

ARTICLE

Guardians of Governance? Differences in Local Politicians' Perceived Influence on Participatory Trajectories¹

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Abstract

This exploratory study contributes to understanding the intricate relationships between local politicians and participatory democracy, shedding light on the perceived influence politicians exert on participatory trajectories. It delves into how they perceive to influence the design, process, and short-term outcomes of participatory trajectories. Moreover, we explore how this varies across politicians' positions (executive, majority, and opposition councillors) and across different types of citizen participation. We conducted 34 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Flemish (Belgian) local politicians (24) and civil servants (10). First, our findings reveal that executive politicians act as guardians in the design and short-term outcome stages. However, in the ongoing process, individual political influence is perceived as absent. Second, political influence differs in the design stage between government-initiated and bottom-up trajectories. Opposition councillors only seem to influence the short-term outcome in top-down-initiated referenda.

Keywords: local politicians, perceived influence, participatory democracy

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Introduction

Governments have experimented with different forms of citizen participation, emphasising its potential to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness in the context of a crisis in representative democracy (Bussu et al., 2022; Newton & Geissel, 2012). Considering the key position of local politicians in representative systems, this research examines how their influence evolves in a more hybrid system that incorporates different types of citizen participation (Danielsson et al., 2018). Bussu (2015) metaphorically refers to local politicians as mediators between the elected council and citizen participation, reflecting their role in shaping local governance by embedding participatory initiatives (Bussu et al., 2022; Sønderskov, 2020). This idea of local politicians being responsible for local governance will be metaphorically referred to as 'guardians of governance'. Moreover, in this paper, we refrain from expressing normative opinions on the desirability of political influence. When assessing the impact of citizen participation on public policy, we follow the argument that such initiatives primarily serve as mechanisms for policy recommendations to decision-makers, who ultimately decide whether to implement them or not (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023).

We contribute to the literature by untangling politicians' real-life influence on trajectories of citizen participation. Our objective is to enrich the debate on political engagement. Earlier research describes participatory output and its embeddedness mainly from a citizens' perspective (Strandberg et al., 2021; Werner & Marien, 2022). However, the political connection and its mechanisms, as perceived by local political and administrative elites, can provide important insights into participatory trajectories.

In particular, we contribute to academic research by exploring perceptions of politicians' influence on different trajectories of citizen participation. Earlier studies investigated the utilisation of participatory outcomes by local politicians in political decision-making (Nederhand & Edelenbos, 2023; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023; Vrydagh, 2022). In their work, Bussu et al. (2022) introduce the concept of informal embeddedness of citizen participation, highlighting the lack of policy implementation tied to citizen participation, undermining its legitimacy and effectiveness. Influence can be exercised in different stages of the policy process (Dür, 2008). Due to the predominant focus of earlier studies on the output and outcome stage, research has not yet determined the influence on other stages of the participatory trajectory. To move beyond a focus solely on uptake or outcomes, we contribute by applying Nam's (2012) more holistic framework, which distinguishes among three stages: participatory design, process, and short-term implications or outcomes. Our study thus explores perceptions of how local politicians influence citizen participation, unveiling strategies and efforts they take to impact particular participatory trajectories. Thereby, we aim to elucidate how these politicians adapt to changes in local democracies, and more

specifically, to citizen participation that complements the traditional representative system (Danielsson et al., 2018).

This research significantly advances our understanding of participatory democracy by critically examining perceptions about the extent to which local politicians maintain control of citizen participation. By shifting the research focus from citizens to politicians, this study underscores the power dynamics in local participatory governance processes. Moreover, the paper offers a nuanced understanding of participatory processes by examining multiple stages (design, process, and outcome) beyond mere adoption or outcome. Consequently, it provides valuable insights into the full spectrum of the participatory process.

Based on quantitative studies showing great differences in attitudes and roles between types of political elite in citizen participation (De Smedt et al., 2025; Junius et al., 2020), we expect executive influence to substantially outweigh that of legislative politicians. However, an extra bias is also expected towards politicians being part of a government party being more influential in contrast to opposition councillors. This study is conducted in Flanders (Belgium), where a wide variety of citizen participation exists (Caluwaerts et al., 2020; Dezeure et al., 2022; Van Damme et al., 2017). This paper compares three particular types of citizen participation that not only reflect the range of participation types within our research context but are also widely recognised in other countries (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Each type integrates the complex reality of local policy-making with established participatory practices. We distinguish between a digital referendum, a bottom-up deliberative citizen panel, and a deliberative mini-public using sortition.

Our primary research question is: *How do local politicians and civil servants perceive political influence on the design, process, and short-term results of citizen participation trajectories?* This main research question is subdivided into two sub-questions:

- How does this perceived influence on citizen participation vary across politicians' positions (executive, majority, or opposition) (RQ1)?
- How does this perceived influence on citizen participation vary across different types of citizen participation (RQ2)?

