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**Constituency Town Halls in Canada and the Role
of the MP as Representative**

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Constituency Town Halls in Canada and the Role of the MP as Representative
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ABSTRACT

Members of Parliament (MPs) hold multiple and varying responsibilities as representatives, legislators, and party members in Canada's Westminster-based model of Parliament. As representatives, MPs use different methods to engage constituents and hear their views. This paper investigates the nature of citizen participation and representation in Canadian federal politics, specifically through constituency town halls organized by MPs and their staff. This work analyzes how constituency town halls contribute to the role of MPs as democratic representatives.

I accomplish this goal by complementing my professional experiences in Westminster in the United Kingdom and Parliament in Ottawa with research on citizen engagement in Canada and participatory democracy in Latin America. The paper will begin with a literature review on the nature of participatory democracy found in Porto Alegre, Brazil and its relationship with representative democracy, followed by a discussion of the role of representation and participation in Canadian democracy. Three case studies will ensue, involving constituency town halls organized by backbench MPs from NDP, Liberal and Conservative parties of urban, suburban, and rural ridings. The analysis to follow will discuss how the town halls contribute to the role of the MP as a representative of their constituents, and what the MP tangibly brings back to Parliament with the understanding that the case studies are not representative of all town halls. This article is an attempt to start a deeper conversation about the nature of representation of MPs in Parliament and the interplay between MPs and citizen participation in constituencies.

I argue that MPs organize their town halls differently with various objectives, but the most insightful lesson is that rather than political staging or institutionalizing civic participation of a binding nature, Canadian town halls seem to be more of an exercise of consulting citizens to assist the MP in their representative role of making informed decisions in Parliament. Therefore, neither are they solely a political ploy for good image nor a long-term institutionalized means of citizen participation but rather lie somewhere in the middle where MPs hold binding decision-making on policy. Citizen engagement seems to be employed by MPs as a measure of public opinion and can be a motivation for an MP to influence party platforms, create private members' bills and communicate with ministers responsible for that particular portfolio.

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Introduction

“It all begins at the constituency level” (Hon. Fletcher, 2010). Minister of State for Democratic Reform, The Honourable Steven Fletcher is referring both to the democratic process and the work of a Member of Parliament (MP): without the involvement of constituents, MPs cannot be elected into office nor can they continue to be successful in representing their community. Institutionalizing civic engagement is an opportunity to allow power to emanate from the constituency where democracy begins, into the broader public forum – Parliament – of debate and law-making. Ways in which political representatives act on this conception varies, from online consultations to citizen assemblies to federal budget consultations. Town halls are an understudied form of engagement between MPs and their constituents, in which MPs ask community members for their views to learn more about issues in the riding. This paper focuses on that element of empowerment: how do MPs engage the public using town halls and what is the contribution of town halls to the role of the MP as a representative?

As a preliminary study of MPs’ constituency town halls, I interview three MPs and their staff from suburban, rural and urban ridings. I also use the reports by the MP offices to understand better what happens during and after town halls. For reasons of confidentiality, I refrain from naming the MPs and their party affiliations. First, I outline the interplay between representative democracy and more participatory forms of engagement between MPs and their constituents. This is followed by a discussion of representation and participation and how they are measured in this paper. I then introduce the three case studies and analyze them for insight into the realities of town halls and their contribution to democratic representation.

Why should a study like this matter? Throughout my time in Canada’s federal Parliament, I have learned that “politics is local”, a common adage used by local, regional and national politicians to depict the dynamics of politics. From interviewing over 60 MPs of all parties in the fall of 2009 to working with MPs on both Opposition and Government sides to parliamentary committees and conversations in the halls of Parliament, I have come to realize a common thread linking politicians’ concerns: an increasingly disengaged as well as frustrated electorate. Despite claims that perhaps citizens are content with their democracies and do not see the need to vote, the voter turnout is severely low among young people, who will form future demographics. Indeed, the national voter turnout rate was at its lowest in the last Canadian election (Institute of Wellbeing, 2010; Milner, 2007). Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) argue that it is in the interests of government, political parties, and policymakers to include citizens in decision-making because of the declining voter turnout rates and weakening party membership, which are signs that current opportunities and spaces for public involvement are neither sufficient nor effective. This leads one to consider what one MP told me: town halls are “unused tools in an MP’s toolbox”.

