PART I SCOPE AND CONTEXT

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People and local politics: themes and concepts

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The daily lives of most people are circumscribed by the locality in which they live. In some respects this may appear a strange observation. It is usual nowadays to think of people as members of a ‘global village’. The news media bring pictures of political happenings in other continents into our homes. Movements in the international economy render people unemployed in industries across the world. The structure of society is shaped by forces which have their origins outside the local arena and which regulate all countries within the same mode of economic organisation. International organisations, such as the European Economic Community, legislate across national boundaries. Meanwhile, within particular countries the State is increasingly able to surmount the resistance of local administration and customs. What are ostensibly local political events, such as elections for councils, are often heavily influenced by the conditions of national politics. Finally, populations are far more mobile than at any previous time and able, with greater affluence, to encounter a much wider range of experiences.

Yet, despite these often dramatic developments, the locality remains the arena within which most lives are conducted. The problems people face in their daily lives arise for the most part within the area in which they reside. They may be concerned with the quality of schooling for their children, the provision of hospital facilities within easy reach, the state of the roads, the need for a place of worship for a religious minority. These are the ordinary problems which face the average person and they constitute much of the stuff of local politics. Whilst the problems may seem unique to those affected they are in fact common to many localities and they engender relatively standard patterns of actions and responses. Moreover, these problems are recognisably similar, though never precisely the same, in different countries. However, the processes by which the citizen brings
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issues to the attention of authorities and the ways in which the problems are handled by them can display as many differences as similarities—which it is the object of the series of case studies in this book to illuminate. The organising theme is local political participation, a complex phenomenon involving a myriad of forms of political behaviour which are, taken together, of central importance to the life of democracy. Amongst the many aspects of such local political behaviour that might be examined the study has selected four themes: political participation, political mobilisation, the relations between leaders and citizens, and the effect of locality and community on participation. They provide a picture, though not a complete one given the complexity of the subject matter, of the distinctively local aspects of citizen participation.

Political participation is, of course, not an entirely novel topic in either Britain or France. Much of the British and French literature has, however, concentrated on participation in elections, as in the research conducted by the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in France and the series of British election studies sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council or associated with David Butler in the Nuffield series. Our approach differs, however, in that it consciously pays less attention to electoral participation in order to concentrate on the participation of the average citizen in day-to-day politics and government, outside the electoral period when political involvement is artificially heightened and distorted by partisan polarisation and the activities of a ‘political class’. In that respect its general orientation shares something in common with the approach developed by Verba and Nie (1972). Whilst their study had a local component it nevertheless was principally focused on national patterns. By contrast, our aim is to give greater weight to the particular character of the local milieu and its effect on participation. Thus, we pay special attention to the way in which local activity is concerned with issues that affect people in an immediate manner and which may often be at least partly resolved within the locality. The immediacy of the problems gives local participation an added meaning. At a time when the local level of government and administration and participatory democracy are topics of renewed interest in all western democracies, the study of local communities or collectivities can shed a distinct light on the nature of contemporary processes of participation.

1 Participation

That the locality should be a major focus for public participation in Britain is, perhaps, not surprising given the localist tradition in British politics. In Britain, as also in the United States, there is a long-standing belief, which may be more myth than reality, that in matters of government and public services there is an autonomous sphere open to influence and determi-
nation by local citizens and their representatives. As Lagroye and Wright suggest, ‘the powers of the local authorities in Britain belong to a residual domain preserved by the local authorities as their legitimate and traditional terrain against encroachments from the centre’ (Lagroye and Wright 1979: 5). The importance of this notion of the prior legitimacy of the local over the centre is not necessarily reduced by the fact that (as chapter 2 relates) the centre has been increasingly forceful in imposing its will over local authorities. There is a presumption of local responsibility for problems and solutions and this has been seen, in theory at least, as an inducement to local political participation. It was the potentiality for civic participation within an autonomous local structure, as opposed to a centralised bureaucratic system, which inspired the classic participatory theories of John Stuart Mill and Tocqueville.

