

ARTICLE

How should local councillors fulfil their representative role? A qualitative exploration of citizens' and councillors' expectations¹

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Abstract

There is limited research on the way local councillors are expected to act as elected representatives, according to citizens and local councillors themselves. In addition, research is often quantitative and (mis?)guided by conceptualisations developed a long time ago with national politics in mind. This article presents the findings from secondary analysis of qualitative research with foremost open questions on local councillors' representative roles among citizens (n=123) and local councillors (n=88) in Dutch municipalities. Citizens had no or low expectations, or preferred local councillors to listen, to be visible, and to keep promises. Local councillors' expectations reflected the old roles of trustee and party delegate, and the new roles of democratic watchdog and ombuds politician, roles that they often combined. This latter finding underlines the need to explore the conceptual underpinnings of these concepts (for instance, combining elitist and participatory elements), to be careful with research in which these representative roles are presented as mutually exclusive, and to find out when and why local councillors switch from one to another role.

Keywords: Representation, Local democracy, Styles of representation, Local councillors

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Introduction

What are the expectations of citizens and local councillors of the latter's representative role? That is the main question in this article. This concerns a fundamental relationship in local democracies. Local councillors stand in for citizens to rule on their behalf (cf. Rehfeld, 2018). Citizens' expectations of representative roles feed into their evaluations of the way local councillors represented them in and between elections (Lauermann, 2014, p. 3). Criticism on the way local councillors act for citizens has been a reason for launching democratic innovations involving citizens directly in public policy-making, in particular in local politics. More recently, the way certain Dutch local councillors represent citizens has led to discussions, even in court. Whereas proponents of so-called *ombudspolitiek* argue that local councillors should (also) actively engage with particularistic interests of citizens, others prefer local elected representatives to orient themselves on the general interest of the entire local community. For this reason alone, an up-to-date exploration of expectations of councillors' representative role is already welcome.

Thus far, research on (local) elected representatives often casts these expectations in concepts derived from the 18th-century political philosopher Edmund Burke; with *trustees* following their own judgement, *delegates* following their voters' instructions, and *party delegates* following their electoral manifesto (see e.g. Eulau et al., 1959; Karlsson, 2013; Verzichelli, 2020). These conceptualisations of representative roles have received severe criticism, however. Some argue that they are increasingly outdated (see e.g. Mansbridge, 2020). More fundamentally, others argue that the roles of trustee and delegate have always been too academic, as politicians have difficulty recognizing themselves in these representative roles (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Carman, 2006; Searing, 1994). In addition, local politics has evolved quite substantially, with the partial decline of parties and the expansion of direct citizen participation (Denters & Rose, 2005). It would therefore be no surprise if expectations of both citizens and local elected representatives of what the latter should do have changed beyond the traditional conceptualisations. This underlines the importance of empirically reassessing established conceptualisations and examining whether new expectations regarding local councillors' representative roles have emerged.

Qualitative research would be most suitable to do so, but it is fairly uncommon. That holds for local councillors' expectations of their own representative roles, and even more so for citizens' expectations. To the best of our knowledge, there is not even a single qualitative study that asks citizens about the representative roles of local councillors using open questions on what they expect from local councillors as their representatives. And that is problematic. As scholars, we may continue to describe a fundamental relationship in local democracy with conceptualisations that are not, less or no longer empirically valid. We may thus misinterpret how local councillors are expected to act on behalf of citizens.

Fortunately, we can address this lacuna by leveraging qualitative data from various research projects, allowing secondary analysis of the views of citizens (total n=123) and local councillors (total n=88) on the latter's representative roles in the Netherlands. With this variety of data, we address the question of what local councillors and citizens expect from councillors in their representative role. Dutch municipalities share features and challenges of local democracies in other Western countries, in particular, Nordic and Rhinelandic ones. Therefore, our findings may also offer insights into expectations of local councillors' representative roles beyond the Netherlands.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss the traditional conceptualisations of representative roles, and recent alternatives that address the particularities of local democracy. In section 3, we describe which data from various research projects we used to examine the expectations of citizens and councillors in various Dutch municipalities. In section 4, we present our findings. The results show that traditional representative roles of party delegate and trustee can still be discerned among local councillors' expectations. That also holds for alternative roles of democratic watchdog and ombuds politician. Strikingly, local councillors often combine these roles, also in more unexpected ways. Citizens' expectations can hardly be structured according to the conceptualisations from scholarly literature, if they have expectations at all. Recurring expectations among citizens are local councillors standing up for citizens' neighbourhoods, being visible, listening to citizens, and being knowledgeable, as well as being honest and keeping promises. Finally, in section 5, we conclude that our results cast serious doubts on quantitative studies presenting the three traditional representative roles as mutually exclusive options, as local councillors may switch from one role to another. A fundamental rethinking of the representative roles used in our studies of (local) representative politics is therefore required.

Conceptualisations of (Local) Representative Roles

Three Traditional Conceptualisations of Representative Roles

Representation is the key concept here. As Hannah Pitkin (1967, p. 8) stated in her classic study on this concept, representation is making something "in some sense" present again. That "making present again" can be done in various ways. For instance, representatives may *stand for citizens* by mirroring one or more features of the population, such as gender, age, class, education, or colour. This so-called descriptive representation has received considerable attention under the heading of "politics of presence", in which the identities of representatives have become a key democratic concern (Phillips, 1995).

Representation can also be understood as *acting for* the represented, whereby representatives stand in for citizens, with the power to rule on their behalf (Rehfeld, 2018). In principle, all political activities of (local) representatives could thus be perceived as a matter of active representation. Whether they determine policy goals, legislate, vote, or scrutinize the executive, they rule on behalf of others. In the late 1950s, Eulau and colleagues (1959) invigorated the empirical study of the various ways elected representatives act on behalf of others. They distinguished the *focus* and *style* of representation. Focus refers to *whom* an elected representative seeks to represent, such as inhabitants of a certain territory, a group in society, or the entire population. Style refers to the way in which, or *how*, a representative actively represents; the latter is what we concentrate on here.