In this paper, we first describe what has been established in the literature by focusing on the link between representative and participatory democracy. Second, in the research design section, we describe the participatory cases, the research context, and the methodological approach. Next, we assess the perceived influence of local politicians in the different stages, across types of political elites and types of citizen participation. These specific research features are summarised in Figure 1. Finally, we draw conclusions and reflections by discussing local politicians' perceived influence on participatory trajectories.

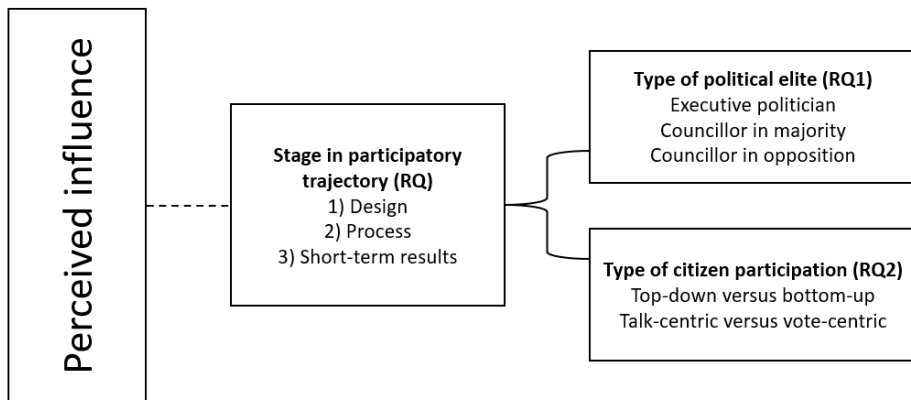


Figure 1. Research Features

Theory

Quantitative research (e.g. De Smedt et al., 2025; Junius et al., 2020; Kersting, 2016) has found that politicians' support for citizen participation in general depends on their position in the political system. Rather than being driven by normative motivations, they appear to behave according to an instrumental logic. Consequently, this instrumental logic enables decision-making primarily when political decision-makers retain control (Danielsson et al., 2018). In addition to their attitudes, the roles that politicians conceive and adopt also impact their capacity to exercise influence in participatory trajectories. Winsvold and Vabo (2024), for example, follow this line of reasoning by focusing on the relationship between local councillors' leadership capacity and citizen participation processes. Earlier research has identified several participatory roles (e.g. initiating, participating, institutionalising, responding, connecting stakeholders, and resisting) (De Smedt et al., 2025; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Thompson, 2019). Despite this earlier literature, there is still a lack of understanding regarding how they influence in concrete, real-world participatory settings.

In our study, we define *influence* according to Banfield (2017) as the power one holds to provide direction and impact. Influence can be exercised through different channels, which makes it challenging to measure (Dür, 2008). In this research, we expect both abilities and attempts as channels through which politicians influence. The ability to influence, for instance, may stem from a politician's formal position, enabling them to set the agenda or lead a vote. Attempts to influence may involve deliberate actions, such as discussions with other politicians or parties to build alliances behind the scenes.

Previous research quantitatively examined the influence of politicians by considering citizens' perspectives on the ideal influence of politicians (Haesevoets et al.,

2024), politicians' perceptions on influence within city councils that are confronted with citizen participation (Plüss, 2014), or politicians' political leadership capacity (Winsvold & Vabo, 2024). Swiss councillors have shown not to perceive a diminished influence within city councils due to the introduction of citizen participation (Plüss, 2014). The hypothetical scenario for which Norwegian local councillors assessed their political leadership capacity included the type of citizen participation (Winsvold & Vabo, 2024). In the following paragraphs, we outline existing knowledge on potential influence at different stages, exerted by various types of political elites (RQ1), and in diverse forms of citizen participation (RQ2).

Stage in Participatory Trajectories

Local politicians are actors with vested interests and have the power to provide and facilitate meaningful citizen participation (Bussu et al., 2022; Hendriks, 2006; Nederhand & Edelenbos, 2023). Many studies presume that they determine whether and how citizen input is incorporated into decision-making processes (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Sønderskov, 2020; Sørensen et al., 2020; Yang & Callahan, 2007). However, the political connection with citizen participation trajectories can have many different faces. A framework of Nam (2012) investigated three criteria as an evaluation framework. While earlier studies predominantly focused on political uptake, Nam (2012) opened up the participatory process by adding two stages: design and process, in addition to outcome. The three criteria of Nam (2012) can be adopted as stages to explore exercised influence. First, in the design stage, politicians can influence by taking part in setting the legal framework (e.g. participatory regulations), initiating and shaping the features and the topic of the project. Second, they can influence the ongoing process stage by actively participating, mobilising people or, for example, steering the discussion or convincing the public of a specific opinion. Third, in the stage of the outcomes, politicians can influence by (not) ensuring the implementation of the participatory trajectory. Politicians can, for example, have the ability to enact policies, or attempt to delay decisions or influence administrative priorities.