Since we began our parliamentary internship, we have tried to discover “what MPs know” - what they know about their job, the constituencies they serve, and how to be effective in their roles. One of these knowns is how MPs use town halls to enhance their roles as representatives. Over this 10-month journey, I have discussed with MPs their intentions for engaging their constituents and what they bring back to Parliament after the experience. I have also had the unique privilege of visiting constituencies west to east to north, from the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia to Brandon, Manitoba to Toronto, Ontario to Quebec City and to Iqaluit, Nunavut, hearing from constituents and what matters to them. I have also spoken to numerous MPs about their role as representatives and this paper is a compilation of these encounters. I have learned from experience that constituents of all backgrounds and interests want to be heard; they have diverse needs, and they want their needs to be addressed which, in turn, need to be communicated in Parliament if the institution is to be truly representative.

Participatory Representative Democracy

What kind of democracy are we talking about? A democracy in which it suffices to have Parliamentarians speak and decide on our behalf? A democracy that consults citizens and supports the representative role of Parliamentarians? One that engages citizens in a deeper dialogue with their representatives and gives citizens direct influence over government policy? I will explore the various dimensions of the model of participatory representative democracy within a parliamentary framework in Canada.

Participatory democracy is an ideal type of local engagement of citizens. The model emerged from the recognition that limited conceptions of democracy as simply voting, that is, Schumpeterian notions, are insufficient to sustaining a healthy democracy. Leftist governments understand democracy to involve, contrary to the past, the engagement of citizens and pluralistic participation. Participatory democracy has become a goal for leftist governments in Latin America in their decentralization projects, such as that of Evo Morales in Bolivia, the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) in Brazil, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Further, leftist governments in Latin America are responding to existing democratic deficits in well-established democracies (Avritzer, 2002; Barkzac, 2001; Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999; Hartling & Wells, 2006; Koonings, 2004; Moynihan, 2007; Nylén, 2003; O’Donnell, 1998; Ponniah, 2006; Wampler, 2007b; Wampler & Avritzer, 2004; Wilpert, 2007). As James Early (2009) suggests, participatory democracy is the “bedrock” upon which to build potential advances in democratization. Participatory democracy moves beyond representation by elites to a more substantive rather than procedural version of democracy, carving out an institutionalized role for citizens to decide on policy through deliberation and engagement with elected officials, in the aim of deepening democracy (Avritzer, 2002; Nylén, 2003).

Participatory democracy is conceptualized as a counterpart to representative democracy, rather than its replacement or challenger. Participatory democracy is implemented to complement representative democracy, providing tools to citizens to influence government policy (Avritzer, 2002; Brautigam, 2004; Moynihan, 2007;

Souza, 2001; Wagner, 2004a; Wampler, 2007b). This implementation of participatory democracy arose out of the recognition that government officials do not always understand the local realities facing citizens (Brautigam, 2004; Wagner, 2004a,b; Wampler, 2007b). Direct and indirect forms of democracy coexist in a participatory democracy where citizens contribute to the work of elected members of legislative bodies by meeting to deliberate future policy and concomitantly electing representatives. As an example, the 16 districts of Porto Alegre, Brazil combine elements of “direct and representative democracy” (Baiocchio, 2003, p. 53). The theory behind representative participatory democracy is based in the rule of the people, in which decisions reflect what people want. Representative democracy cannot guarantee genuine reflection of the electorate’s aspirations largely due to pressure exerted by powerful economic interest groups that have sway over decisions of representatives. Rather than deliberating, representatives are very much consumed with electoral competition and party discipline. In contrast, participatory democracy places citizens at the centre as active participants in their democracy, creating a complementary but not parallel power to representative authority, where a strong bond of ‘co-governance’ and accountability is formed between representatives and local councils organized by citizens (Ackerman, 2004; Goldfrank, 2007b; Moynihan, 2007; Wilpert, 2007).