Eulau et al. (1959, 1962) subsume the various styles of active representation under elected representatives' various roles. In the understanding of Eulau and others, a role has a rather normative connotation, namely: "...[a] coherent sets of norms thought to apply to holders of a position" (Eulau et al., 1962, p. 8). Similarly, we understand here the representative roles of local councillors as the various ways they are expected to behave on behalf of their citizens' interests, that is, how they *should* act in the interest of the represented according to both citizens and local councillors themselves.

Three styles stand out in empirical studies of elected representatives' roles: trustee, delegate, and party delegate (Blomgren & Rosenberg, 2012; Verzichelli, 2020). That also holds for the limited set of studies of representative roles at the local level (see e.g. Copus, 2016; De Smedt et al., 2024; Karlsson, 2013). Eulau et al. (1959) were crucial to the development of these roles, whereby they drew on the ideas of the conservative political philosopher Edmund Burke (1774).

Burke developed his ideas on representative roles in the context of national politics. Based on extensive information about citizens' views and needs, as well as deliberation with fellow representatives, *trustees* decide, based on their *own judgment*, what they believe best serves the general interest and the common good of the political community as a whole. Trustees thus act independently from their constituents or other partial interests, making it a rather elitist understanding of representation. In contrast, *delegates* follow the instructions of their voters, regardless of their own opinion. Delegates are thus bound by the (electoral) mandate they were given. Given the more prominent role of political parties in European politics, especially at the national level, researchers added an additional conceptualization: the *party delegate* (also called the party soldier or partisan) (see e.g. Converse & Pierce, 1986). Party delegates follow the instructions from their party when they rule on behalf of citizens. Both voter delegates and party delegates may have a specific, narrow understanding of the general interest. Trustees, conversely, seek to serve the general interests beyond the divided views among parties and voters, relying on their own judgement after deliberation among representatives of different creeds and backgrounds.

Table 1. Three traditional representative roles in empirical research

Representative role	Definition
<i>Trustee</i>	Representatives well-informed of citizens' concerns, deciding after deliberation with fellow representatives according to their own judgement on what is best for the common good of the entire political community
<i>Delegate</i>	Representatives deciding according to the instructions of their voters
<i>Party delegate</i>	Representatives deciding according to the instructions of their party

Fundamental Criticism on the Traditional Representative Roles

Even though empirical studies of representative roles are still often guided by the three roles of trustee, delegate, and party delegate, these conceptualisations and their application in research have received fundamental scholarly criticism. We address four points of criticism that are directly relevant for empirical research on the expectations of citizens and local councillors on the latter's roles.

First, representatives do not stick to one representative role per se. Eulau et al. (1959) already acknowledged this when conceptualising the so-called *politico*, a representative who acts as trustee or delegate depending on the situation. In accordance, others argued that it would be more relevant to study when and why representatives switch roles (see e.g., Andeweg, 1997). Surveys among representatives, however, often present these roles as mutually exclusive by asking how representatives would vote if a conflict arises between their own opinion, the party's opinion, and their voters' opinion (see with respect to local councillors, e.g. De Smedt et al., 2024; Karlsson, 2013). In this way, representatives cannot indicate to what extent their role depends on the situation or issue at hand.

A second point of criticism concerns the lack of explanatory power of the conceptualisations (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012). Although a relationship between representative styles and preferences regarding participation has been established empirically at the national and local level (see e.g. De Smedt et al., 2024; Junius et al., 2020), several decades of research did not yet produce a significant relationship between representatives' self-conceived styles and their parliamentary behaviour, at least at the national level (Verzichelli, 2020). This raises doubts about the empirical value of the traditional conceptualisations.

A third point of criticism relates to the applicability of these traditional conceptualisations of representative roles in current politics. Mansbridge, for instance, talks of the "fading usefulness of the 'trustee vs. delegate concept'" (2020, p. 38). In

reality, the delegate is, for example, barely seen, not least because it is often formally forbidden for parliamentarians to vote according to a mandate. In addition, as Mansbridge (2020) argues, the elitist connotation of the trustee conflicts with the voters' growing desire to have elected representatives who are 'like them'. Furthermore, the elitist role of trustee fits less with the growing opportunities for direct citizen participation at the local level, in particular. Other scholars also refer to the "decline of the party delegate", because of the decreasing societal embeddedness of political parties (Verzichelli, 2020, p. 243). This criticism further questions the empirical value of the traditional conceptualisations.

More fundamentally, some scholars have dismissed the traditional representative roles of trustee and delegate as an intellectual invention that does not resonate in actual political practice. Specifically, these researchers encounter empirical difficulties in describing representative roles in these terms (see e.g. Searing, 1994). Politicians, for example, struggle to define themselves as trustee and delegate (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005, p. 509). Or, as Gambacciani (2024, p. 191) straightforwardly states, "the categories of 'delegate' or 'trustee' do not exist in the minds of politicians". The traditional conceptualisations of representative roles may thus be even devoid of empirical reality.

New Conceptualisations of Representative Roles

These fundamental criticisms have led to a wide variety of new conceptualisations of representation. Some of them were focusing on the mechanisms of representation, for instance, with voters providing their representatives a mandate based on the latter's electoral promises, representatives aligning their behaviour in anticipation of what voters would appreciate in the next elections, citizens conveying their views from below via representatives, or candidates seeking top-down support for their views (see e.g. Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005; Dassonneville et al, 2021; Mansbridge, 2003). Other conceptualisations focused rather on representation by political parties in terms of promise-keeping, responsiveness to public opinion, and enacting the common good (see e.g. Werner, 2018).

New conceptualisations have also been developed to grasp individual politicians' representative roles. Two of these conceptualisations are potentially relevant for local councillors' representation. The first one involves representatives addressing particularistic interests through service responsiveness (Eulau & Karpis, 1978). Service responsiveness entails casework for individual citizens or organisations, with representatives helping them with their specific complaints, problems, grievances, and requests, for instance, with respect to welfare outlays or permits (see e.g. Fenno, 1978; Searing, 1994). Local elected representatives addressing particularistic grievances, interests and needs of individual citizens and organisations have also been recognized as a representative role (Denters, 2005). In a guide on representative

styles of Dutch local councillors, it is called an ombudsperson (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). We therefore label this representative role *ombuds politician*. This role is rather incompatible with the role of the trustee, as its focus on particularistic interests is clearly at odds with the trustee's focus on the general interest of the entire political community. Ombuds politicians are different from party and voters' delegates, as they address individual complaints and grievances also from citizens who did not vote for them or their party. The role of ombuds politician may yet also be complementary to the role of party delegate (by serving the particularistic interests of party affiliates) and voters' delegate (by serving the particularistic interests of constituents).