This presumption in favour of local autonomy is in striking contrast to the situation in France. The Jacobin tradition of France has ensured a centralisation of administrative powers which has no institutional parallel in Britain, whatever the pressures the British centre can impose on its periphery. Much of what in Britain is run by local politicians and local government officers is managed in France by a centrally appointed and controlled bureaucracy. Whilst it remains appropriate to speak of local government in Britain, in France it is a matter of local administration. As Lagroye and Wright again put it, ‘the powers of French local authorities belong to a conceded domain – to areas traditionally belonging to Paris but resentfully transferred to the localities’ (Lagroye and Wright 1979: 5). At the same time there are political linkages between centre and periphery quite unlike anything in Britain as a consequence of the cumul des mandats whereby politicians hold office at both national and local levels – as deputies (or even ministers) and as mayors or local councillors. Whilst the French national and local elites are integrated, however unevenly (Beccquet-Leclercq 1983), in Britain the two elites are at some distance from one another, observing a kind of division of labour, and creating what has been called a ‘dual polity’ (Bulpitt 1983; see also Page 1983). There has, indeed, been an attempt to bridge the gap in Britain by national level local government pressure groups but these intermediary bodies have proved relatively ineffective, especially during the post-1979 period of Conservative government (Rhodes 1986).

The consequence of these differences is that while in Britain it has been standard practice to think in terms of a distinctive local politics, somewhat apart from (but far from uninfluenced by) national politics, in France the notion of ‘political’ activity was for long commonly applied solely to electoral activities and even then only where these involved competition between parties. Behaviour which might therefore be construed as ‘political’ participation in Britain would possibly not possess a ‘political’ quality in a French locality, though even then the idea of ‘total politics’ appears to
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be on the increase. This ‘apolitical’ tradition means that ‘political’ participation at the local level is less readily regarded as legitimate and proper in France.

Political participation may be defined as taking part directly or indirectly in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of policy. However, at the local level much involvement in decision-making arises out of a person’s social position and lacks a political character. In both countries there remains, though to a decreasing extent, an arena of politics which is not very distinct from civil society in which socially prominent people are involved in making decisions and may be elected to office even though they do not identify themselves with any ideological position or display any party political affiliation. This ‘apolitical politics’ is particularly to be found in rural areas and has survived longer in France than in Britain where party involvement in local politics has been much more widespread. Activity directed at influencing decisions in such areas may be regarded as belonging as much to the social as to the political realm. Distinctively political local systems emerge with the appearance of competition between party entrepreneurs at the local level. Hence, action targeted at such decision-makers might be interpreted as distinctively political participation. But even in this case the participants themselves may, as is shown in chapter 3, perceive their behaviour in trying to influence decisions as non-political, perhaps regarding it as akin to a consumer complaining about services.

The modes of participation are various (Verba and Nie 1972). We have chosen to look in particular at the extent to which people contact the local council, take part in groups and protest about local issues. Local voting behaviour is not our prime concern except to the extent that the political leanings of citizens shed light on other aspects of their behaviour. Important as electoral activity is, it is a mode of behaviour quite distinct from other kinds of participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Moysier, Parry and Day 1986).

The greater part of the participation we look at follows the conventional channels whereby people engage in group activity or contact authorities whether individually or through their groups. Such activity is mainly instrumental in character, concerned to achieve or defend the interests of the individual or group. This has been very much the dominant model in studies of participation, such as those by Verba and Nie (1972) and Barnes, Kaase et al. 1979. According to this conception the bulk of political behaviour is characterised by a rational assessment of the costs and benefits of action – a view borne out by much of the evidence reported from both countries in subsequent chapters. Some individuals, on the other hand, may be motivated more by communitarian than by narrowly conceived benefits. Their involvement may take on an altruistic dimension.
Concerned more with the good of the whole local community than with the advantage of particular groups or sectors within it. Indeed the concern for others may be such that individual benefits become irrelevant and participation ceases to be instrumental but is, instead, expressive in character, establishing a person’s solidarity or sympathy with those whom they believe deserving of their support. Finally, another motivation may be the developmental or educative effect of action, enhancing one’s understanding of the political world although this may well be regarded more as a by-product of action than an impetus to it (Parry 1972, 1974). The extent to which these non-instrumental attitudes are at best minor themes in understanding the quality of local participation is explored, particularly in chapters 9 and 10.

