14 Local councillors in comparative perspective: Drawing conclusions

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The chapters of this book contain the first results of our common research project. They show a rich picture of many aspects of local councillors in 16 countries. It is not the intention of the group that this is the final output from the project. On the contrary: these analyses should be only a first step in the use of this valuable dataset. Further analysis and publications are under way and are foreseen in the future.¹

Clearly there is much diversity between councillors included this study. However, it is already possible to draw some general conclusions. In this chapter we provide overall conclusions combining the results from the different chapters relating particularly to councillors and parties, citizens, the executive, governance reform, gender, and ideology, and in doing so return to some of the issues and broader processes raised in the first chapter. This analysis is based on empirical investigation of councillors in municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants – and therefore these conclusions generalise to that specific group of councillors, rather than all councillors in the countries included in this research.

The councillor and their party

A major conclusion permeating several chapters is that the political party still plays a significant role in the work of local councillors. Although on a national level party membership of citizens might be in decline, for those who are elected in the council their party is still very much ‘alive and kicking’. An overwhelming majority of councillors is member of a political party and parties play an important role in the election of councillors: Verhelst et al. in chapter two show the party is important in providing elective support and even in providing a motive for running in the election in the first place. However, the relations between the councillor and the party are by no means one sided: A majority of councillors presently have, or have had a position in their local party. So councillors do not only depend on their party, they also play an important role in

¹ Indeed we invite interested colleagues to explore the dataset. A copy can be requested from Björn Egner at begner@pg.tu-darmstadt.de.
their party. As Razin illustrates in chapter three, party leaders usually seek support of the party group in the council and the party group has much influence over the decisions of the local party. The relations between the councillor and the local party can thus be seen as characterised by symbiotic interdependency.

Thus it may come as no surprise that implementing the party programme is perceived as an important task by many councillors (especially by those who are member of a national party). However, Klok and Denters (chapter four) demonstrate that this task is seen as somewhat less important than the traditional representative tasks. When we turn to the contribution that councillors bring to these tasks, it shows that implementing the party programme scores among the top of the different tasks, indicating that party politics is more important in terms of what councillors actually do, than in terms of their role perceptions. This is matched by the fact that local councillors have the most frequent contact with the members of their party group and the leaders of their local party rank fourth in their frequency of contact (Plüss and Kübler, chapter eleven). The significance of the party for the role orientation of councillors is also illustrated by Karlsson in chapter six by the fact that almost 30% can be characterised as ‘party soldiers’. Although they are outnumbered by those who can be seen as ‘delegates’, there are four countries where the party soldiers form the largest group with approximately half of councillors (Spain, Belgium, Norway and Sweden). On the other hand party soldiers are very rare (approximately 10%) in the Czech Republic, France, Israel and Poland.

Comparing the different countries we find a consistent pattern where party politics is very important in some countries and much less in others. On all the indicators mentioned above Sweden, Norway, and in most cases Spain score high. On the other side of the spectrum we find France, Israel and particularly Poland, where political parties play only a minor role in the everyday practice of local councillors.

The councillor and the citizen

What are the implications of the role of the political parties for the relation between the councillor and the citizen? Are councillors’ loyalties with their party or with the constituents? The evidence that can be gathered from our chapters points toward different directions in answering this question.

When councillors are asked for their general notions about democracy, Heinelt finds support for a participatory model, giving citizens an active role in democratic ‘self-determination’, is higher than support for a narrowly defined representative or ‘liberal’ notion of democracy, where only elected politicians decide what should happen. This finding would indicate that councillors are