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Doing Democracy Differently: How Can Participatory Democracy Take Hold In Deprived Areas?

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ABSTRACT

The existing literature suggests that people living in areas exhibiting high levels of deprivation approach democracy in a distinctive way. Participation in electoral politics in these areas is likely to be low, and formal avenues for citizen participation unpopular. At the same time, trust and confidence in the institutions of democracy is significantly lower amongst the poorest social groups, and people living in deprived areas are more likely to feel disconnected from the processes of government. This presents a distinct problem to researchers and policy-makers interested in participatory democracy; the very citizens whose participation would most enrich the democratic process are those most resistant to reform. The paper addresses this issue by presenting data from a detailed case study in one neighbourhood in England, drawing on archival data, interviews and testimony collected over more than two years in the field. The results suggest that well-established norms of participation remain important in determining both the level and form of democratic engagement, and that an understanding to the context in which participation takes place is essential if participatory democrats are to respond to inequalities in democratic participation.

KEYWORDS

Participatory democracy; inequality; deprivation

Introduction

People living in deprived areas are not supposed to be interested in democracy. A glance at the literature dealing with the dynamics of participation in democratic life suggests that, in general terms, people on low incomes display very low levels of interest, engagement, trust and confidence in the structures and processes of democracy. Most of the existing work suggests that there is little likelihood that politics will be a regular topic of discussion in these areas, whether in the home or the workplace, and few writers expect to see high levels of democratic engagement. Consequently, attempts at engendering greater levels of democratic participation in deprived areas have been stymied, and democratic reforms which have been successful elsewhere have proved stubbornly unsuccessful when applied in such settings.

The question addressed in this article is simple: why is it that democratic participation seems much lower in deprived areas? Tackling this question is of critical importance, as

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the findings of empirical work on participation imply an existential threat to participatory democracy. Most participatory theorists hold that there are normative virtues to democratic participation which can enhance not only the democratic process but the lives of the individuals taking part (Dacombe, 2018; Pateman, 1970; Wolfe, 1985). It is hugely problematic, therefore, that the very groups in society who would benefit most from participation in democratic life seem to be those most reluctant to do so. A first step towards providing a convincing response to this problem is through an exploration of the ways in which deprivation works to depress democratic participation – an area relatively under-explored in the literature to date.

This article addresses these issues by presenting findings from a detailed case study of one neighbourhood in England, highlighting the importance of local context in shaping democratic participation in such areas. The article draws on archival data, interviews and testimony collected over more than two years in the field. The paper highlights the importance of context in understanding the ways in which participation plays out, with the results suggesting that the particular configurations of social infrastructure in deprived areas can be important in determining both the form and level of democratic engagement.

The piece begins with an account of the relationship between deprivation and democratic participation, exploring this both in theoretical and empirical terms. It moves on to identify the importance of local structural conditions as a neglected feature of the ways in which such participation plays out in practice. The article then introduces the empirical findings, before highlighting the importance of viewing participation in context to the development of a rigorous account of participatory democracy in practice.

Democracy and the participation of the ‘poor’: an analytical problem

Political scientists have always treated the relationship between participation and poverty in both empirical and theoretical terms. From the earliest studies in this area, empirical work has focused on clarifying the dynamics of citizen involvement in democracy, highlighting the variety of forms of democratic participation, and identifying a wide range of salient features which are related to the likelihood of engagement in democracy (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994; Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). Alongside this, a strong theme of theoretical work wrestled with the lack of clear incentives for participation, focusing primarily on voting but also considering the breadth of democratic participation highlighted by empirical work on democracy in practice. This work has made important contributions to thought on the variation in levels of participation across social groups, focusing on the costs of maintaining the commitment necessary to engage in political life in an informed and meaningful way (Olson, 1965; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968).