In comparative studies of national and sub-national politics, regional representatives are more constituency-oriented than national ones (André, Depauw, & Deschouwer, 2016). Regional representatives attach more value to their constituents' opinions than to their parties' opinions, and also prioritise the interests of their constituencies more. Closer proximity of citizens in sub-national politics thus seems to entail differences in "representatives" focus and style. As a consequence, findings of representative roles at one level of government do not necessarily (fully) apply to another. Local politics differs from national politics, with many more laymen politicians, much more opportunities for direct citizen participation, a typically larger share of migrant voters, closer proximity to voters, the presence of local independent lists, and often a more pragmatic, less ideological nature of decision-making. These differences may matter for the representative roles local councillors and citizens want the former to adopt.

Local politics differ in particular from national politics with respect to the extensive opportunities for direct citizen participation. These opportunities challenge the position of the local council as *the* voice of the people in local policy-making (Denters, 2005). They allow citizens to contribute themselves directly to local policy-making instead of indirectly through local councillors. Some councillors in the Netherlands indicate, indeed, that their representative function has been weakened by citizen participation (Wagenaar et al., 2024). In response, local councillors may (also) adopt a new representative role. In this respect, Denters (2005) conceptualised the representative role of *democratic watchdog*, guarding the democratic quality of decision-making processes. In this role, local councillors embrace citizen participation, recognising the emancipated citizens to speak for themselves in local policy-making. It is therefore a non-elitist role, in contrast to the trustee role, as trustees consider themselves better placed to make decisions than 'ordinary' citizens (Denters et al., 2020). In the role of democratic watchdog, local councillors perceive citizen participation as a means to strengthen the democratic quality of today's multi-level network governance (see also Moors & Stans, 2025). They can expand citizen participation to enhance responsiveness and accountability in the present-day myriad of (semi-)private and public organisations involved in local policy-making and public service

delivery, which has resulted from processes of decentralisation, privatisation, amalgamation, intermunicipal cooperation and Europeanisation (Denters, 2005). In response to well-known inequalities in citizen participation, local councillors can also facilitate equal access to decision-making for all citizens and local organisations (Denters, 2005). Instead of following their own judgment or the instructions of voters or parties, they seek to take the interests and needs of all stakeholders into account in decision-making, also the interests and needs of stakeholders who could not take part in citizen participation. According to Denters (2005), the role of democratic watchdog can be supplementary to other representative roles, as citizens cannot be actively involved in all issues.

Table 2. Two new conceptualisations of representative roles

Representative role	Definition
<i>Ombuds politician</i>	Representatives addressing particularistic interests, grievances, and needs of individual citizens, enterprises, or local organisations
<i>Democratic watchdog</i>	Representatives guarding the democratic quality of decision-making, by facilitating citizens' equal access to decision-making, and taking the interests of all involved (including the unheard one) into account in decision-making

The need for and the lack of qualitative studies with open questions

Which conceptualisations of representatives’ roles do citizens and local councillors expect the latter to adopt? Given criticisms on the traditional conceptualisations and the variety of proposed new conceptualisations, empirically, remarkably little is known about this. Quantitative studies of Dutch citizens’ and local councillors’ views on the democratic watchdog constitute a proverbial exception, providing preliminary evidence for the empirical relevance of this representative role (see Denters, 2017; Denters et al., 2020; Vollaard et al., 2025).

Even more strikingly, for a long time, specifically citizens’ views on representation were rather neglected, in contrast to extensive quantitative research on the views of national elected representatives (Grill, 2007, pp. 3–4). In recent years, the number of quantitative studies of citizens’ views has increased (see e.g. Barker & Carman, 2010; Carman, 2006, 2007; Dassonneville et al., 2021; Lapinski et al., 2016; Lauermann, 2014). These studies provide the basis for comparative studies of the expectations of both citizens and their representatives. These studies are necessary, as a mismatch in expectations may contribute to people’s lower satisfaction with democracy (see e.g. André & Depauw, 2017; Mongrain et al., 2025). What is striking about the limited number of studies examining the (mis)match between the expectations of citizens and elected representatives (see e.g. André & Depauw, 2017; Bengtson & Wass, 2010;

Mongrain et al., 2025; Von Schoultz & Wass, 2016; Wass & Nemcok, 2020; and the first one at the local level, Vollaard et al., 2025) is that they are foremost guided by traditional conceptualisations of representative roles (though see Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Pedersen, 2020), for which they may not (fully) grasp the (mis)matches in expectations. The aim of this article is *not* to compare the expectations of citizens and local councillors of the latter's representative roles. Instead, this article is a first step to find out which conceptualisations of representative roles should guide future (also comparative) studies of local politics.

Qualitative research with open questions is most suitable to examine the current expectations of representative roles among citizens and elected officials. Such a fundamental reality check has been foremost missing, however (Wass & Nemcok, 2020, p. 334). In general, there are only a few qualitative studies that examine views of citizens and elected representatives using open questions. Two exceptions are focus groups with Dutch citizens that address (1) the issue of representation directly (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2018), and (2) their expectations of politicians (Van Miltenburg et al., 2024). When asked for their first associations with the concept of representation, citizens initially remained silent (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2018). While they do not use the concept of representation on a regular basis, citizens in general associate it with an individual acting on behalf of someone, such as lawyers for their clients, or parents for their children. Based on Dekker and Den Ridder's (2018) findings, a good representative should share the same substantive positions as the represented, achieving the desired results. When focused on national politicians, citizens expected politicians to listen to the people, to empathise with and understand their constituents, to communicate openly and clearly, to make promises real, and to be knowledgeable. The other focus groups confirmed that Dutch citizens' expectations of politicians are high (Van Miltenburg et al., 2024, pp. 34–78). Responsiveness turned out to be key in citizens' expectations: Politicians should listen, be attentive to citizens' concerns, explain, keep close contact with citizens, and be present in the country ("*het land ingaan*") – and adjust policies to meet those interests. Thus, existing studies showed that citizens overwhelmingly want politicians to be well-informed about citizens' preferences and decide accordingly as a delegate. However, citizens also want them to serve the general interest, following their own common sense ("*gezond verstand*"). The latter expectation relates to the role of trustee, even though a large majority does not want politicians to follow their own judgment regardless of the (party) group they represent. The combination of elements of the roles of delegate and trustee seems to be contradictory. However, when citizens are convinced that the majority of the population shares a single understanding of the general interest, this would be compatible (Van Miltenburg et al., 2024, p. 58). Citizens' democratic views thus have a majoritarian streak, although they might be empirically mistaken about how many fellow citizens share their views.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no qualitative studies with open questions on citizens' and local councillors' expectations of the latter as elected representatives. Our article is a first step to explore to what extent traditional conceptualisations of trustee, delegate, and party delegate still feature among them, and to find out whether their expectations are (also) informed by alternative conceptualisations such as ombuds politician and democratic watchdog. The next section explains how this will be done.