We aim to study perceptions of politicians' influence to demonstrate the extent to which local politicians are embedded in citizen participation trajectories. It determines the strength of the connection to local government. The direct link between citizen participation and the political sphere is crucial for allowing creative problem-solving processes to unfold (Sønderskov, 2020). It pertains to what many scholars refer to as the tensions between representative and participatory democracy, where citizen engagement may be detached from decision-making processes, resulting in non-implementation (Dalton et al., 2001; Jäntti et al., 2023; Karlsson, 2012; Sørensen et al., 2020). In earlier literature, the link between these participatory trajectories and public authorities was called 'coupling' or 'embeddedness' and mainly concerns

the closeness of the relationship with executive politicians (Hendriks, 2016). While anticipating that policymakers will adhere closely to the political coalition agreement (Font & Smith, 2019), we have to keep in mind the established policies that governing politicians have agreed upon. Relatedly, politicians might consider the accountability of these processes as an issue (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023; Schmidt & Wood, 2019; Setälä & Schiller, 2009). Finally, the link in earlier research was mainly focused on the outcome decision-making stage of citizen participation (Nederhand & Edelenbos, 2023; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023; Vrydagh, 2022).

Type of Political Elite

Earlier research mainly showed politicians' formal positions being a key predictor of their views towards citizen participation (De Smedt et al., 2025; Junius et al., 2020; Núñez et al., 2016). Most research states that politicians in opposition parties hope that participatory trajectories will serve as a counterbalance to majority dominance by gaining influence in local policy-making. On the contrary, those in the majority fear losing influence due to these participatory trajectories (Michels, 2006). This fear of losing power also influences the political adoption of citizen participation outcomes. Research shows that proposals requiring minimal cost and policy change are more likely to be implemented (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023; Font & Smith, 2019). Meanwhile, more transformative and costly participatory proposals might empower those in opposition. Citizen participation may encounter practical and normative obstacles such as budgetary limitations, technical constraints, or occasional ethical dilemmas. The type of political elite plays a key role here: While legislative councillors are responsible for shaping the broader legal framework, executive politicians are more directly confronted with these concrete challenges in policy implementation.

Type of Citizen Participation

In addition, the design of citizen participation (e.g. regarding the initiator, extent of authority, and mode of participation) inherently shows a trade-off in democratic goods (e.g. inclusiveness, efficacy, social equity, etc.) (Boelen & Steyvers, 2022; Kaftan & Gessler, 2024; Michels, 2011). First, the initiator refers to trajectories initiated top-down by politicians or bottom-up by citizens. Second, the extent of authority varies from consultative to a more decisive voice for citizens in these participatory processes. Third, the mode of citizen participation is commonly classified as vote-centric or talk-centric (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). The vote-centric ways allow citizens to directly express their opinions on policy-making³ and are considered

3 Some vote-centric forms may be designed with a greater extent of authority and thus tie the political decision-making to the outcome of the vote (Rojon et al., 2019).

inclusive because all citizens can take part, and each vote carries equal weight (Rojon et al., 2019; Witting et al., 2023). Talk-centric participatory trajectories engage citizens through discussions and deliberations around policy problems. However, they typically engage only a small group of citizens. This type of participation is valued for its educative impact, improving understanding and political efficacy (Grönlund et al., 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2016; Strandberg et al., 2021), whereas vote-centric methods are seen as polarising and lacking reflection (Witting et al., 2023). Participatory practices clearly vary in their underlying logic, ranging from *cold* participation, involving consensus-driven interaction between ordinary citizens, to hot participation characterised by more partisan and animated interactions in which conflict is explicitly accepted (Bobbio, 2018). Additionally, distributive and collaborative participatory governance types can be respectively linked to vote-centric and talk-centric participation, as both enable politicians to mobilise support; however, the former transfers power to citizens, while the latter enhances politicians' agenda-setting and problem-solving capacities (Winsvold & Vabo, 2024).

The strength of the relationship between citizen participation and local politics partly hinges on how politicians view these participatory processes. Earlier quantitative research led us to expect that bottom-up, vote-centric, and citizens deciding in citizen participation will offer politicians less influence due to the less interactive design than top-down, talk-centric, and advisory or co-decisive citizen participation (De Smedt et al., 2024; Goutry et al., 2024; Haesevoets et al., 2023).

In sum, we aim to untangle both abilities and attempts to exercise influence and thus fine-grained perceptions of influence that drive the political impact of citizen participation (Baekgaard et al., 2022). As a result, we explore perceptions of the influence of executive, majority, and opposition politicians in different stages of three particular forms of citizen participation. The interviews with local politicians and civil servants focused on whether and how politicians influence participatory trajectories.

Research Design

This paper uses a qualitative comparative case study in the context of three Flemish cities. In order to get a broad understanding of influence in real-life participatory trajectories, we take into account the complex daily reality. Measuring influence has been a topic of concern in earlier research, for which the methodological rigour relies on triangulation (Dür, 2008). Qualitative efforts are particularly good in investigating mechanisms of exercising influence (ability and attempt). Therefore, we conducted in-depth interviews combining the perceptions of political and administrative governing actors. This helps us achieve a more comprehensive understanding of political influence. We investigate the influence using a triangulation approach. It

uses the self-perception of local politicians and the perceptions of civil servants as key players close to the participatory process. By doing so, we obtain a sound assessment of exercised political influence in participatory trajectories. To strengthen the validity of our findings, we triangulated the interviews with policy documents (e.g. process documentation and council/BMA reports) and media articles, offering an external perspective on the studied cases. These different data sources provide cross-validation of our findings and enhance their robustness.