From these origins, a fairly comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of democratic participation in Western liberal democracies now exists (for reviews see Schlozman, 2002; Verba, 2001). One of the major findings of this literature is the restriction of engagement in democratic life in particular social groups. Numerous studies have been dedicated to this issue, with the result that one of the empirical certainties within political science is that there is a strong relationship between political participation and socio-economic status (see Solt, 2008). Indeed, one of the most consistent ‘facts’ about political life returned by political science to date is the dramatic difference in the rates of participation between

the least well off and the more affluent groups in developed societies (Lijphart, 1997; Milbrath & Goel, 1977). The explanations for this phenomenon are varied, and have informed a significant amount of empirical work in the field (for reviews, see Rueschemeyer, 2004; Solt, 2008).

Subsequently, a focus on socio-economic status and democratic participation has become a mainstay of research in the discipline, and for scholars interested in democracy there is a well-trodden path to testing, and extending, the theoretical assumptions at large in the literature. What is common to most of these studies is the focus on abstracting data on the particular features of the individuals and institutions concerned in order to identify general features of participation in democratic life. However, despite the significant contribution of existing research to understanding the salient features which affect the level of participation, research to date has been far weaker in explaining the *mechanisms* of democracy, and the importance of context in determining the extent, and manner, of democratic participation.

Only a few studies attempt to explore the ways in which participation varies according to the particular settings in which democratic participation takes place. Huckfeldt (1979, p. 579) provides a valuable insight into the relationship between setting and democratic life, finding that ‘social context is an important determinant of the extent to which individuals participate in politics’. Within the literature, this kind of assumption remains important in explaining variations in participation, particularly at the local level. For instance, Archon Fung (2006, p. 133) suggests that ‘democratic performance depends upon the existence of favourable neighbourhood-level “initial conditions”’ which affect the performance of democracy in different localities. Lowndes et al. (2006) highlight the importance of local institutional rules in determining participation. Elsewhere, important contributions by Greenberg and Lewis (2000), Goldfrank (2002), Fung (2004), Baiocchi (2005), and Michels and de Graaf (2010) amongst others, have revitalised interest in the explanatory power of detailed examinations of localised democratic participation. Consequently, research strategies which have previously focused on the large-scale analysis of individual factors affecting participation are increasingly complemented by a literature providing a fine-grained focus on the interplay between structural conditions and democratic participation in particular areas.

Despite this, it is rare to see explicit consideration given to the ways in which these factors actually affect participation, and the consequent variations in democratic life between areas depending on the socio-economic status of their residents. Instead, social context is usually assumed to be both static and uniform. People are either poor, or they are not, and this state exists independently of the area in which they live. There is scant attention paid to the differing ways in which people experience poverty throughout their lifetimes, or to the effects of the relationships *between* citizens living in poverty. As Brady (2004, p. 14) points out, there are significant challenges involved in accurately reflecting the subtleties of the relationship between factors such as income, occupation and civic resources, with the result that ‘very little thought has gone into the ways that income inequality might affect participatory inequality’.

This remains the case, and a significant gap in exists in the ways in which questions like these have been tackled within political science. This raises an analytical challenge which proponents of participatory democracy need to overcome if they are to reconcile their aims with the empirical realities of participation in democracy; in order to address the

charge that their programme is unrealistic and utopian, further investigation is needed into the relationship between participation and poverty.

Participation, socialisation and social infrastructure in deprived areas

As we can see, this environment presents a challenge to researchers and practitioners interested in participatory democracy. Questions over what it is about deprivation that depresses participation are particularly pressing given the normative value associated by participatory democrats with widespread democratic engagement. But they also demand research strategies which focus on exploring the particular contexts surrounding participation in individual localities in order to reveal the pathologies of social life in deprived areas.

By focusing on the localised effects of poverty, it is possible to shed some light on these issues, and empirical work that takes this approach suggests that the concentration of people suffering from varying forms of deprivation within different localities might bring a nuance to accounts of its relationship to democratic participation which is absent in much of the existing work. Within the literature examining poverty within deprived areas, one of the primary insights derives from William Julius Wilson's (1990) identification of neighbourhood effects; the idea that the conditions of life in poor areas negatively affect the lives of residents, regardless of other factors.

