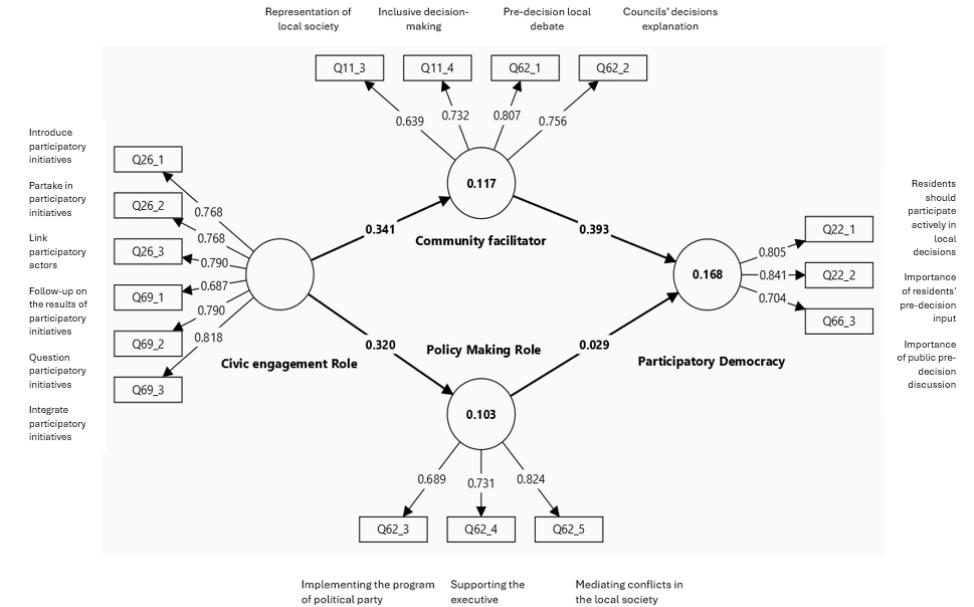
Table 3:
Structural model fit model
Structural model

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Civic engagement Role -> Community facilitator	0.341	0.346	0.041	8.249	0.000*
Civic engagement Role -> Policy Making Role	0.320	0.325	0.041	7.757	0.000*
Community facilitator -> Participatory Democracy	0.393	0.399	0.056	7.021	0.000*
Policy Making role -> Participatory Democracy	0.029	0.032	0.051	0.569	0.570

Note: non-standardized estimates are provided; b if effect indicated by "→", then regression estimate is provided; c if effect indicated by "↔" then, covariation estimate is provided; d *Statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

Source: Authors’ own, 2024

Figure 4:
Structural Model results



Source: Authors’ own, 2024

As shown in Figure 4, the path coefficients indicate the strength and direction of the relationships between model constructs. There is a positive relationship between the community facilitator role and the participatory democracy notion of respondents (path coefficient, β -value = 0.399 (significant at $p < 0.05$)). The concept of participatory democracy enforced by councilors' day-to-day actions entails the direct involvement of citizens in political decisions and processes that affect their local lives. We can suggest that political engagement is facilitated by an individual's availability of resources, political interest, and collaborative networks. Following the previous research, where participatory democracy innovations and practices are encouraged and supported, it might help to link local government closer to citizens (Stoker, 2004; Pratchett, 2004). Councilors might feel more equipped to elaborate on their participatory roles, perceiving their contributions as impactful for the local community and the local government agenda and decision-making.

Our results assume that there is a statistical relationship between a broader understanding of the civic engagement roles of councilors and their community facilitator tasks (path coefficient, β -value = 0.341 (significant at $p < 0.05$)). Local political representatives can significantly enhance civic engagement by acting as community facilitators and serving as binding bridges between citizens, local administration, and central authorities. They can mobilize different economic, political, or decision-making power resources, raise civic awareness, and empower local communities, thereby increasing the general level of participation on a local level. The significant positive path coefficient suggests that as the effectiveness or visibility of community facilitators' tasks increases, so does the level of civic engagement practices and approaches. This aspect could be interpreted through the lens of political capital, where facilitators (local politicians) contribute to building relationships among local stakeholders to connect their political representation role with the local community's needs (Lidström et al., 2016; Alonso & Iglesias, 2020). The councilors' acceptance of different types of deliberative participation forms is more favorable than participatory approaches, such as elections or referendums. Participatory democracy practices are typically perceived as an additional tool to foster civic engagement (Kersting, 2021).

Our analysis also indicates the statistically significant relationship between local politicians' civic engagement roles and implementation of tasks that relate to political interests' representation duties and requests from local society (path coefficient, β -value = 0.320 (significant at $p < 0.05$)). We suggest that local politicians actively engaging in participatory engagement roles may develop stronger connections with the community, thereby gaining a deeper understanding and knowledge of local needs and priorities. This engagement enhances their capability to act effectively as knowledgeable intermediaries between political representation and community interests, favoring diversity and representativeness. This link could enhance the institutionalized participation process tailored to local needs and sensitive to contextual challenges (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Campbell, 2010). Our analysis suggests an interplay between different dimensions of civic engagement roles, such as integrating and encouraging

local initiatives, and community facilitator roles, such as decision-making, inclusiveness, and representation. The relationships among different empirical constructs like the participatory democracy notion, community facilitators, and policy-making roles might also be analyzed as the co-production of local social capital and participatory capacities. In this context, the positive effects of community facilitation actions performed by councilors and their normative participatory democracy understanding might reflect more favorable attitudes and norms towards these engagement forms than instrumental policy-making roles.