Not all participatory actions are spontaneously generated by citizens who seek to bring problems to the attention of local government and administration. In very many cases participation is reactive as individuals and groups respond to measures initiated by the authorities themselves. It is when people are faced with a threat to build a road near their property or to close the local school that they are most likely to voice their feelings and take action. Even then the extent of participation is partly determined by the opportunities provided within the local institutional structure for citizens and groups to make themselves heard. A very powerful campaign may force its views upon authorities but to a large extent participation is dependent on the access provided, which varies not only between countries but within the various institutional structures of any one country.

Participation is a minority activity. Apart from voting, most people do not involve themselves in public life. Non-participation is, therefore, as important a phenomenon to examine as participation. The social composition of the participants and the non-participants is potentially important to the operation of liberal democracies such as France and Britain and is the prime focus of the case studies reported in chapters 3 and 4. To the extent that public action is effective in carrying messages about needs and problems to the authorities, it can be of some significance that these messages are being transmitted only by that sector of the population which is most active. It is possibly that participation, far from helping to rectify the inequalities arising in civil society, may end by reinforcing bias.

2 MOBILISATION

Among the various forms of political action may be distinguished a type of collective behaviour which has important specific characteristics and is worth treating separately as a phenomenon of possibly growing importance. The notion of mobilisation has not been widely employed by British political scientists outside the study of developing countries where it refers
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to the attempts by elites to direct the local population and its resources towards programmes of modernisation. To a lesser extent it has made its appearance in the discussions of mass society and the dangers of its exploitation by anti-democratic elites (Kornhauser 1959). In France, however, the concept of mobilisation has wider currency within the social sciences (Chazel 1975). But even in France the term has taken on a multiplicity of meanings. In this study it is used to describe a process whereby individuals are led either to take on new political commitments or to rediscover old ones and as a result to act collectively and particularly intensively to achieve common ends (Oberschall 1973: 102). This may occur in two very different ways. People may be mobilised to act against the established authorities culminating even in acts of violence – ascending mobilisation. Alternatively, elites may themselves mobilise their forces to coordinate resistance to threats to their policies or their existence – descending mobilisation. There is both mobilisation and counter-mobilisation.

Mobilisation, in this sense, involves three major characteristics. The action is, in the first place, collective. It is a matter of assembling individuals into groups to pursue common objectives which bring to the attention of the authorities. Secondly, and following from the first, it is organised action. Although action may initially be more or less spontaneous, once mobilised it becomes organised and structured by agents of mobilisation which may be parties or voluntary associations. Hence, mobilisation involves the work of political entrepreneurs. This mobilisation is a process which is induced and in which the action of political entrepreneurs (leaders, elites or institutions) forms an essential component (Nettl 1967: 32–3). Finally, mobilisation is, on this view, typically conflictual. In the case of ascending mobilisation it seeks to activate the population to oppose a public decision or to challenge established values and norms. For this to occur the relevant population must be ‘mobilisable’. There must be grievances, values or goals, explicit or merely latent, which can be activated and, very often, symbols by which these can be recognised and even internalised by those being mobilised (Nettl 1967: 33). The possibility that a population is mobilisable in certain circumstances places the inactivity of large sectors of society in a different perspective. To discover, as studies regularly do, that most people are not actively involved does not mean that they could not be activated quite readily by skilled agencies of mobilisation. The dangers and the opportunities provided by this possibility were much debated in the discussions of the nature of mass society (Kornhauser 1959; for a critique see Oberschall 1973: 102–13). Sometimes both those mobilising and those mobilised may individually be active participants in other directions. In distinguishing the processes of mobilisation for special attention, therefore, we do not assume that in
practice mobilisation and conventional channels of participation can be sharply distinguished. Descending mobilisation is very frequently directed at countering challenges. This may be achieved by mobilising the various sectors of the elite to defend the policy. Alternatively it can involve an attempt by the authorities to drum up support amongst the wider population to support the status quo.