This has its basis in the argument that deprived areas suffer in part because they lack infrastructure and resources that are commonplace in better-off areas. For instance, Jencks and Mayer (1990) explore the effects of structural conditions of poor neighbourhoods, highlighting the ways in which life in deprived neighbourhoods amplifies the effects of poverty suffered by individuals. These concentration effects, caused by the density of deprivation amongst the population of poor neighbourhoods, mean that the lifechances of individuals living in areas like this are hampered from the outset. The result is one of the core assumptions in the field; being poor in a mixed income area results in better outcomes than living in an area with a high degree of poverty. Writers such as Wilson (1990) suggest that deprived areas are not only ecologically and economically different from other areas in that they maintain unstable, weak social infrastructure but that they are ghettoised, their residents isolated from more stable and prosperous areas, with limited social connections outside of their locality.

One reason for this is the role played by processes of socialisation in shaping social life in deprived areas. Theories of socialisation assume that peer influence over attitudes and behaviour is sufficient to explain the greater likelihood of unfavourable social outcomes in 'poor' neighbourhoods, and the far stronger life chances of citizens who grow up, and reside, in more affluent areas. This suggests that low levels of participation, alongside other negative outcomes, are somehow 'contagious', and are passed between the residents of deprived areas (Small, 2004). Consequently, any comparison between the descriptive features of participation in different areas will reveal that more affluent localities perform better. Socialisation mechanisms suggest that living in deprived neighbourhoods can shape the attitudes and aspirations of individuals through a range of different means, such as the absence of role models (Newman, 1999), the stereotyping people living in poor areas by public officials (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) and the ways in which the segregation of individuals living in deprived neighbourhoods drives them to develop oppositional cultural stances towards mainstream society (Massey & Denton, 1993).

In the remainder of this article, I present research findings which show how a focus on contextual factors like those sketched above can be useful in explaining some of the ways in which participation can be depressed in deprived areas. The implications for this insight for participatory democracy are made clear at the paper's conclusion.

Methodology

In order to examine these issues, the sections that follow present research findings drawn from qualitative research in the Blackbird Leys housing estate in Oxford, UK. Measuring around 5.9 square miles, with approximately 6,000 inhabitants, Blackbird Leys was founded in the 1953 on the site of a disused sewage works. It is located on the periphery of the city and originally served as housing for workers in the industrial area on the eastern edge of Oxford, as well as a convenient place to relocate the residents of the slums cleared from the centre of the city in the middle of the Twentieth Century. In the early-1990s, an outbreak of joyriding gained the area national notoriety as a sink estate, and for a time, it acquired a (entirely unjustified) reputation as a hotbed of anti-social behaviour.

Today, the area is a pocket of deprivation in a largely affluent city. Unemployment in the neighbourhood is consistently high, and with the decline of heavy manufacturing in the area, more than a third of the area's adult population are out of work. The population exists, for the most part, on very low incomes, with the area one of the most deprived 10% of the country by some measures. Educational attainment in the area is low, the population's health is significantly worse than the rest of Oxford (the obesity rate in Blackbird Leys is almost double that of the rest of Oxford, and life expectancy nearly seven years lower). Despite being the attention of a number of policy interventions, the area has proven stubbornly resistant to significant social and economic change (Morrison, 2003; Koch, 2014). In short, by most measures, the area can be considered to be suffering a significant degree of deprivation.

Blackbird Leys is a unique case in that it allows democratic participation in a community to be analysed from its inception, and in living memory. Conventional research problems related to the origins of community structure and function can therefore be entirely avoided – we can be reasonably certain of even the earliest developments in the area's democratic life, and data on the levels and type of participation are readily available. Connecting this to the theoretical assumptions that are prominent in the literature is not hard. However, as will become clear, the dynamics of democratic participation on the estate, and the social infrastructure which supports it, do not neatly fit any of the assumptions in the literature.

The research involved a range of different methods of data collection. Archival work was carried out, taking in contemporary news media, photographs, records kept by community groups, and an archive of interviews with local residents throughout the life of the estate. Official statistics enabled a detailed picture of social and political life on the estate to be built. In particular, Census data, and the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government, allowed a detailed account of the social make-up of the estate, and comparison with the rest of Oxford, to be carried out. Beyond this, interviews were held with residents over a two year period, and observational data was collected at meetings of local community groups. Such a wide-ranging approach was important in establishing an account of participation on

the estate that reached beyond the conventional approaches in the literature, to include the relationship between citizens and the structural conditions of the estate, which reaches from its founding to the present day.