Additionally, a pilot study on a citizens' assembly in Ghent, which included interviews with local politicians and civil servants, refined the interview topics and questions. On the one hand, we added a question in which each actor also estimated the influence of other key local actors (e.g. executive board, civil servants, citizens, etc.). On the other hand, the overarching question about politicians' influence in participatory versus non-participatory trajectories was unclear to respondents. As a result, we revised the question and asked about their influence compared to conventional practices. In this way, we safeguarded the internal validity and reliability of our research.

Our research is conducted in the context of three Flemish cities with a central function in their area (known as *centrumsteden*). In Flanders, a monistic local government system prevails in which executive politicians are also members of the municipal council in addition to their executive role in the board of mayor and aldermen. The municipal council has greater decision-making power formally. In practice, the executive body has a dominant position (Verhelst et al., 2011). The executive board assumes political leadership in the local authority and principally operates as a collegiate collective (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Steyvers, 2016). The majority is usually comprised of various parties in a formal governing coalition. Politics in Flanders, including at the local level, is typified by its partocratic nature where political parties dominate all spheres of decision-making (Vandeleene et al., 2019).

In order to measure influence, we followed the interview approach of Dür (2008) and conducted interviews with local politicians and civil servants in three participatory cases in three Flemish cities (Kortrijk, Genk, and Mechelen). These cases represent the diverse types of citizen participation trajectories found in the local context of Flanders (Dezeure et al., 2022), but are also types that are broadly known in other countries (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Eventually, 34 interviews were conducted between February 2023 and March 2024, of which 24 were with local politicians and 10 with civil servants. Politicians provided information about how they perceived their influence in the different stages, and these were juxtaposed with the understandings of civil servants. Both local politicians and civil servants also assessed the influence of others (politicians, civil servants, citizens, and civil society) (see Appendix for wording of the interview questions). Below, we introduce the operationalisation of the three stages, the studied cases, and the type of respondents. Ethical approval was given by the ethical commission, for which each interviewee signed an informed consent.

In each interview, participants were asked to discuss their perception of influence in the trajectory, followed by sub-questions about the different stages (design, process, and outcome) in the participatory trajectory. We use these stages to evaluate politicians' influence. Specifically for the outcome stage, we focus on the influence on short-term results. Since most of the cases in our study were set up recently, the influence can only be investigated in the short term. These particular outcomes depend on the specific type of citizen participation and range from citizens' advice to final decisions within the participatory trajectories. The interviews were coded using NVIVO based on a predefined framework consisting of three analytical stages: design, process, and outcome.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of perceptions of political influence on participatory trajectories, we selected three cases with distinct design features. This enables us to explore patterns of influence within diverse participatory governance arrangements. Two were initiated top-down by the government, whereas the other was initiated bottom-up by citizens. Moreover, two of the cases are talk-centric oriented, while the other is vote-centric. Some extra context on the cases will be given in the following paragraph.

Our first case is Kortrijk, where they deployed an annual *digital binding referendum* in the municipal legislature from 2019 to 2024. The referendum is a direct democratic, digital, and vote-centric participation trajectory. It is a rather experimental and innovative instrument in the context of citizen participation in Flanders (Acar et al., 2023). Although legislation is not open to binding referendums, the political choice was to morally bind themselves to the outcome. Our second case conducted a more deliberative way of citizen involvement through a *mini-public* in the city of Genk. A two-stage sortition process was used to select twenty-two residents. They debated about challenges arising from the superdiverse demographic nature of the city of Genk, to manage potential conflicts and cultivate a shared perspective on dealing with citizen diversity. Third, a bottom-up process with *deliberative panels* took place in Mechelen, our third case, by using a talk-centric participatory method. The difference with the case in Genk is that participants are self-selected in Mechelen, and multiple discussion moments have taken place. Specifically, this participatory project aimed to brainstorm and discuss ideas regarding the utilisation of public open spaces and was initiated bottom-up by an artistic group in cooperation with a city museum. On the contrary, the cases of Kortrijk and Genk were initiated top-down by the local government. The differences between the cases are displayed in Table 1. We selected three distinct cases to obtain maximum variety in our explorative study (Yin, 2018).