Avritzer’s (2002) contribution to the body of literature on participatory democracy is noteworthy in that his account unites deliberation among citizens with concrete forms of decision-making. Avritzer (2002) refers to Porto Alegre as a model in which a new public space emerges and engages in an intensified relationship with government power, as evidenced in Appendix 1. He contrasts participatory democracy as a more substantive democracy and representative democracy as more limited and procedural by demonstrating the binding nature of citizen decisions in Porto Alegre’s participatory democracy. Avritzer (2002) points to ‘participatory publics’ as the new institutionalized public space in which civic participation is intensified and citizens are accorded direct decision-making power. This new space is made possible by grassroots developments in civil society, in which mobilization at the public level joins with institutionalization at the political level to form deliberative, participatory publics. He refers to Porto Alegre where much of the participatory agenda arose from calls from civil society to broaden access to decision-making and deepen democratization where all voices are heard (Baiocchio, 2003; Waifelisz et al., 2003; Wampler, 2007a). Avritzer (2002) approaches this participatory process by moving beyond post-war democratization theories that dichotomize elites and the masses. In response, Goldfrank (2007a) affirms, “scholars should look below to ‘participatory publics’ for other emerging democratic innovations” (p. 149). This new public sphere becomes an “ideal speech situation” as articulated by Jurgen Habermas (1996, 1974) where “open-ended conversations”, “issues of common interest”, a “second-person attitude”, and “public-spirited communication” dominate (Baiocchio, 2003, p. 54). Participatory publics are a central attribute of participatory democracy as they embody this conversion of specific needs into public issues as community concerns.

Representation

Constitutionally and procedurally, MPs are elected to represent a certain area of Canada, called a constituency or riding. Among the various roles of the MP as legislator, citizen-advocate, ombudsperson, ambassador, representative, and party member, the MP holds direct responsibility to represent the constituents of their riding. The MP is directly accountable to this constituency and is elected by these individuals. This representation is reflected in many ways, such as MPs' voting positions, caucus participation, correspondence to Government ministries, questions posed in the House of Commons, and investigations in Parliamentary committees.

There are numerous definitions for "representation" in politics. Pitkin (1972) refers to representation as giving and having authority, and does not necessarily imply a democratic context. In other words, representation is reflected by a King who represents a nation just as much as a president who represents a democratic public. Pitkin (1972) does, however, distinguish between "...sham and real representative institutions" (p. 2) which implies a certain type of measurement of representation. Pitkin's (1972) definition is most helpful to this paper because representation gives authority to citizens through elections and consultations, while MPs also have authority as representatives making decisions on behalf of citizens. Plotke (1997) studies representation on a historical trajectory since the Cold War, highlighting the evolution of representation from elites and interest groups to entrenched participation of citizens with integration of politics and society. Brown (2006) highlights the ambiguity of political representation but does note the importance of representation in a democracy. Brown (2006) also acknowledges the complexity of representation which "...includes multiple elements" such as authorization, accountability, expertise, participation and resemblance (p. 206). Participation is the elemental focus of this paper in how it interacts with representation as both an internal and external variable of representation.

The Canadian Study of Parliament Group (1994) features Edmund Burke's work on representation and his three models of trustee, mandate/party and Jefferson/delegate representation. Burke's notion of the MP as trustee involves the theory that MPs are elected to use their best judgment and make decisions on behalf of their constituents. The mandate or party model operates with the understanding that the MP is elected into a party representing the party's interests as a member of the team, with strong levels of party discipline. The Jefferson or delegate model "...stresses participation by the represented" and is most useful to this paper (Brown, 2006, p. 206). This third model of representation - which places the onus on the representative to represent their electorate's wishes to their best ability - is examined below in the town hall case studies.

The Value of Participation beyond Elections

There is a strong will among Canadians and their representatives to have citizens involved and participate in the policy process. As Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) state and Armit (2007) confirms, "Survey data indicate that Canadians want to play a

more meaningful role in the policy process and are less willing to defer to the expertise of policy elites” (p. iii). Concomitantly, representatives recognize the value of consulting citizens and general public input in policy creation. As Brown (2006) states, there lies great value in examining how citizen panels contribute to the “representative field”. In fact, Turnbull and Aucoin note (2006) that, “...most citizens who have not previously been engaged come away from these exercises with an increased interest in participation. This finding alone should justify the resources committed by government to such exercises” (p. v). Brown (2006), however, notes that these methods of participation hold “limited but beneficial contribution to the representative fields of contemporary democratic societies” (p. 2). The reason for this is due to citizen panels involving no binding decision-making power, rather holding an advisory role on complex policy issues and stimulating public discourse among ordinary citizens. In contrast, Gibson (1992) demonstrates that citizen panels and constituency assemblies sometimes create change faster than government could. As Motsi (2009) accounts, “The United Nations considers that public participation is an objective of value in and of itself – in other words, it is a fundamental human right to participate in society’s decision-making processes”. Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) refer to common obstacles as Brown (2006), and add that governments are weary of involving the public in decision-making. The scholars also emphasize the value of public input as a process where social capital, social trust and civic knowledge become strengthened. At its core, civic engagement aims to create meaningful dialogue between legislators, policymakers and citizens beyond elections (Goodin, 2009).