Surprisingly, the model does not indicate statistically significant relationships between councilors' policy-making tasks and participatory democracy perception (path coefficient, β -value = 0.029 (significant at $p < 0.05$)). Policy-making tasks refer to the functions related to representing specific interests and requests from local society and ensuring that various interests are represented in agenda-setting and decision-making processes. While councilors' roles in policy-making are crucial, they alone may not be sufficient to enhance perceptions of participatory democracy, possibly due to overriding systemic and hierarchical influences that limit their effectiveness in the Lithuanian context. The weak relationship could indicate that hierarchical arrangements, regulatory systems, and political power may become the main obstacles to connecting the dots between the political representation role and an ideal understanding of local participatory democracy (Yang & Pandey, 2011).

8. Conclusion and discussion

In recent decades, the debates on the notion of local democracy have shifted from the discussion on the policy-making powers to a more normative understanding of civic engagement processes on a local level (Stoker, 2004; Pratchett, 2004). The decreasing distance between citizens and local government, trust issues, accountability and responsiveness, and expressions of local identity became more rigid in public debates compared to previous decades. Our research contributes to the discussion on the notion of local democracy by examining the relationship between the local councilors' roles and functions and their perception of democratic practices. In summary, we hypothesized that the extent to which Lithuanian councilors perceive their participatory and community facilitator roles would be positively related to a better understanding of participatory democracy. The evidence is derived from a quantitative survey that aims to analyze the political leadership of Lithuanian councilors and reveal their political roles and agenda-setting practices at the local governance level. Our analysis suggests that the councilors' support of the participatory democracy notion is also associated with supporting different community participatory tools, approaches, and mechanisms such as interest mediation, social networking, and responsive decision-making. There is a clear distinction between participatory and representative democracy elements. The analysis results support the hypothesis, suggesting a strong relationship between

participatory engagement tasks and councilors' support for the notion of participatory democracy. Similar research suggests that the councilors' perceptions of their participatory attitudes significantly impact their support for participatory democracy innovations. On the other hand, it might foster tension and hesitance (Sønderskov, 2019; 2020).

Contrary to these results, policy-making tasks such as mediating conflicts, supporting the executive, or implementing party programs do not support participatory democracy understanding. We can assume that it is explained by the discrepancies in connecting political decision-making power with the need for political accessibility and more effective community engagement practices. The subjective understanding of social norms, values, and trust in local institutions is considered an important aspect of councilors' opinions. However, we lack reasonable empirical indicators to prove the importance of subjective social norms on democratic councilors' approaches.

Referring to Lithuanian self-governance changes and the current status of local autonomy, we could say that the power asymmetries, ongoing interactions between politicians, administrators, and social stakeholders, and contextual factors favor a more local understanding of political representation and local democracy profiles. The councilor's focus on bottom-up initiatives represents their initial support of community capital and collaborative capacities. We refer to the importance of context and the 'politics of locality' (Kearns, 1995), stating that the nature of places affects the citizens' capacity for governance. Even though local governance can intensify territorial fragmentation, disjunction, and conflict, it can also enhance areas as a positive result of such governance. A context-sensitive approach suggests that 'designing' is both a systemic and adaptive practice, where participation is essential but not alone can be adequately adopted (Collins & Ison, 2009).

What can we learn from the empirical evidence of the Lithuanian councilors' case? First, we assume the first steps of the emergence of "new localism" that modifies central-local relations and attempts to modernize local democracy (Pratchett, 2004, p. 368). The shift towards more engaged, community-focused participatory practices represents trends in local governance, where political leadership, democratic innovations, and increased citizen participation are seen as central to revitalizing local democracy (Fung, 2015).

Councilors' support of participatory democracy may symbolize their changing roles as political representatives to more engaged local actors closer to citizens. Second, the switch of political representation powers from councilors to directly elected mayors. The change means that local politicians need to rebuild their importance at the local level. Third, local identity is essential. As for community engagement and facilitatory roles, we discovered the strong connection between the local community and political roles. The priority is given to community voices rather than political party outcomes. This shift is consistent with trends in other European countries, where local identities and community voices are increasingly prioritized over traditional political party structures (Bacqué & Gauthier, 2017).

Finally, the design of participatory processes is crucial because it defines the framework of the roles and tasks of local councilors as mediators, facilitators, integrators, and supporters of local interests. Both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ engagement mechanisms are crucial in mediating between the councilors’ responsibilities. Using any participatory method should be paired with evaluating the environment where participation will occur and the prevailing power dynamics that influence roles and practices within a community (McGuire, 2006). The effectiveness of participatory methods depends on the approaches and contextual factors, such as power dynamics, social norms, and values (McGuire, 2006).

9. Research limitations

First, the single-country case has limited generalizability, suggesting comparability constraints across different political and institutional self-governance systems. Nevertheless, broader trends in local democratic practices among councilors may suggest a relationship pattern between political functions and roles and higher support for participatory initiatives. Second, the various institutional designs and local electoral mechanisms impact the roles and perceptions of local politicians, including their power in the local decision-making process. A more nuanced approach would be helpful to allow comparative benchmarking with countries with different levels of local autonomy and practices in democratic innovations.

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