The data is presented as follows. First, findings on the level of formal democratic participation on the estate are presented, in order to contextualise the discussion that follows. Then data on two relevant contextual conditions are presented; the isolation (both physical and social) of the estate from the rest of the city, and the area's reputation. The importance of these in driving processes of socialisation which shape democratic participation amongst the area's residents is considered in the latter stages of the paper.

Democratic participation in Blackbird Leys

As one would expect, levels of democratic participation in Blackbird Leys appear, at first glance, to be persistently low. As the estate forms a distinct electoral ward, it is possible to reach an initial account of participation by examining election turnout data. The chart below shows the percentage turnout in Oxford City Council elections¹ in Blackbird Leys, alongside similar figures from Littlemore², a neighbouring electoral ward, and the mean turnout across the city as a whole. As we can see in [Figure 1](#) (below), turnout in local elections in Blackbird Leys is, without exception, lower than that across Oxford. This is what one would expect, if the literature on the relationship between deprivation and political participation is to be believed, and provides a first indication of the effects of poverty on the democratic life of the residents of the estate. It is also clear that turnout across the city has been following a general pattern of decline during the period for which data are available.

In comparison with Littlemore, turnout in Blackbird Leys is also low, and on only three occasions did levels of participation exceed those in its neighbouring borough. In one of these, in May 2008, the election in Blackbird Leys was noteworthy as a closely-run affair,

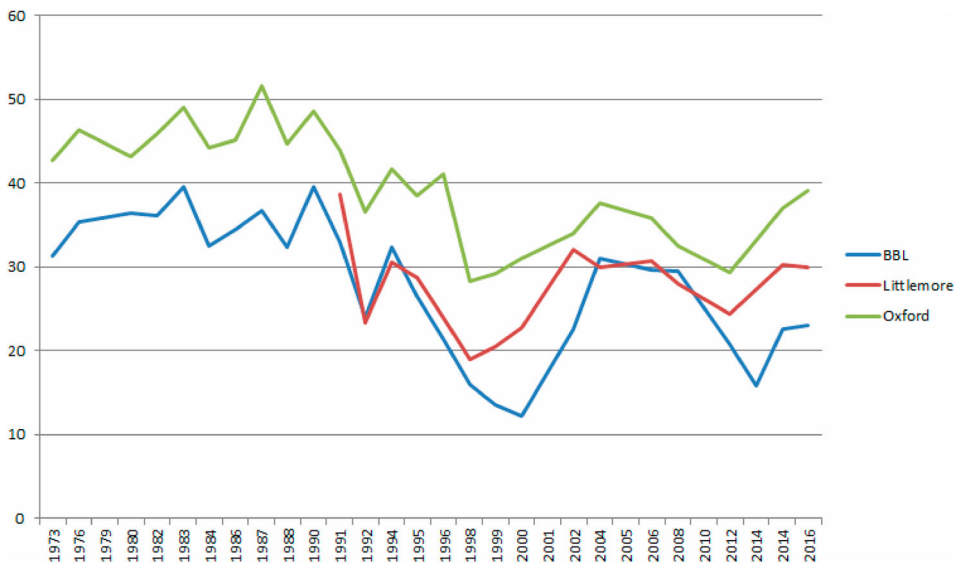


Figure 1. City Council Election Turnout (1973-2016): Blackbird Leys, Littlemore and Oxford.

with the Independent Working Class Association (IWCA) candidate narrowly failing to beat the Labour Party incumbent. As others have noted, closely-fought elections where the result is uncertain tend to have far higher turnouts than at other times (Blais, 2006). The rise in turnout at the turn of the century corresponds with a programme of redistricting – for many years, Blackbird Leys residents were the most under-represented in Oxford, with 34% more electors represented by each councillor returned by the ward than the city average. Otherwise, the citizens living on the estate seem, at first glance, to be markedly disengaged from the formal structures of local politics.