Data and methods

Ideally, a qualitative exploration of citizens' and local councillors' expectations of the latter's representative roles would be systematically designed, in which relevant contextual factors (such as size and level of urbanisation of a municipality), the selection of respondents, the interviewers, the interview questions, and interview settings are determined in advance to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. A balanced selection of respondents can strengthen the transferability, allowing us to apply the findings to other situations. A structured set-up of interviewing can prevent biases in data collection and interpretation, enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

We do not have data collected in such an ideal setting, however. Instead, we can rely on data collected in a variety of qualitative research projects with foremost open questions, which could yet provide a preliminary answer to the question what citizens and local councillors expect of the latter's representative roles. Secondary analysis of various sources entails disadvantages. Different interviewers, different interview questions, and interview settings may result in data that are not fully indicating the same political phenomenon, *in casu*, the representative roles of local councillors. Transferability of the findings may be hampered by a certain bias in the selection of respondents in the various research projects. Nevertheless, a variety of data sources also provides an opportunity for triangulation. If a finding consistently emerges across a diversity of interview settings, its confirmability would be stronger.

Most importantly, all data sources used are based on qualitative studies with open questions concerning their expectations of local councillors. That allows us to find out how citizens and local councillors formulate their expectations themselves instead of being forced to respond to pre-defined (traditional) conceptualisations of representative roles. Even where we started with a relatively closed question, we asked them subsequently to explain why, offering the opportunity to reflect with the researcher on their answers.

All data were collected in the Netherlands. Recent studies among all Dutch municipalities provide quantitative evidence of the relevance of the roles of party delegate, trustee, and democratic watchdog, both among citizens and local councillors

(Denters et al., 2020; Vollaard et al., 2025). Qualitative studies would thus also constitute a check on the empirical value of these conceptualisations of (local) representative roles.

In addition, local democracies in the Netherlands share features with certain local democracies elsewhere, for which findings can also be transferable beyond Dutch local politics. First, the relation between citizens and local councillors is shaped by the electoral system and council size. Local councils in the Netherlands are elected through a system of proportional representation with open party lists, which is the most common system among European countries (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). In the Netherlands, the size of councils varies according to population size, as everywhere else. The average size of Dutch local councils of 24.3 members is in the same range as Belgium (23.2), Lithuania (24), Denmark (24.8) and Norway (26.2) (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). The average population size of Dutch municipalities of about 50,000 inhabitants is yet above the EU's average of 22,000 and also Belgium (20,000), but in the same higher-end category as Sweden (36,000), Lithuania (47,000), and Denmark (60,000) (Prorok & Calzola, 2026). As elsewhere, local councillors in the Netherlands are laymen, for whom their political function is fulfilled in addition to other activities such as work (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022). In the Netherlands, local independent lists play a prominent role in local councils (holding about one third of the seats), in contrast to Denmark and Sweden (below 5 per cent), but in the same medium category as Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022).

The horizontal power relations within local governments also impact on the relationship between inhabitants and local councillors. Collective leadership with limited to modest mayoral strength, as in the Netherlands, is also to be seen in Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, England (in local governments of the so-called leader-cabinet type), certain parts of Germany, and Czechia (Heinelt et al., 2018). Dutch mayors are appointed by the national government following the recommendation of the local council. In most other European countries, mayors are directly or indirectly elected (Gendźwiłł et al., 2022).

The powers of local governments can also influence the relationship between citizens and local councillors. According to the Local Autonomy Index, Dutch local governments' degree of autonomy is average (60 out of 100), similar to Belgium, Luxembourg, Czechia, and Lithuania, but lower than in Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland (more than 70) (Ladner et al., 2023).

Finally, the relationship between citizens and local councillors has been shaped by the developments featuring in many other local governments in Western democracies, such as New Public Management, increasing opportunities for citizen involvement in policy-making, intermunicipal cooperation, decentralisation, privatisation, Europeanisation and rising populism (Callanan and Loughlin, 2021; Denters & Rose, 2005).

All in all, Dutch local democracies share similarities with many local democracies elsewhere. Given the specific aspects shaping the relationship between citizens and local councillors, they resemble more closely local democracies in Nordic and Rhine-landic countries such as Belgium and Sweden. The findings are therefore more likely to apply in these latter cases.

Citizens' Expectations: Qualitative Research in Two Municipalities

We study citizens' expectations of local councillors based on qualitative interviews conducted in two research projects in two different municipalities, using the same methods of data collection. In both projects, we conducted so-called street interviews with citizens, as these also facilitate access to (digitally) illiterate, non-Dutch speaking, and survey-weary citizens who are hard to reach with internet questionnaires. The first project focused on citizens in a large urban conglomeration with many relatively poor people (n=113), the second on a relatively wealthy mid-sized amalgamated municipality harbouring a variety of countryside villages, hamlets, and small towns (n=20). The interviews in the first municipality were conducted in October-November 2022; the interviews in the second municipality in June 2025. The interviews took place in different parts of the municipalities. In the large urban conglomeration, we selected four districts that varied in the turnout rates in the 2022 municipal elections: two districts with a turnout below the municipal average, one around the municipal average, and one with a relatively high turnout. These differences in turnout largely coincide with socioeconomic differences, with the districts with the lowest turnout also being those with the lowest socioeconomic status. In both municipalities, we conducted interviews at different locations (near primary schools; in a petting zoo; in shopping centres; in parks, etc.), and at different times. Although we approached people largely at random, we did pay attention to variation in gender, age, and ethnic background.