Thus part III of the book will be looking at the ways in which, in reaction to decisions with potentially very severe repercussions on the locality, individuals were activated to form groups. Typically, leaders took on the task of organising often diffuse concerns into collective action with an agreed strategy. Examples of such issues include the building of a nuclear power station and the introduction of policies undermining a major source of employment and wealth. In several cases the threat originated from sources outside the locality, but the mobilisation was directed in the first instance at those more local authorities which appeared to bear responsibility for allowing the danger to develop. Often the action is extremely intense but short-lived, with the group dispersing once the objective is achieved or the leaders find themselves unable to sustain the new commitment or to reinvigorate old loyalties long enough to see a major campaign through to a conclusion. This is especially the case where the authorities have been able to mobilise their own response in which, as chapter 5 reveals, the integrated French elite system has considerable resources.

3 LEADERS AND CITIZENS

The orthodox democratic image of local politics is one where citizens bring their problems to the attention of their elected representatives who, in turn, respond to the demands which are placed upon them. This process is sometimes described as one of the articulation and aggregation of interests in which demands expressed by individuals and groups are packaged into sets of policies by political entrepreneurs, usually parties, and converted into policies and policy outputs. However, as part IV seeks to show, this account is far too simplistic. Leaders exercise a considerable degree of autonomy in modern democracies. Indeed, it has been argued that a more comprehensive explanation of policy-making in modern democracies would ensue from concentrating on the preferences and actions of leaders than of the social forces which strive for influence (Nordlinger 1981). Certainly no picture of politics, local or national, could be complete which does not bear in mind this dual perspective – from the centre of policy-making downward and from society upward (Alford and Friedland 1985). Hence, although our focus is on the response of councillors in France and Britain to the issues and problems raised by the local population, the reaction of councillors has in part to be understood in relation
to their position at the intersection of a number of political and social forces.

Councillors as well as needing to take into account the problems of the particular area of the town they are responsible for representing, are also faced with demands from a variety of groups and associations speaking for the interests of different social sectors. Whilst having to respond to these expressions of often sectional interests, councillors generally conceive themselves as acting for the collective interest of the locality by reconciling conflicting aspirations and, to a degree, integrating local society. They can thus justify a belief in priorities which deviate from those of the local populations. This notion of a collective interest may itself be a myth but, as a political formula, it is often part of the language of political leadership. In formulating local policies and decisions the councillors are influenced by forces other than pressures from the electorate – forces which may be overlooked in studies of participation. The impact of the strategy of the council as a whole, especially where parties are strong, and the influence of the local bureaucracy, particularly in Britain, have to be borne in mind.

Nevertheless, when all this is admitted, local democracy, if it is to have some meaning, must imply a significant degree of agreement between leaders and citizens as to the local agenda. The conditions favourable to such agreement include the integration of the leadership into the locality. Such integration is not merely socially and economically based, in the sense that councillors can be rooted in the locality by length of residence or by their sharing the social and economic experiences of the population at large. Councillors can also be integrated into the social, economic and political structure of the locality through membership of the most important effective groups. The case studies suggest that this integration is apt to go rather further in France than in Britain. In this way, messages about the needs and problems of the area can be communicated to the decision-makers on the council. The linkages can also be utilised in a downward direction by the councillors to influence the composition of the issue agenda. Indeed, they may go so far as to activate the groups themselves, thus helping to shape the agenda and channelling the direction of the very demands which the council is to handle.