These low levels of electoral turnout are corroborated by existing research on participation on the estate. Frances Reynolds (1986) finds the inhabitants of Blackbird Leys suspicious of public officials and reluctant to participate in decisions which affect local facilities. Morrison (2003) highlighted the difficulties in engaging local people with decisions over the allocation of regeneration funding to the estate. Perhaps most significantly, Insa Koch's (2016) detailed analysis of political behaviour on the estate identified a broad disillusionment with formal political institutions but highlighted the development of less formal forms of civic engagement and the popularity of local politicians who drew on localised networks of citizen support rather than national politics.

However, these findings also raise a further set of questions. In corroboration with the literature, participation in Blackbird Leys does indeed seem somewhat different to the rest of Oxford and is something of an outlier even when considered alongside other deprived areas of the city. This is important as it suggests that there is something qualitatively different about the way in which residents living on the estate treat democratic participation, regardless of the socio-economic status of its inhabitants. Why this might be so, and exactly how it affects the decisions residents on the estate make over their engagement with democracy, is explored in the following sections.

Isolation and democratic participation

An examination of the social profile of the city underlines the distinction between Blackbird Leys and the more celebrated areas of Oxford. Despite its popular image as a comfortable, privileged area, Oxford ranks near the middle of all English districts in terms of deprivation. However, this is a function of the extremes of inequality within the city, with some areas ranking in the 20% *most* deprived areas of the country, and others within the 20% *least* deprived (as indicated in Figure 2). Despite the presence of scholarly excellence in the city's universities, official data shows that Oxford is divided roughly in half in terms of the educational attainment (and prospects) of its citizens, with the northern and western parts of the city ranking significantly higher than the south and east.

The physical location of the estate in relation to the rest of Oxford underlines this point. It is located at the extreme south-east of the city, outside of the arterial ring-road and transport links to the city centre have been notoriously unreliable throughout its history. This estate's isolation is obvious in qualitative data on the residents' perceptions of the estate as a community. One female resident speaking in the early years of the estate felt that

[p]eople who come from Blackbird Leys feel good about it. The problem really lies with other people from the outside. Maybe it is because Blackbird Leys is still out on a limb. Maybe it is because Blackbird Leys is not on its way to anywhere.