As part of this qualitative endeavour, we used open questions, not pre-informed by conceptualisations of any representative role. We did not ask specifically what people thought of the concept of representation, as previous research indicated that people are rather unfamiliar with the word (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2018). In the first municipality, we usually began with a question such as "Are you familiar with this area?" or "Do you live nearby?". If people answered yes, we explained that we were conducting research on voter turnout in the municipal elections in the neighbourhood and that we would like to ask them a few questions about it. We then asked them whether they voted in the municipal elections of 2022 and why they did or did not do so, since this was the project's main research question (see Van Bochove et al., 2023).

Since the municipal elections of 2022 were already a few years ago when we conducted the street interviews in the second municipality, we started there with a

different question, namely, whether someone liked to live in that municipality. In both municipalities, we then asked them whether certain things should be done differently or better in their municipality, and to whom they did or would address their concerns. We also asked to what extent local councillors would feature as potential access point for their concerns, and why (not). Most crucially, we furthermore asked them what they expect from local councillors, whether they would be willing (or not) to vote in local council elections, and why (not).

The street interviews usually took a few minutes, up to a maximum of 20 minutes. The interviews were not recorded. Interviewers took notes and wrote out the spoken text soon after. The statements from citizens presented in the findings section are therefore not verbatim quotes, but reconstructed summaries based on field notes, aiming to reflect their intended meaning as accurately as possible. All citizen respondents were asked for their consent with using their statements anonymously in our studies.

We analysed the data from the street interviews with citizens in the two municipalities deductively, using the five representative roles described in the literature, and inductively. We used qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti for coding. We could find hardly any references alluding to the traditional or new representative roles, for which we formulated instead the broad code 'expectations of councillors', containing 10 sub-codes (such as 'no expectations', 'listening to citizens', 'being visible', 'being honest', 'keeping promises', and 'standing up for certain groups'). In presenting the findings, we have combined these codes into four categories (1. No or low expectations; 2. Standing up for (certain groups in) the neighbourhood; 3. Being visible, listening to citizens, and knowing what is going on; 4. Being honest and keeping promises) and a residual category.

Councillors' Expectations: Three Data Sources From a Variety of Municipalities

Data on councillors' expectations come from three qualitative data sources that all include foremost open questions on representation. The first data source is drawn from a research project examining the way local councillors cope with aggression (R1). This project also included the question which role they like the most – representation ("*volksvertegenwoordiging*"), setting policy goals ("*kaderstelling*"), or scrutiny ("*controle*") – and why. For over 20 years, local councillors have been taught to describe their roles in these three terms, which means that these roles are very familiar to them. We thus hoped to gain insight into how they perceived their representative role, drawing from a wide variety of interviewees (n=60). The 60 participants were recruited from nine urban and rural municipalities in the provinces of Utrecht, South Holland, and North Brabant. Participants varied in age, years of council experience, gender, affiliation with a local or national party, and occupational background. Together, they constituted a representative cross-section of the overall population of

Dutch municipal councillors. The interviews were conducted between January 2024 and March 2025. All participants provided written informed consent prior to taking part in the interview, and all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (or near-verbatim). To guarantee the anonymity promised to the respondents, we only refer here to their gender, their age category, and the size of their municipality.

The second data source is derived from the research project on turnout and representation in a large city we referred to above, in which we also asked local councillors (n=15) what they expect from local councillors in January and February 2023 (R2). Local councillors were given a form on which they could answer several questions anonymously, to be submitted two weeks later. This allowed them to reflect on their answers. One question started relatively closed: "What do you see as a right interpretation of your representative role? Do you want to follow the party line, act according to your own judgment, or consider all interests and needs? And why?" (*"Wat zie jij als een goede invulling van je volksvertegenwoordigende rol? Wil jij vooral de partijlijn volgen, naar eigen inzicht handelen of alle belangen en behoeften meewegen? En waarom?"*). They could, and did, motivate their answer to this question. In addition, we also reflected with them on the questions in a two-hour session on turnout and representation in their municipality.

The third data source is derived from a research project on political representation (R3), involving a series of individual interviews with local councillors in a municipality (in which we also held interviews with citizens), varying in terms of party affiliation, age, function (back benchers; council group leader) and policy focus (n=13). The entire interview was devoted to the theme of representation, whereby we specifically asked them to define this concept. We also asked them whether they could provide instances of good and bad representative activities by local councillors (including themselves), and explain why they would perceive these instances as good or bad. All respondents were asked for their consent to use their statements anonymously in our studies.

We analysed these three different sources the same way, seeking traces of the various representative roles conceptualised. The codes used to determine these roles are as follows (based on Denters et al., 2020):

- Trustee: focus on general interest of the entire community; competent; listen to others' arguments and expertise before deciding according to own judgement
- Party delegate: presenting party message in municipal council; follow party's programme and voters when making decisions
- Democratic watchdog: monitoring democratic quality decision-making; provide citizens and local organisations access to decision-making; guarantees that all interests are taken into account in decision-making
- Ombuds politician: addressing particularistic interests, grievances, and needs of individual citizens, groups, organisations or specific parts of the municipality

In addition to the operationalised roles, we kept our eyes open for other potential understandings of the way local councillors are expected to act in the interests of inhabitants. Thus, we adopted both a deductive and inductive analysis, as was done with the citizen data. Table 3 summarizes the data collections among citizens and local councillors.

Table 3. Overview of data collections among citizens and local councillors

Type of actors	Research format	Location	Timing	Respondents	Key questions
<i>Citizens</i>	Street interviews on local turnout and representation	Various neighbourhoods in large urban conglomeration	October-November 2022	n = 113	- Where do you address your concerns on local issues? - What do you expect from local councillors?
<i>Citizens</i>	Street interviews on local representation	Across mid-sized, partly rural amalgamated municipality	June 2025	n = 20	- Where do you address your concerns on local issues? - What do you expect from local councillors?
<i>Local councillors</i>	Interviews on response to aggression	From nine urban and rural municipalities	January 2024 – March 2025	n = 60	- Which role (including representation) do you like most and why?
<i>Local councillors</i>	Open survey and focus group on local turnout and representation	Large urban conglomeration	January – February 2023	n = 15	- What do you consider the right interpretation of your representative role and why?
<i>Local councillors</i>	Interviews on local representation	Mid-sized, partly rural amalgamated municipality	2022 - 2025	n = 13	- How do you define representation? - What constitutes a good and bad example of representation and why?