Levels of Participation

Representatives seek participation in different ways, and the framework used in this paper to evaluate the three case study town halls comes from Gail Motsi’s June 2nd, 2009 paper at the Institute on Governance entitled *Evaluating Citizen Engagement in Policy Making*. Motsi (2009) sketches three levels of participation on a continuum: communication - consultation - engagement. Whereas communication involves the least civic participation, engagement institutionalizes participation and empowers citizens to the greatest possible degree.

Measuring Participation

As Motsi (2009) declares, it is quite easy to forget about the purpose of a participatory exercise, thus she complements a focus on purpose and process. She measures civic participation using the following equation:

$$\text{purpose} + \text{process} + \text{people} + \text{context} = \text{outcome}$$

I incorporate this approach in my analysis, as in each case study I use the following categories: context, objective, organization, participation, and outcome. David Elton (2003) uses tools to evaluate citizen panels such as town halls: representation, agenda setting, access to information, discussions, option creation, individual participation, cost, and closure. This study’s focus is on closure and what the MP tangibly brings back to Parliament. One could draw a parallel between Motsi’s (2009) ‘outcome’ variable and Elton’s (2003) ‘closure’. In fact, Elton (2003) identifies town halls as

having poor closure and fair representation. He rates town halls 57% overall and roundtables as 81% overall, using the aforementioned indicators.

Methods of Participation

There are various forms of participation in a representative democracy. As Brown (2006) suggests, there is value in creating a conceptual and institutional space for citizen panels. These processes include protests, petitions, referenda, town halls, public surveys, e-consultations, roundtables, Royal Commissions, Parliamentary inquiries, committee research, independent review panels, and citizen assemblies. Canada is well experienced in this arena, as British Columbia and Ontario have held citizen assemblies on electoral reform, the federal Government has organized pre-budgetary nation-wide consultations, a rail freight service review, an independent review panel on the National Capital Commission, and most recently, the Liberal Party held roundtables of experts during prorogation in January 2010. As well, organizations hold consultations such as the Canadian International Council and The Centre for International Governance Innovation in order to encourage public debate on national and international issues. In contrast to participatory democracy in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Canadian civic engagement involves consultation more than binding civic decision-making. Despite these differences, it is clear that democracies across the globe are moving towards greater deliberation (Axworthy et al., 2009; Baiocchi, 2003, 2005; CPRN, 2007; Canadian Study of Parliament Group, 1994; Environment Canada, 2010; Goodin, 2008; Government of Canada, 2010; Institute of Wellbeing, 2010; Kearney et al., 2007; Milner, 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2009; Province of New Brunswick, 2008; Smith, 2009).

Constituency town halls are the focus of this paper as one among many methods to engage citizens and encourage democratic participation while connecting MPs to the people they represent. It is necessary to distinguish between a roundtable and town hall, as both terms are used interchangeably on Parliament Hill and I use them in this paper with different meanings. A roundtable, as one MP puts it, is not as frequent or inclusive as a town hall, involving select interest and expert groups. In contrast, town halls are held frequently and are open to all constituents to attend, held between three to five times a year. I choose to examine town halls because of the opportunity for an MP to represent his/her constituency with a greater understanding of the span of issues arising out of a meeting where everyone is invited.

Case Studies

As aforementioned, the focus of this study is on the ‘closure’ aspect of town halls: what do MPs tangibly bring back to Parliament after organizing constituency town halls. I analyze the cases using five categories: context, objective, organization, participation, and outcome. It so happens that the interviewed MPs fit into the three classifications of participation: communication, consultation and engagement.

1. A Case of Engagement

Context:

MP#1 is most experienced with town halls. In fact, he and his staff call them 'community dialogues' and 'open forums'. His constituency is also very active and engaged with local and federal issues. At an Arts Community forum his office welcomed, gathered, and organized submitted ideas during the forum for productive conversation. This MP has also produced a document for anyone to host Kitchen-Table Conversations with members of the community, and the host group can register with his office to chat with the MP for a few minutes by phone and discuss the group's recommendations.