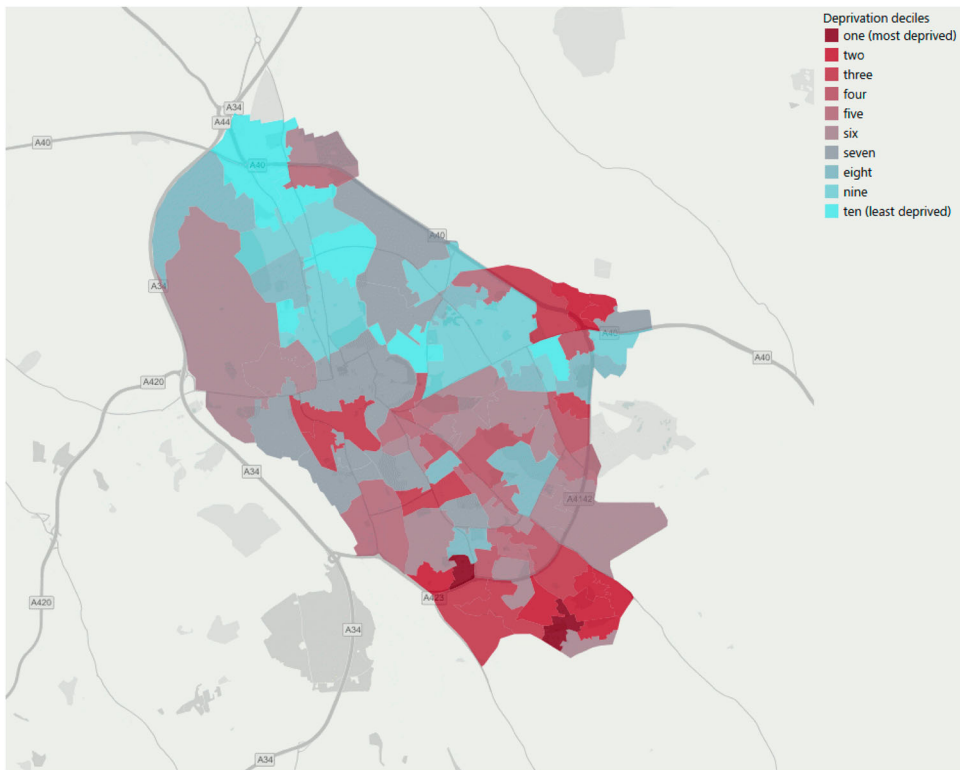


Figure 2. Indices of Multiple Deprivation in Oxford.

This sense of isolation is underlined by that treatment of the estate in the press. One local newspaper in 1963 referred optimistically to the emergence of Blackbird Leys as ‘a community in the making’. However, by 1968 the same publication described the estate as ‘Oxford’s Offshore Island’. Thirty years later, the local press was acknowledging the isolation felt by the residents of Blackbird Leys, listing the pejorative names by which the area was known, including ‘The Black Hole’, ‘the Ghetto’ and, most starkly, ‘the Place for Forgotten People’.

As a background condition to democratic participation on the estate, these social and physical distinctions between Blackbird Leys and the rest of Oxford matter. Not only is the area new (in Oxford terms at least) but it exists quite separately from those in the rest of the city – the estate is also socially quite isolated, despite its close proximity to a fairly large urban centre. However, it is also significant that the isolation of Blackbird Leys also underpins a reputation, strongly felt both within the estate, and across the city, which is important in determining the ways in which many residents living in the area orientate themselves towards public institutions and democratic participation.

Reputation as a structural condition

During the 1990s, Blackbird Leys gained a degree of national notoriety thanks to a series of media stories which highlighted anti-social behaviour, and in particular, joyriding in the area. For a time, the estate became a byword for poor urban planning and crime, as the

story reached even international new outlets, and this reputation is important both in the way in which Blackbird Leys is perceived by outsiders and (significantly) the ways in which residents present the estate to non-residents.

Coverage of the ‘problems’ of Blackbird Leys began in summer 1991, with local reports of a rising level of car crime, and of joyriding in particular. This, in turn, precipitated a police operation to deal with the problem, the result of which was a period of seemingly-spontaneous civil unrest which lasted for three days. The riots of 1991 led to a frenzy of media activity, and for a time, news cameras and journalists were a familiar sight on the hot summer evenings. The coverage in the media during this time was overwhelmingly negative, and presented Blackbird Leys as a hotbed of crime and anti-social behaviour. Coverage of the rioting highlighted a number of injuries to bystanders and resulted in some sensational media coverage, which afforded the area a notoriety that was not simply contained to the national press but spilled over into international media reports, Parliamentary debates and, for a time at least, the national psyche. Although national media attention has lessened in recent years, this reputation has not gone away, and even the most superficial examination of news coverage of Blackbird Leys will reveal some alarming headlines (see [Figure 3](#) below). For one resident, the media coverage during this time ‘was bad press. Blackbird Leys was mud and everyone was frightened to visit. I think that stuck with us for years’.

In fact, the reality of the problem is just barely reflected in the newspaper headlines, and does not neatly fit any of the prominent explanations put forward by commentators at the time. Local residents suggest that joyriding and ‘displays’ had in fact been occurring for a number of years leading up to the media frenzy in 1991. According to the diary of one resident, written in late 1991, ‘there has been a car related problem on Blackbird Leys for a number of years’, and indeed, had become a regular occurrence during the warmer months. The problems of summer 1991 therefore fitted into a familiar pattern, and the diarist noted that ‘during the summer of 1990 displaying had been taking place for some considerable time, mostly at about 3am’. The problem began once again around March 1991, and concerned residents alerted the authorities to the problem. This time, the participants were far bolder, and began to clash with police whenever they tried to intervene. The pattern of the ‘displays’ also changed, and they began much earlier, around 10pm. By the end of the summer, this had become a regular event, and attracted a number of spectators to the most popular areas. However, once the rioting of September caught the attention of the press, the estate became the subject of a media