Table 1. Features of the Cases

	Digital referendum <i>Kortrijk</i>	Mini-public <i>Genk</i>	Deliberative panels <i>Mechelen</i>
Initiator	Top-down	Top-down	Bottom-up
Mode of participation	Vote-centric	Talk-centric	Talk-centric
Extent of authority	Binding	Consultative	Consultative
Mode of selection	Self-selection	Sortition	Self-selection

A list of the respondents' features is available in Table 2 (a detailed list of the respondents is available in Appendix Tables A.1 and A.2). We cannot provide details on the individual level regarding the party affiliation of politicians or other features for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality. However, the politicians are a fair representation of the political-ideological forces in the cities being studied and, by extension, cover the ideological spectrum of Flemish (local) politics. We interviewed five local politicians from the social-democratic party (Vooruit), five from the Flemish nationalist party (N-VA), three from the liberal party (Open VLD), five from the Christian-democratic party (cd&v), four from the Greens (Groen), one from the far right (Vlaams Belang), and one from the communist party (PvdA). Of the 34 interviewees, 21 were male and 13 female. Moreover, we distinguish between three types of local politicians: those in the executive board who are mayor or alderman, councillors who are part of a majority party, and councillors who are part of an opposition party. This division is important to answer our second research question.

Table 2. Number of Interviewees

	Kortrijk	Genk	Mechelen	Total
Type of elite				
Executive board	3	3	2	8
Majority councillors	3	2	2	7
Opposition councillors	3	2	4	9
Civil servants	3	3	4	10
TOTAL	12	10	12	34

Results

During the interviews, local politicians were asked several questions to get insights into their perceived influence in the three stages of the participatory trajectories. When the participants were asked about their influence in the specific citizen participation project, the majority of legislative councillors commented that it was not in their hands. These councillors stated that only a small group of executive politicians and civil servants is responsible for organising. Therefore, the predominant influence of executive politicians appears to extend beyond representative decision-making and encompass participatory trajectories as well.

In this section, we investigate patterns of perceived influence between the different political positions (executive, majority, and opposition councillors) and types of citizen participation. The first sub-question (RQ1), which examines differences in politicians' positions, will be addressed in depth first, followed by an exploration of variations in types of participation (RQ2). Despite the theoretical expectations and the delineation of our two sub-research questions, we opted to primarily structure the results for each sub-question around the different stages. Moreover, triangulation across interview data and documentary sources was used to assess the robustness of the empirical evidence. This process did not reveal systematic differences between politicians' and civil servants' accounts across cases, and therefore does not warrant separate treatment in the results section.

Type of Political Elite

Influence on Design

In general, councillors from opposition parties across cases consistently perceive themselves as having limited influence in shaping participatory trajectories. In the case of Kortrijk, many interviewees (for illustration quote LP3) mention that the board of mayor and aldermen prepares the topic and specific question(s), without a decisive voice or room for discussion with other legislative councillors. Some opposition councillors mention that the coalition parties make choices without consulting other parties. Also, the participatory regulations, including the necessary participant quota and minimum majority to be morally binding, were established by the executive politicians. As a result, the municipal council (legislative politicians) has the ability to give final (dis)approval during the vote, which is described as lacking significant input from the council. This often leads to a confrontation between the majority and the opposition, since majority councillors can more easily attempt to ask for changes from their executive colleagues.

LP3 (opposition councillor): *The municipal executive determines the regulations and has also formulated the question, which is then simply presented to the municipal council. In practice, it is almost always approved by the majority against the opposition. [...]*

Therefore, we, as the municipal council, have not had the opportunity to participate in the formulation of the question or to debate it. Essentially, a decision has simply been made by the municipal executive.

On the contrary, in Mechelen, the topic and design of the deliberative trajectory were brought bottom-up by a group of artists and further elaborated together with a group of civil servants working in a city museum. Here, it was only presented to all local politicians as a project, thus no local politician had the opportunity to influence this stage.

In the case of Genk, local politicians mention an executive organisation of the deliberative mini-public. A selection of key players (executive politicians and civil servants) jointly formed a steering committee that shaped and monitored the citizen participation trajectory from start to finish (see quote LP21). The trajectory with its features of sortition, focus on dialogue, and participants as advisors was designed through a political-administrative cooperation. Legislative councillors had little influence at this stage. However, they were able to attend all meetings and discussions but rarely used that power.

LP21 (government councillor): *No, personally, I have not, no. [...] You must also consider that this participation initiative was driven by colleagues within the municipal executive, particularly those from social affairs, and so forth. [...] the practical aspects were handled by my fellow alderman at the time, along with the departments that worked on it.*

Influence on Ongoing Process

Overall, local politicians note that the city administration wields greater influence over the process than individual city council members, as civil servants often hold operational responsibility for the organisation of citizen participation. It is their professional duty to implement the process. As a result, politicians themselves have limited involvement and especially no formal tasks within the process. Occasionally, external experts are appointed by local governments to provide their insights and knowledge. This dynamic underscores the substantial role that administrative bodies and experts play in shaping participatory trajectories, often overshadowing the contributions of elected representatives in the legislative branch. Particularly, councillors who are not part of the executive board have minimal direct influence over the ongoing process. Some councillors have previous experience and earlier established informal relationships that make them more involved during a certain trajectory.