Objective:

The MP takes a back seat in town halls, as he is there to listen and empower constituents. In the cycling summit town hall he acted as a catalyst to connect community organizers. He organizes town halls to listen to challenges and what the priorities of government should be.

Organization:

The parliamentary intern organized everything as she engaged with advisory groups who were working on cycling issues in the city. They met four times and the intern consulted the experts on cycling in the city who informed her of different cycling philosophies and the various types of riders in the city. The parliamentary intern thus held a roundtable discussion among these experts to discuss issues and get advice for organization of the town hall. In fact, the topic of how to make cycling infrastructure in the city safer and easier came out of a previous roundtable discussion among community interest groups. The intern then contacted the appropriate people for the town hall: posters around town, letters to interested groups, riding association mailings, and invites to other levels of government and MPs of other parties in the area. The office made sure to hold the event in an area that was bike accessible due to the expected participants.

Participation:

This constituency is quite active and informed about their city. There were just over 120 participants representing themselves and/or associations and co-ops. There were over 50 who did not attend but who wrote in and also posted thoughts on the web.

Outcome:

The MP's staff claims that his approach made this town hall successful. As the intern observes, "had he made it into a public relations event", the town hall wouldn't have been the excellent opportunity it was for the MP as representative to exercise his role. The three key messages that arose out of the meeting were the need to connect the suburbs with the city, education and awareness of cycling benefits, as well as year-

round maintenance of bike paths. During and after the event, the MP brought together the necessary groups at the local level and empowered them to initiate and advocate change. This MP worked closely with the municipality in order to align responsibilities of municipal and federal jurisdiction. With regards to bringing something tangible back to the Hill, his office wrote a report, shared with his caucus and on his website in order to inform and encourage further locally organized community dialogue initiatives. After conversing with the town hall organizer, it appears that the preparation for the town halls, which included the roundtable of experts significantly contributed to the efficiency and effectiveness of the town hall accomplishing set objectives.

2. A Case of Consultation

Context:

This MP (#2) has represented the riding since 1997. He was a municipal councillor for many years for the same area, which demonstrates his strong grasp of local engagement. He has held town halls on the following: pre-budget consultations, online petitions, pensions, Task Force on Women Entrepreneurs (with a report to Prime Minister's Office), youth, and health (recommendations sent to Romanow Commission). He has 24 years experience of holding forums like this.

Objective:

Through conversation, it is clear that this MP has four main objectives at town halls: soliciting public input in the budgetary process; “a way of providing contact with the community”; gauging interest; and giving constituents a sense that they have been heard. This MP emphasized consistently that he holds town halls as a representative of *everyone* in his riding rather than of his party. As he states, town halls have “...to do with being an MP, not a [party member]”. When asked how he keeps the events non-partisan rather than a platform for political preaching, he simply stated that an MP needs to remember who brought them here and needs to work for everyone. He strongly believes that this message comes through during his town halls, as he does not speak for very long, he empowers members from the community to present their views, and when he does speak it is about local issues and what he is doing for the average citizen. He’s a facilitator.

Organization:

Similar to the other MPs, this MP devolves the organization of town halls to his riding staff. He has one staff member responsible for advertising the event through local media and an interactive website for signing up and collecting views for setting agenda. His team takes up to a week for soliciting comments before and after the town hall through social media and mailings. Mass mailings of invitations are sent to the riding association, party supporters in the riding, non-governmental organizations, interest groups and private organizations. His team communicated the challenge of making new connections and reaching out to those constituents who have not

previously been involved. Held about three to four times a year, his town halls become an evening with three to four speakers – for a diversity of views – in which presentations of the speakers last for approximately 45 minutes and the rest of the two-hour block is filled with question and answer time. He also partners with organizations around town such as the Chamber of Commerce. As he says, “the more intimate the better”.

Participation:

Approximately 3,000 invitations are sent each time, and approximately 50 to 55 constituents attend. The attendance is a mix of interest groups, including small businesses who are present for self-promotion and constituents who are informed and engaged. As the MP’s team has advised me, they are seeking new ways to encourage the participation of younger people and those typically not inclined toward political interests. This MP has also voiced concern with having “the same people” at town halls and his interest in spreading his reach to include more diverse contributions. As his staff told me, “we want to reach out to people in new ways”. A couple of ways in which they achieve this goal is through informing and engaging pamphlets on, for example, pensions, and making visits to institutions and organizations.