Comparisons between the priorities of citizens and councillors, such as those made in chapters 7 and 8 are therefore only one measure of the success of a local political system in democratically establishing a common understanding of its priorities. There are sound reasons why the councillors’ concerns might diverge from those of their constituents. There are even reasons to think that the agenda of citizens is not entirely spontaneous and beyond manipulation. It also has to be acknowledged that there may be, in addition, a suppressed agenda which our study of effective
political demands has been unable to tap. The ample theoretical literature on the possible existence of non-decisions and of covert agenda construction (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974; Parry and Morris 1974; Cobb and Elder 1983) coupled with a certain number of empirical investigations (Crenson 1971; Gaventa 1980) show that there are dangers in accepting overt issue agendas at their face value. For this reason the several questionnaires employed in the course of the study made use of very open, non-directed questions in order to elicit as unconfined a set of agendas as possible. Arguably, the processes by which elite and, especially, citizen attitudes on issues may subtly be structured by social and economic as well as political forces can mean that there is no guarantee that even unpressured answers to questionnaires will bring to the surface those needs and problems which have not yet achieved public expression. Whilst acknowledging this limit to our methodologies we do nevertheless claim that the overtly expressed agenda represents a highly significant part of the basic material of local politics. Indeed the extent to which the very different French and British systems are capable of permitting local concerns to be articulated and communicated is some evidence of their democratic quality.

4 COMMUNITY AND LOCALITY

It was pointed out above that most public participation occurs within a given locality. Very few people cross the local political boundaries in order to conduct political activity. The few who do so are in general the professional politicians seeking to promote or defend the interests of the locality at regional or national level. If most action goes on within a locality how far is it possible also to say that perceptions of the nature of the locality have an effect in encouraging or discouraging political involvement?

One view of the relation between participation and the locality which has received much attention in British and American thinking is that political involvement might be expected to increase, the more that residents identify the area in which they live as a ‘community’ (Putnam 1966). The characteristics of a community are notoriously contestable and involve a mixture of descriptive and evaluative considerations (Plant 1978). They are generally applied to an area which is thought to have a reasonably clear spatial identity, a strong degree of social integration and a degree of political autonomy (MacIver 1924; Rossi 1972).

The appeal of this approach almost certainly reflects some British and American beliefs about the nature of local government – beliefs which, as critics have noted, may have more to do with aspirations than reality (Bulpitt 1972; Saunders et al. 1978). Thus it has been one view guiding
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discussions of British local government that the boundaries of governmental areas should ideally bear some relation to ‘communities’ (Hampton 1970: 1–23). The assumption appears to have been that a sense of identity with a distinct, long-standing autonomous village, town or county stimulates political interest and involvement. This communitarian principle, however, pointed towards units of local government of a relatively small scale which were not necessarily compatible with the needs for regional coordination and planning in a complex mobile industrial society. Moreover, the financial and administrative reality of increased central government control and supervision reduced local autonomy in fact and often in law. The Local Government Act which came into force in England and Wales in 1974 generally favoured the principle of efficiency through scale rather than that of respect for communities. The abolition or merger of smaller authorities resulted, in the view of traditionalists, in the disruption of old loyalties and a loss of local democracy (Byrne 1985: 48–59). It is not clear, in fact, either that the old authorities were closely related to genuine communities or that the new authorities gained efficiency through scale. As Hampton has argued, local government may need to be both smaller and larger to combine the virtues of both ideals (1970: 302). The extent to which a sense of community exists and to which it contributes to political involvement thus remains relevant to any future discussion of local government organisation and is also a very open question, as chapter 9 will indicate.

This concern for community has no counterpart in French political science. The reason lies partly in criticisms of the relevance of community sentiment in the modern world and partly in the very different assumptions about the system of local administration. An interest in community is largely confined to rural sociologists for whom it is a residual element in a generally more urbanised society. French political writing prefers the notion of local ‘collectivity’ to that of community. The collectivity takes institutional form in the commune which is an administrative and political unit rather than a social phenomenon marked by feelings of solidarity. Moreover, within the French political and administrative system no local area could make the claims for autonomy traditionally advanced in Britain (see chapter 2).

Given these factors, the approach of French political science is to view the local commune as a social unit (Gesellschaft) marked by social contradictions, conflicts and compromise rather than as a community (Gemeinschaft). This is not to say that community is not a value towards which leaders and citizens might in theory aspire, but studies start more from the view that participation is likely to be associated with the pursuit of sectional interests within the collectivity. The hypothesis is, therefore, that it is those who are aware of and involved in the active social forces in the