In the case of the referendum in Kortrijk, local politicians are perceived to influence the process by some (anti)campaigning through their political party. They either urge their supporters to vote for, against, or not to vote, which can impact the turnout (see

quote LP9). If the turnout is below a certain threshold, the result is invalid. They can also influence the debate on the topic at stake by launching campaigns and asking critical questions about the initiative in municipal council meetings (see quote CS3).

LP9 (executive board): *On average, I think that by calling to vote and to vote in favour, you can give a certain direction. Especially in the constituency that agrees with your policy, and yes, I do think you can have an influence there.*

CS3: *There was concern that the opposition would campaign too aggressively around the issue, potentially appropriating it and thereby shifting the focus too much toward the municipal council. In that sense, the council exerted considerable influence, perhaps not always consciously or directly. Members of the council frequently requested to be involved in formulating the question or to offer suggestions, and they were also highly critical of the digital referendum process.*

In the ongoing deliberations in Mechelen, only a few local politicians mentioned some influence. This is due to their investment of time in the debates. Others only attended a meeting where the results were described. In general, some (executive) local politicians played a minor role in the citizen participation process, which shows a certain commitment and was perceived as having limited influence by other respondents.

CS6: *There was a dedicated alderman for participation, who actively embraced this role. This individual made a significant effort to be present at many of the discussion groups during the exhibition [named] 'The Never Ending Park', and also attended various debate evenings, demonstrating a strong commitment to participatory engagement.*

Lastly, in Genk, the politicians did not influence the mini-public's ongoing process. This is a clear choice made by the steering committee to prevent political pressure on the participating citizens in the mini-public. Executive politicians attended a closing meeting of the mini-public to show their support for the participation project, but did not substantively participate (see quote LP23). Thus, their presence and involvement in the process count as an ability and a limited attempt to influence, which are mostly symbolic. Legislative councillors did not perceive a substantial influence either on the ongoing process.

LP23 (executive board): *We, the three responsible politicians, did make some inquiries. Which I also believe is our duty, and then we let it go. On the last day, I stopped by at the end to ask, 'How did it go?' Just to get a sense of the atmosphere or to feel the mood. I found that important as well, but by then the process was already somewhat concluded, and they could reflect a bit. However, I refrained from expressing any opinion within the group of 22.*

Influence on Short-Term Results

In general, when participatory processes yield outcomes, they are often perceived to be significantly influenced by the implementation and decisions of executive politicians. Despite the findings, they rarely incite serious deliberation within the city council and rarely result in implementation. Despite the attempts of specific politicians from opposition parties to introduce a debate on the topics or solutions that came forward from participatory trajectories, their political impact is rather insignificant. Typically, the city council adopts points predetermined by the executive boards, reflecting a limited role for non-executive council members in shaping participatory short-term results. This dynamic highlights the perceived dominance of the executive in steering the political uptake of participatory trajectories, raising concerns about the effectiveness of citizen engagement efforts.

We can state that the case context of the mini-public in Genk makes it impossible to investigate the short-term impact. Nevertheless, executive politicians do point out that there is an important role for them and the administration to play when it comes to implementing what comes out of the participation project. Citizens selected by lot were tasked with drafting a set of principles on how people can live together in a diverse and multicultural city. Through the participatory process, citizens have developed shared principles, which must now be translated into tangible policy for everyday life. According to both executive politicians and civil servants, they should play a crucial role in this translation process. This provides them with the ability to exert significant influence on the results. However, at this point, it is unclear what the influence of local politicians will be on the long-term outcome.

By contrast, in the case of Kortrijk, we see some immediate perceived influence of the political campaigns on the results of binding referendums (see quote LP3). Not only do majority councillors or executive politicians appear to possess the power to influence the referendum's result, but opposition councillors also exert influence, primarily through formal political debates or campaigns. As the influence on the outcome here is closely tied to the process, one might question whether it occurs at a particular stage of the process or concerns the outcome itself. It is included here since councillors explicitly refer to their influence on the result. Majority councillors also have the legal ability to ignore a referendum decision, but have decided to always respect the outcome if the turnout is high enough.

LP3 (opposition councillor): *In the first referendum, ten out of ten. Because we had absolutely a lot of influence there. A great deal, I think. We were able to turn it for the better. Yes, I think that it was over 56% plus a few percentage points, undoubtedly thanks to our campaigns. So I think we gave the final push there, at least to steer it in the right direction. So yes, I think we were very satisfied. [...] We were probably able to save a few percentage points and turn them to our advantage.*

Lastly, in Mechelen, several local politicians pushed to pursue certain citizen proposals. It was mentioned during the interviews that executive politicians have a large influence on these short-term results because they can provide financial or organisational support for the realisation of the projects (see quote LP17).

LP17 (executive board): *Yes, yes, because that can go in two directions. Either an idea is very good, and the idea cannot be watered down, and then it is a one or zero decision. Or you say, it might be a good idea, but it is not entirely practical or feasible. It needs to be downsized, or it needs to come back in another form. But in both cases, you naturally have a significant impact on the final realisation.*

Types of Citizen Participation

Above, we explored the perceived influence of politicians in the different stages of citizen participation by discussing which type of politicians are most influential in each stage. Overall, executive politicians' perceived influence is more prominent than that of legislative councillors. Therefore, we explore whether differences in influence across participatory trajectories can be found. Although we distinguish our research questions between the perceived influence by local politicians through their formal positions and the type of citizen participation, inevitably, differences across formal positions are also reflected in the outline below.