Findings

Citizens' Expectations of Local Councillors' Representative Roles

Based on the street interviews in the two municipalities, it became clear that many citizens have low levels of trust in politics and politicians, both locally and nationally. Many mentioned that they do not feel seen or heard as citizens, and that politicians, in their view, are unaware of the problems people face in their daily lives – especially in poorer neighbourhoods (see Van Bochove et al., 2023). When asked about their expectations of local councillors, this feeling of not being adequately represented was echoed. From the responses, we identified four types of expectations

that citizens have of local councillors. First of all, citizens across all four districts of the large municipality, as well as in the mid-sized municipality, mentioned that they do not have any – or very low – expectations of local councillors. Two other types of expectations – relating to visibility and honesty – were also found in both municipalities. The expectation of standing up for the district – or for specific groups within it – was more commonly found in the large municipality, particularly in districts where many citizens felt ‘abandoned’ by politicians, which tended to be the municipality’s poorer areas. We further explain these types of expectations and illustrate them with quotes from the street interviews. After that, we reflect on how these findings relate to the ideal-typical roles of representatives as described in the literature.

No or Low Expectations

Citizens often have few or no expectations of local councillors. Some citizens mention that this is due to a lack of knowledge. For example, a respondent said: “I am unaware of what municipal government entails and what local councillors actually do, so I do not have any expectations about it” (female, 26, large municipality). Another respondent said: “I have no idea who is in the local council and what a local councillor does” (female, middle-aged, large municipality). Low or no expectations are not only based on a lack of familiarity with the work and personal identity of local councillors, but often also on a lack of trust. “I do not trust the municipality of [city name], and therefore I do not have any expectations of municipal councillors”, a respondent (male, 50, large municipality) said. Particularly in neighbourhoods with traditionally low voter turnout, voting is regarded as a futile effort. Citizens in these neighbourhoods often perceive politics as serving ‘the rich’, while ‘ordinary people’ do not attract attention (see also: Van Bochove, Klarenbeek & Moors, 2022). This lack of confidence in itself also contributes to low expectations of local councillors. Some respondents stated that national and European politicians have a greater impact on what happens locally than local politicians. Even if a local councillor wishes to advocate for a particular district or neighbourhood, this effort is seen as having little impact: “They can’t do anything. They are ruled by Brussels” (female, 80+, large municipality). While most citizens who have no or low expectations base these on negative images of municipal councillors, sometimes citizens also have low expectations because they are satisfied with how things are going in their municipality. For instance, a respondent mentioned:

I don't really have expectations [of local councillors]. It's okay the way it is, I guess. But still, I do respect that they do it. It doesn't seem like something I'd enjoy – always having people complain to you. It takes up a lot of time. I do appreciate that. (female, 65, middle-sized municipality)

Standing up for (Certain Groups in) the Neighbourhood

When citizens have expectations of municipal councillors, these often centre on the hope that local councillors will stand up for (certain groups experiencing difficulties in) their neighbourhood. This expectation is most prevalent in the large municipality. While the literature on different representative roles of local councillors distinguishes between focusing on general interest ('trustee') and on individual citizens ('ombuds politicians'), many citizens actually expect a focus on a level in between. The relevance of local councillors is perceived at the scale of specific groups within particular neighbourhoods. For example, one respondent stated: "I expect a local councillor to organise more support for families and young people in the neighbourhood" (male, 23, large municipality). Another interviewee was sceptical about the municipality's presence in their neighbourhood. He said: "I hope that local councillors could offer more support to people facing financial and other difficulties" (male, 25, large municipality). Similarly, a citizen of the middle-sized municipality said: "The municipality mostly focuses on older people, not so much on the youth. Especially teenagers, around the age of fifteen. If there were more activities for them, you'd probably see less, um... crime". Numerous citizens in both municipalities view safety as a key concern in their neighbourhoods. One of the respondents said: "Local councillors should think more about safety than about permits" (female, 59, large municipality). In some cases, citizens' expectations do come close to the image of local councillors as 'ombuds politicians' who focus on individual citizens' interests. Respondents mention examples concerning housing ("our current home is too small for a family with five children"), foundation and sewer problems, and future plans about a recreational area that a respondent often uses.

Being Visible, Listening to Citizens and Knowing What is Going On

The expectation that local councillors stand up for a certain (group of people in the) neighbourhood is often combined with the expectation of visibility and approachability. One respondent argued that councillors should make themselves seen in the neighbourhood as much as possible, "not just during elections". She continued: "Councillors should feel engaged to show their face and occasionally walk around the district" (female, 47, large municipality). Another respondent said: "There is little contact between politicians and the people" (female, 70+, large municipality). According to citizens in both municipalities, local councillors must know what is happening in (different neighbourhoods in) the municipality. Regular visits to the neighbourhood, and talking and listening to people living there, are often mentioned as ways to achieve this. Several respondents expressed the view that local politicians are too far removed from the daily realities of citizens. One of them said:

I think it's important that they listen to people's concerns. I feel like they're pretty far removed from reality. They should send council members out into the field, to have conversations like this, to be visible. (female, 34, middle-sized municipality)

Another respondent said: "They should come and live here for a while. Aldermen all live in nice houses" (male, 65+, large municipality). Another respondent also referred to the difference in socioeconomic status between local councillors and ordinary citizens: "They have no idea what poverty is. If you don't have to deal with it, you also don't know what's going on" (female, 61, large municipality). In short, citizens experience a distance between their daily reality and the policies implemented by the municipality. Lived experience of problems and talking to real people, instead of policy based on numbers, is what many citizens consider necessary.