Outcome:

Feedback after a town hall is essential according to MP#2. As this MP makes clear, “I don’t think doing a public forum without any feedback is relevant”. His office always provides feedback to constituents after the event as well as to appropriate Ministers and critics for the portfolio. The riding staff take notes and put a public report together for the participants and relevant Minister. What remains unclear, however, is what the Ministries do with recommendations and reports. The recommendations in pre-budget consultations last fall included the inclusion of a concrete Job Creation Plan in the budget and an increase in support to small to medium businesses and not-for-profit sectors. This MP is convinced that town halls contribute significantly to good public policy. He follows through on feedback to Parliament, whether through communicating with his colleagues in caucus, sending reports to the Prime Minister’s Office or relevant Ministers, or voicing the issues in committee. He sees a direct influence of hearing citizens’ views in town halls on his responsibilities to represent them in Parliament.

3) A Case of Communication

Context:

This constituency’s recurring themes and concerns most recently include the long gun registry, Bill C-391 (An Act to amend the Criminal Code and Firearms Act), and wild horse border crossing. MP#3 usually holds meetings over two days in six locations throughout the riding.

Objectives:

This MP sees town halls as a way to connect with constituents, inform constituents on what his party has been doing and plans to do for the community, and to get public input. He sees these forums as open houses, which complement the role of the MP as a representative of a constituency.

Organization:

This MP's approach involves following what the previous MP did, as he previously worked as the MP's legislative assistant. The riding office contacts the local councillors and mayors as well as creates ads in the papers to inform constituents of upcoming forums.

Participation:

The participation consists of those who are interested in what is happening in the riding. As the MP and staff suggest, it is not always necessarily the same people. In this MP's view, those who do not attend are people who know what is going on, are satisfied, or may not have that fervour to participate like others do. The people who do attend, however, come prepared with specific issues and questions to discuss.

Outcome:

This MP reports back to regional caucus and sends a letter to the appropriate Minister if necessary. As well, he follows up with constituents who had questions during the meeting. Overall, this MP acknowledges the grassroots nature of town halls and that they "are good at doing that" by encouraging local views on an issue. The staff are certain that through town halls this MP is kept abreast on the issues that are important to his riding and he in turn makes decisions in Parliament with this information.

Reflections

Attempts at engaging and informing constituents are worthy ones. The MPs share conviction in the value of citizen input to influence their decision-making as representatives. Their staff also communicated a shared value of town halls in their potential to positively impact the representative role of the MP. As these cases suggest and the Canadian Policy Research Networks Incorporated (2007) concludes, "The institutionalization of citizen engagement is an ambitious but achievable goal" (p. 39). Each town hall, although different in outcome, was a positive exercise in participation and representation. Armit (2007) and Klashinsky (2010) emphasize the value of public engagement as bringing more credibility and trust to political leaders because as Klashinsky (2010) notes, "a strong consultation and engagement process will not only realize citizen value, it will also build relationships needed for integrated and sustainable solutions" (p. 24). This relationship between citizen and government is important if genuine representation is to be realized. Town halls seem to be an appropriate forum where an institutional space is created for this relationship. In the end, as Minister Fletcher (2010) articulates, democracy is "the best way to empower

people is to empower the government to empower people”. Based on the case studies, town halls can be a fruitful way to accomplish this empowerment.

When compared to institutionalized, binding, civic decision-making of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, town halls in Canada seek different objectives¹. In Porto Alegre the objective is to empower citizens with binding decision-making power that complements the work of politicians whereas in Canada it seems to be a form of consultation in which the MP hears citizens’ views and makes decisions with this information. As I have discussed with MPs, Canada’s context of representation is not as limiting as it may sound when compared to Porto Alegre, Brazil. As Minister Fletcher (2010) told me, “there needs to be a balance” between participation and representation. Democracy cannot be too devolved as in California where citizens make many of the decisions through referenda and the state is very polarized (Fletcher, 2010). Gibson (2003) and Grubel (2003) share this concern for balancing the need for citizen participation with decision-making power, which ultimately rests with the MP. As MP#3 shared with me, the key challenge for a representative is to inform constituents on Parliament and issues that deeply affect Canadians, and in turn, take citizen input to the Hill. The MPs acknowledge the limits of civic participation, which can compete with representative democracy.