First, top-down-initiated trajectories, namely Genk and Kortrijk, are perceived to be dominated by the executive body, with limited input from legislative councillors. Second, in talk-centric participation where initiators have manoeuvring space, as in Genk and Mechelen, the collaboration between executive politicians and administrative bodies seems to be crucial, often sidelining broader political influence. Third, trajectories based on self-selection are assessed with a clear contrast between the executive-controlled Kortrijk case and the bottom-up Mechelen trajectory. This highlights the varying degrees of political influence. However, politicians' perceived influence is not necessarily the same in cases with similar features. Therefore, Table 3 showcases the main political actor(s) driving each stage in the different trajectories.

Table 3. Key Perceived Influence of Local Politicians by Stage and Case

	Digital referendum Kortrijk	Mini-public Genk	Deliberative panels Mechelen
Design	Executive politicians	Executive politicians*	No influence
Ongoing process	Political parties*	Limited political influence	Limited political influence
Short-term results	Executive, majority and opposition councillors	Executive politicians	Executive politicians + majority councillors

* Shared influence in situations where a political actor's influence is perceived jointly with other stakeholders, e.g. civil servants.

In the design stage, it is the executive politicians (belonging to the majority) who influence the top-down cases. Sometimes, the civil servants also have a pronounced influence on the design. In the digital referendum case in Kortrijk, councillors accept or reject the design of the referendum by voting in the municipal council. However, in practice, the executive board is perceived as the most influential in the design phase since the council follows their proposal. We find similar results in the case of Genk, which was also initiated top-down (see quote LP18), albeit the civil servants seem to have a more pronounced influence in Genk than in Kortrijk. In the Kortrijk case, the board of mayor and aldermen sometimes overruled a proposal from the civil servants for the referendum. In the bottom-up case of Mechelen, executive and legislative politicians do not influence the design stage since an artistic group designed the trajectory (see quote LP13).

LP13 (majority councillor): *How that happened at that moment was mostly determined by how the artists organized it, and I think that's important, that it just happened that way.*

Moreover, individual local politicians did not perceive themselves as influencing the ongoing process across the three cases. When we focus on the perceived influence of opposition and majority politicians, we see similar results with small differences. During the process of the digital referendum in Kortrijk, councillors have the ability to campaign, mostly through the political party they belong to (see quote LP3). So, both majority and opposition councillors perceive exercised influence through their political party. In both talk-centric cases, the civil servants are the main drivers of the ongoing process, thus local councillors perceived no significant influence in the

process (see quote LP16). As mentioned before, politicians may attempt to leverage informal networks to form alliances that enhance their influence over a certain trajectory.

LP3 (opposition councillor): *In the first referendum, I believe we reached many thousands of people and were able to convince them to go vote.*

In the three cases, executive politicians are perceived to influence the short-term results. Majority and opposition councillors perceive influence on the results in Kortrijk, while only majority councillors perceive influence on the short-term results in the case of Mechelen (see quote LP14). In the case of Genk, only executive politicians perceive that they have influence (see quote LP22).

LP22 (executive board): *I think the basic principles came from the 22 [participating citizens]. I probably had some influence on how to bring them together: how to cluster them, where the themes lie, how to phrase them, and how to approach them. I contributed to that, but the principles themselves came from them. Distilling those principles was something I had some influence on, but it was also a collaborative effort within the [political-administrative] steering group.*

Conclusion and Discussion

Our research sheds light on the general power mechanisms of local politicians in participatory trajectories. As in representative democracy, executive politicians perceive themselves as having the strongest influence in participatory democracy. Accordingly, they are consistently acting as mediators or guardians. However, more informally, legislative councillors appear to differ in influence on the three stages: design, ongoing process, and short-term results (see Table 3 in the results section). Although civil servants are not the target group of our study, we note that they are perceived to be influential at both the design and ongoing process stages, particularly in deliberative cases. Local executive politicians and civil servants are the most embedded actors involved in policy-making. This might explain why both are perceived as the most influential actors in participatory trajectories as well. Despite our general findings, different participatory trajectories and formal political positions shape individual politicians' influence. This supports the findings of Winsvold and Vabo (2024), showing differences in perceived political leadership capacities.

First, vote-centric participation is perceived as more open (ongoing process and short-term results) to be steered by all local politicians or even political parties. This openness, however, also raises concerns regarding co-optation, where politicians might incorporate participatory trajectories into power structures, using them

to reinforce their own political agendas rather than fostering genuine democratic involvement. In the context of vote-centric referenda, this can involve subtly shaping the trajectory through strategic question framing or the allocation of resources to influence public opinion. Such actions may align the process with existing power structures and present it as democratic, masking potential biases. Moreover, as Esaiasson and Öhberg (2020) highlight, politicians' perceptions of procedural fairness are often shaped by the favourability of the outcome. High levels of policy engagement make politicians vulnerable to self-serving interpretations. When participatory outcomes align with their preferences, they are likely to frame these processes as fair. This tendency contributes to the institutionalisation of co-optation mechanisms and highlights how political involvement may influence participatory processes.