Being Honest and Keeping Promises

Citizens expect local councillors to be honest and to be held accountable for what they say. "You don't vote for lies", as one respondent put it (male, 33, large municipality). Another remarked: "There are people you have some confidence in, but no one really stands out. They have to earn it" (female, 70+, large municipality). She believes that everything done should "have a clear rationale and justification; that's how you build trust. No empty words. Honesty lasts the longest". Still, some are more critical: "They lie through their teeth. You don't have a say" (male, 70+, large municipality). Many citizens, above all, expect honest and transparent communication, especially when previously made promises cannot be fulfilled. What citizens long for is to be heard, acknowledged, and treated justly (Moors & Stans, 2025).

Other expectations. While the above-mentioned expectations were most prevalent, other expectations were sometimes also mentioned. For example, a respondent mentioned that she expects that municipal councillors "represent the vision that voters endorse by supporting their party" (female, 30+, large municipality). This reflects the representative role of the 'party delegate' as described in the literature. A few respondents also gave answers that relate to the 'democratic watchdog'. A respondent, for instance, said: "I expect from local councillors that they are critical of the municipal executive. There are always big plans to stroke their own egos, costing another 100 million more than planned. They need to be more critical of that" (male, 45, large municipality).

In sum, the results of the citizen interviews show that citizens' expectations of local councillors mainly align with Pitkin's (1967, p. 209) classical definition of representation: councillors are expected to act "in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them." Of the five ideal-typical roles described in the literature, only

elements of the ombuds politician role were found regularly, with local councillors expected to seek solutions for problems of individual citizens. Additionally, a few respondents gave answers that relate to the roles of party delegate and democratic watchdog.

After focusing on citizens' perspectives, we now turn to how local councillors themselves view their roles as representatives.

Local Councillors' Expectations of Their Representative Roles

In the early 2000s, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior launched a so-called renewal impetus (*vernieuwingimpuls*) in local politics, accompanying legislative changes to distinguish more clearly the functions of the local council and the local executive board. As part of the renewal impetus, the three traditional roles of legislatures were emphasised with the triad *kaderstelling* (setting policy goals and norms, as local equivalent of legislation), *controle* (scrutiny) and *volksvertegenwoordiging* (literally, representation of the people). Ever since, this triad has been extensively used to describe the roles of local councillors, for instance, in their introduction programmes, reflection sessions, and courses, and in political analyses and media reports. Consequently, most, if not all, Dutch local councillors are familiar with the concept of representation. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is easy for all of them to indicate what they understand as representation. For instance, some remain silent for a while before trying to answer. Others admit they have not thought about it much: "I think that someone as local councillor is not much aware of those roles, because you just do what you do, and you just go ahead, you know. So, it is not as if we reflect upon that very consciously" (R1-31, female, large municipality, 18–35 years old).

Representative Role: Integral to Their Function or Separate Activity

The councillors provide varying answers to the question of what their role as representatives entails. Some councillors perceive their representative role as self-evident of their function, just by being elected (see e.g. R1-16, female, large municipality, 36–55 years old). Other councillors perceive all their activities as integral to their representative role: "Yes, I am always the people's representative. That's what I do when I set the policy goals, and that's what I also do when I control. So, that is not a separate task in itself" (R1-13, male, large municipality, 18–35 years old). Yet other councillors clearly distinguish representation from setting the main policy goals and scrutiny. For them, representation boils down to all kinds of responsiveness activities directed at citizens, such as listening to or talking with their constituents and other inhabitants in order to obtain information about what the situation is, to find out what inhabitants want, or to give an account of what they have done for them (see e.g. R1-15; R1-40; R1-42; R1-43; R1-44; R1-47, and R1-48). These responsiveness activities can be neglected when time is in short supply for local laymen politicians (R1-31,

female, large municipality, 18–35 years old), or when a council is rather self-absorbed with activities within the town hall (R1-60, female, small municipality, 36–55 years old). In sum, representation is differently understood by local councillors as integral to their function or as a separate activity.

Ombuds politician: a Contested Role

Many local councillors consider it desirable to direct individual citizens with complaints or problems to the specific municipal unit responsible for addressing those issues. Beyond that, local councillors' expectations of their responsiveness activities towards citizens vary substantially. Some, for example, embrace a role as ombuds politician tackling (also practical) problems of individual citizens:

And if no civil servant or alderman does anything about it, I think a council member should take it up. It's such a small matter, but that small matter can become a big deal for an inhabitant. (...) It's inhabitants' politics; you let the residents guide you (...) but: the resident isn't always right. (...) But if you think a resident is wrong, you have to be able and willing to explain it very well or propose alternatives, and I think that's part of inhabitants' politics'. (R3-5; male, mid-sized municipality, 56–75 years)

Others rather distance themselves clearly from the role of ombuds politician, describing it pejoratively as 'clientelism' (e.g., R3-2; male, mid-sized municipality, 56–75 years). Ombudswork, with its focus on particularistic interests, would harm the general interest, argue others (see e.g. R3-1, male, mid-sized municipality, 18–35 years). Ombudswork has become (in)famous in Dutch politics by some local independent lists pursuing "*ombudspolitiek*" (ombuds politics). But not all these lists propagate this role. Even within individual local independent lists, local councillors disagree, with some embracing and others distancing themselves from the role of ombuds politician. Even though the role of ombuds politician is a contested one, respondents clearly recognize it as representative role.

Combination of Roles

Local councillors often refer to the notion of the general interest. Some emphasise that local councillors should transcend not only individual problems, but also partisan divisions:

You assume that not party interests are leading, but the general interest. (R1-52, male, large municipality, 36–55 years old)

You do not only represent your own constituency, but according to me also all inhabitants within your municipality. (R1-22, male, small municipality, 36-55 years old)

The notion of the general interest beyond individual interests or partisan understandings of general interests points to the role of trustee, which would follow their own judgment after obtaining expertise and deliberation with fellow elected representatives, according to the traditional definition. Quite some local councillors, however, combine the notion of the general interest with other representative roles. Some combine elements of the trustee role with the partisan role. They start from a position informed by their party ideology, but seek a common decision through deliberation in the council (see e.g., R3-1, male, mid-sized municipality, 18–35 years). Thus, they do not stick to a partisan definition of the general interest, but seek to form the general interest with councillors of different (partisan) backgrounds.