Comparing the first case of engagement with the other two, an interesting observation comes about regarding complementing roundtables and town halls. The town hall organizers for MP#1 communicated an effectiveness of the town hall due to organized roundtables with experts in cycling. The experts were helpful in focusing the agenda for the town hall and highlighting challenges and opportunities in cycling. This combination of a town hall following a roundtable seems to be complementary since the town hall was productive and well structured as a result of previous expert input².

A challenge across all three cases involves what happens with the feedback provided to appropriate Ministers. As the MPs’ staff suggest, the MP has done their job through a town hall and report submission, but it remains unclear if the Minister sees the submitted recommendations and what impact these recommendations may have. One could only hope that in a democracy which seeks ‘rule of the people, by the people, for the people’, citizen input is taken into serious consideration.

Questions for future work

An element of town halls not discussed in this paper - however discussed by some scholars - involves *who* decides to participate (Brown, 2006; CPRN, 2007; CSPG, 1994; Elton, 2003; Grubel, 2003; Smith, 2009). This is a key attribute to examine in researching town halls because this returns to the root of how representative town halls are. As aforementioned, each MP and their staff voiced concerns of the

¹ These participatory exercises also occur at different levels of government.

² Another way of focusing the agenda: Minister Fletcher (2010), in his ‘Fletcher Forums’, allows the participants to decide on 1-2 agenda items using instant remotes to vote.

same people getting involved in town halls. The disengaged continue to be disengaged, which needs to be confronted with a holistic approach that involves improving the effectiveness and representativeness of town halls. Otherwise, town halls simply become a forum for the same people to attend and raise the same issues and concerns. This is not helpful to the MP who represents everyone in the riding. In fact, on a scale from 'poor' to 'excellent', David Elton (2003) rates town hall representativeness as fair. Thus, future research on town halls would be well informed by work on who participates in town halls.

The MPs repeatedly stated the importance of town halls in that they give the community the feeling that their MP and/or Parliament hear their views. Citizens may *feel* that they are being heard, but there is a wide gap between feeling heard and represented and, in turn, attaining that reality. What is actually happening with citizen feedback? The answer to this question impacts the role of the MP as a representative accountable to their constituents because Parliamentarians are to reflect their community's visions and concerns. Future research that is statistically significant and representative of MPs' town halls could examine what happens to citizen feedback after a town hall, the first step being how to measure this process.

Another major element of town halls that needs to be further explored is the notion of representation and who decides the scope of responsibility of an MP to represent a constituency. An MP holds a federal job, thus, what is their scope of responsibilities in a town hall that is local? If put on a spectrum, the MPs seem to inform and listen but MP#1 seems to place more emphasis on listening and goes a step further in empowering community members to take action. For example, MP#1 connected the people responsible for cycling initiatives in the city and empowered those organizations to work together and advocate for more bike paths. Whereas MP#2 chose a federal topic of pre-budgetary consultation, MP#1 took a very local issue and brought together the interest groups for them to, in turn, take action. Thus, how is the responsibility to represent defined in practice and where is the boundary between advocate and representative? Perhaps the electorate should define these responsibilities, as these cases show a variety of styles of representation and needs among constituents³. These questions arise from these diverse case studies, as MPs have no handbook for town hall process or content, which makes effectiveness difficult to evaluate.

Tying back the case studies to research on participatory representative democracy, what can these experiences lend to the literature? It is clear from my qualitative research, observations and conversations throughout this year that what matters most in town hall contribution to the role of the MP as representative is not the party, nor the riding, nor the constituents, nor the issues. What ultimately determines the course of the town hall and its contribution to the MP and their responsibility to

³ One could draw a comparison among the needs of constituents in rural, suburban and urban ridings. In one riding, constituents may be more active and in tune with issues, wanting to be deeply involved, while in another, constituents may solely want to be informed on what the MP is doing in Parliament.

represent constituents lies in the individual MPs themselves who make the choice to listen or not to their constituencies. Not only does the literature point to political will as the key determinant for devolution of power to citizens in a democracy, but through experience, I have noticed that MPs of all political stripes can be inclusive and participatory in their approach or apathetic to valuable civic contribution to decision-making in Parliament. These cases confirm what most research on participatory democracy concludes, which is that, besides institutions such as Parliament and political parties, agency of the individual political actor is the most crucial factor in initiating civic engagement and maximizing tools of the political system. As the Minister of State for Democratic Reform (2010) suggests, it is the party system candidate selection that matters, “not so much the electoral system but who the parties elect to the system”. If a politician is determined to engage their constituency, the outcome can be quite positive for participatory representative democracy.