At the same time, increased involvement from all political actors may also amplify partisan divides. Different parties compete to influence the ongoing process and eventually steer outcomes in line with their agendas. Hence, while a wider political engagement might appear more pluralistic, it can also introduce a form of politicisation that affects the autonomy of citizen participation. This dynamic resonates with Bobbio's (2018) notion of hot participation, in which partisan contestation and strategic behaviour dominate, compared to cold forms that are more citizen-driven and deliberative. Further research is needed to explore these distinct dynamics of co-optation and partisan competition in vote-centric participation.

Second, our analysis shows that talk-centric citizen participation is perceived as leaving little room for the opposition to influence. Opposition councillors are often excluded from influencing the design, ongoing process, and short-term outcomes of participatory trajectories. Talk-centric citizen participation typically involves a limited group of citizens, for which general political strategies provide few opportunities for politicians to influence both the process and its outcomes. This observed exclusion may distance them from the participatory trajectory, while majority and executive politicians gain greater dominance over these trajectories' design and outcomes.

Third, perceptions indicate that bottom-up participation provides politicians with influence only over the political uptake of the participatory results. Thus, politicians have minimal influence during the design and process stages, which might lead to a disconnect between participatory results and their implementation. This is particularly the case in bottom-up trajectories and is linked to what we already know about the lack of political uptake, which comes from an absent relationship with the local government (Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2016; Jäntti et al., 2023). This is especially relevant since impact research has shown the need for embedding or coupling citizen participation within the political system to ensure responsiveness to participatory outcomes (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018; Vrydagh et al., 2023). For the case of Mechelen, this lack of a strong relationship between political decision-making and the participation trajectory led to limited realisation of citizens' proposals.

In sum, our study identifies key patterns of perceived political influence in participatory trajectories and formulates three conclusions for further exploration. We expect them to be valid and, to a certain extent, generalisable to other contexts, given their similarity to an earlier quantitative analysis of the hypothetical political leadership capacities of Norwegian local councillors (Winsvold & Vabo, 2024). First, vote-centric participation is more open to influence from all political actors, but this often intensifies partisan divides as parties compete to shape processes and outcomes, raising risks of co-optation where dominant guardians of governance are further empowered in citizen participation. Second, talk-centric participation tends to exclude legislative councillors, granting greater control to executive politicians. Third, bottom-up participation provides politicians with limited influence during the design and process stages, potentially weakening the link between participatory outcomes and implementation. To address this, stronger embeddedness between citizen participation and the local political system is crucial.

After an abundance of quantitative research on political uptake, attitudes towards participation and patterns of participatory trajectories (see e.g. Bussu et al., 2022; De Smedt et al., 2025; Junius et al., 2020; Kersting, 2016; Sønderskov, 2020; Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023), this qualitative research provides insights into local politicians' guardian role in different stages of participatory trajectories. Our research offers a lens to study how perceived power is shared and exercised among local politicians in participatory trajectories. However, our study has some inevitable limitations. First, three in-depth participatory cases in Flanders cannot yield fully generalisable results due to limited external validity. Therefore, we propose that our conclusions should be broadly tested in different participatory cases. This will enable us to generalise the empirical results into an overarching framework to measure the (actual) influence of local politicians. For example, by focusing on different participatory trajectories (such as citizen surveys, participatory budgeting, and advisory councils) and including different topics. Second, our research focuses on participation projects in local urban areas. Therefore, we invite quantitative research across contexts and examine whether the actors guarding the different stages of citizen participation trajectories differ at higher levels of government (e.g. the national or regional level). Third, studying political influence is methodologically challenging and comes with limitations. We have primarily considered the influence of local politicians through self-perceptions and perceptions of civil servants working closely with them. However, it would also be interesting to consider the actual influence of local politicians. This could also be a valuable avenue for further research. Relatedly, it would be useful to include the perceptions of other key democratic stakeholders (e.g. civil society, citizens, and others) regarding political influence across the different stages of participatory trajectories.

Our study suggests that political influence is predominantly exercised by executive politicians, particularly in the short-term results stage, regardless of the specific type of citizen participation at play. This raises the question of whether executive politicians should retain such control within both representative and participatory democratic settings. The findings further indicate that politicians often struggle to exert strong influence during the ongoing process of participatory trajectories, whereas professionalised civil servants appear to play a more substantial role. Ultimately, our study invites reflection on how and why (executive) politicians (and civil servants) continue to largely dominate participatory governance, and where the genuine influence of citizens is situated. This calls for further research, not only empirically to better understand these dynamics, but also normatively to assess how much political influence is needed and desirable in participatory trajectories.

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