Whereas the representative role of trustee has traditionally had an elitist streak, councillors seeking the general interest also often emphasise the importance of citizen participation (R3-1, male, mid-sized municipality, 18–35 years). Others also combine elements of the trustee role with features of a party delegate and a democratic watchdog: “Own judgment, party line in the back of my mind, interests and needs of district/area – taking the ones concerned into account. Everything is a consideration” (R2-1, anonymous). When an issue is mentioned in the party manifesto, these local councillors report acting in a partisan manner; on issues not mentioned, they rely on their own judgment or take into account the interests of citizens and local organisations (see e.g., R2-1; 2-6; 2-10; 2-11). As their local electoral manifestos can be fairly short, some councillors of local independent lists rather pragmatically form their opinion on the general interest after contacting a few acquaintances with knowledge of the issue at hand and discussions in the council – without much idea about the general interest in advance.

Various local councillors emphasise that they are also expected to represent inhabitants who are not heard in decision-making processes (see e.g. R1-34, male, large municipality, 36–55 years old), for instance by actively supporting the voice of unheard inhabitants (see e.g. R3-6, male, mid-sized municipality, 56–75 years). In these expectations, the role of democratic watchdog can be recognised. It is most often an additional role, as also initially conceptualised (Denters, 2005), combined with the role of trustee and also party delegate. Some, for instance, motivate their activities as democratic watchdogs as part of their party ideology, emphasising the value of citizen participation (R3-6, male, mid-sized municipality, 56–75 years). In sum, local councillors combine elements of the various roles.

Distinct Party Delegates

Whereas the roles of trustee and democratic watchdog are often somewhat blurred with elements of other roles, certain foremost left-wing local councillors take a distinct partisan role:

I find representation of the people difficult. I find the word "people" already very difficult. I represent a political movement, so not others (...) I represent a group of people. (R3-2, male, mid-sized municipality, 56–75 years)

I find representation of the people... I wanted to say that I find that most important, but that's not fully correct. I am a people's representative, but actually address only a part of the inhabitants. I find it important that the dissenting voice that we as small, left-progressive party in a right-wing municipality make heard, is present. (R1-54, male, large municipality, 36–55 years old)

Although local politics is often described as less ideological and more pragmatic, party delegates can be clearly denoted as a distinct role among the local councillors studied.

In sum, elements of all conceptualised representative roles could be recognised in the expectations of local councillors. With the exception of some partisan councillors, however, most local councillors hold expectations that combine elements of various roles.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the qualitative studies of citizens' and local councillors' expectations regarding the latter's representative role? First, traditional representative roles are not fully obsolete. Despite the alleged decline of political parties, the party delegate can still be denoted as a distinct role among the local councillors studied. The role of voters' delegate is hardly visible if at all, but elements of the trustee role, such as seeking the general interests beyond partisan or other divisions, can still be observed. The alternative representative roles of ombuds politician, even if contested, and democratic watchdog, were also present among local councillors, and more sparingly among citizens. Thus, the data offer sufficient doubts about sticking to the three traditional conceptualisations. The few existing studies of representative roles in the Netherlands among local councillors were therefore right to include the new role of democratic watchdog in addition to the traditional roles of trustee and party delegate. But the role of ombuds politician should be included too in Dutch studies. Future research on local politics beyond the Netherlands should also reflect which representative roles it takes into account. This holds in particular for local democracies in Nordic and Rhinelandic countries, given their resemblances with Dutch local democracies.

In empirical studies, the traditional conceptualisations are often presented as alternatives to which actors adhere. Also in this respect, the findings in this study

raise doubts, as at least councillors often combine notions of various representative roles, such as the role of party delegate, trustee, and democratic watchdog, depending on the issue at hand. Even though it is no surprise that empirical reality does not fully fit ideal-typical definitions of representative roles, our findings warn against survey questions commonly used in political science research in which the representative roles are presented as mutually exclusive options. Instead, research should be done on when and why local councillors switch between roles (cf. Andeweg, 1997, on switching by national representatives).

Additionally, the combinations of roles suggest that we should be cautious in interpreting the findings as conclusive evidence for the presence of the conceptualised roles, whether traditional or alternative. Instead, the findings raise doubts about these scholarly conceptualisations. Most strikingly, the traditionally elitist role of trustee is regularly combined with support for direct citizen participation. Thus, our results call for a more fundamental conceptual reconsideration of what it actually means to be a trustee in current (local) participatory politics – which is quite different from late 18th-century national politics in the United Kingdom. Which value does the own judgement of representatives still have, when decision-making would increasingly involve citizens and local organisations directly? Scholars should take that into account when they study local councillors' perceptions of citizen involvement in policy-making.

Our study also showed that citizens rarely express their expectations in terms of the roles conceptualised in scholarly literature. Their expectations could also hardly be structured according to the various conceptualisations. It may partly result from the limited extent to which citizens reflect on local politics, or from the limited time available for street interviews. Longer street interviews in cafes, pet zoos, or at a bench in a park, however, did usually not provide expectations resembling the conceptualisation in the scholarly literature. This further raises doubts about whether quantitative studies among citizens, guided by scholarly conceptualisations, may shape rather than reflect their understanding of representative roles. In sum, the various qualitative data sources we used suggest to thoroughly reflect on the traditional conceptualisations of representative roles by (local) representatives.

Beyond the specific roles, we also found a certain commonality between the expectations of citizens and local councillors. They both often understand representation as responsive activities directed to the citizens, such as listening to and talking with citizens, and knowing what is going on. As certain local councillors pointed out, these activities are rather time-consuming. Being absorbed by the maelstrom of decisions within the town hall, they indicate that they do not always have sufficient time for responsiveness activities. Given citizens' expectations, this is rather problematic. Citizens typically expect local councillors to be visible and to keep promises. With several local councillors finding it difficult to execute responsive activities, it is hard

for citizens to see them and to assess whether they fulfil their promises. The limited media coverage of local politics can hardly compensate for the invisibility of councillors.

All in all, our study showed the value of qualitative research with open questions on the issue of representative roles local councillors are expected to fulfil. It raises serious doubts about casting these expectations in terms of the traditional conceptualisations: trustee, delegate, and party delegate. Meanwhile, we found preliminary evidence for alternative conceptualisations: democratic watchdog and ombuds politician. Further research steps should therefore be a thorough theoretical reconsideration of the conceptualisations of representative roles, and qualitative as well as quantitative research in other cases to determine which representative roles feature prominently in the expectations of citizens and local councillors today.

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