Once again, we return to the ripple effect analogy: successful institutionalization of civic engagement emanates from the constituency where democracy begins, into the broader public forum of debate and law-making in Parliament. Participatory representative democracy functions best when a representative acknowledges their responsibilities to represent their constituents in a way that is genuinely open to constituent concerns, while providing tangible feedback to Parliament through committee work, caucus participation, ministerial correspondence, and/or introducing and shaping legislation. Parliament is meant for MPs to represent, gather, and examine constituent positions collectively in such a forum for national decision-making and law creation. Participation and representation do not have to be mutually exclusive - in fact, just like a friendship, these two elements when brought together can bring out the best in each other to produce fulfilling experiences for all involved. Town halls - as an “unused tool” of MPs - are a way of uniting participation and representation and fulfilling the responsibility of the MP to represent their constituency on Parliament Hill.

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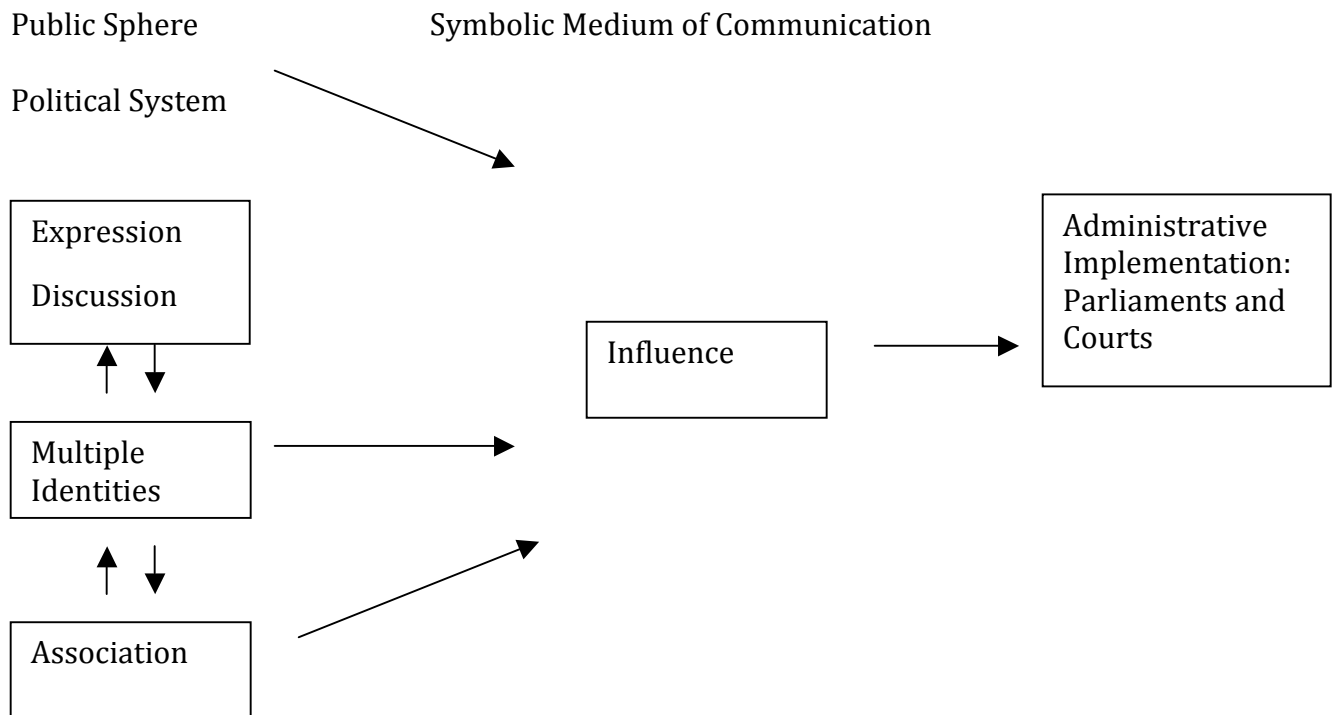
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Appendix 1: Avritzer's (2002) model (p. 53)

(Fig. 2.1 Relationship between the Public Sphere and the Political System, based on Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*)

MODEL I



MODEL II