'Oxford police battle with rowdy youths' – Tulsa World, Sept 3 1991
'Hell on Hot Wheels' – Daily Mirror, 3 September 1991
'Jail the Joyriders Now!' - Daily Express, 5 September 1991
'I hope you're proud, you animals, says riot victim' - Daily Express, 5 September 1991
'Terror on Housing Estate' – Oxford Mail, 10 October 1991
'Blackbird Leys has become synonymous with joyriding – ITV News at Ten, 10 September 1991
'Fear Ruled in No-Go Britain' - The Independent 16 April 1994
'Mowed down on Joyrider Estate' – Daily Mirror, 15 December 2000
'Can Plastic Police tame the Blackbird' – Daily Mail, 6 September 2006
'Blackbird Leys fears return to the 'bad old days of joyriding' – Oxford Mail, 21 December, 2015

Figure 3. Media reporting Blackbird Leys from the early-1990s to the present day.

frenzy, with the press regularly joining the spectators and established the profile and reputation which persists to this day.³

The reputation of the area did not begin here though. From its inception, the area was tainted with a reputation as being a ‘problem estate’ (Reynolds, 1986; Snow, 1991). According to Frances Reynolds (1986, pp. 15–16) ‘the rest of the city had always distanced itself from the drab dirty industrial area [...] there was a widespread belief among city residents that people from the inner city slum clearance areas had been placed on [the] estate’. Indeed, archival research reveals that this appears to have been a condition of the estate throughout its existence. One resident, speaking in the late-1980s thought that

‘Blackbird Leys has a bad name that is totally unjustified. I came to live in Blackbird Leys in ‘74 [...] when people knew we were coming, other friends in Oxford, they’d raise their hands in horror. We got the feeling that other parts of Oxford think Blackbird Leys is terrible’.

The reputation of Blackbird Leys can be summed up by a story appearing in a local newspaper soon after the first families moved in;

four years acres of unlit building sites, inadequate police supervision, parental apathy and the provision of a public house catering mainly for young people, has provided a perfect setting for the idle, the mischievous and the more sinister night people. (Oxford Mail, 17 June 1962)

It was never made clear exactly who the ‘sinister night people’ might be, but the implication was understood by the residents of Blackbird Leys at the time, and across the city. As one of the residents interviewed vividly put it, ‘shit sticks’.

Reputation, isolation and democratic participation

The reputation of the estate, coupled with its physical and social isolation, are important factors in explaining the low levels of participation revealed through the analysis of electoral turnout. Data like that sketched above are useful as they can capture the ways in which the experience of living on the estate can affect residents’ views of participation in a manner which would not be possible with more abstract methods. These kinds of insight have an important part to play in the literature in the field. Famously, Huckfeldt (1983, pp. 580–581) suggests that ‘the social environment can [...] encourage participation through the informal transmission of group based norms which turn participation into a social obligation’. However, as we shall see, the results in Blackbird Leys demonstrate that structural conditions can also have the opposite effect. In this section I outline the interplay between contextual factors related to the area’s deprivation and participation on the estate, highlighting the importance of the social, physical and reputational distinctions between Blackbird Leys and the rest of the city in explaining low levels of democratic participation.

The point here is that residents living in deprived areas do not simply happen to exist on lower incomes than more affluent areas. Rather, the experience of Blackbird Leys suggests that the condition of poverty on the estate brings with it a particular configuration of contextual factors that are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere: as we have seen, Blackbird Leys is seen as an area which is somehow ‘different’ to the rest of the city, socially and physically separate and with a poor reputation. However unfair, this kind of view has, as we have seen, shaped the ways in which people living on the estate understand their own position within the social make-up of the city.

Given the ways in which they tend to be viewed by people living outside the estate, it is perhaps unsurprising that, for the most part, the residents of Blackbird Leys view formal political life, and their part in it, with a certain cynicism. Qualitative data suggests that many residents see the structures of democracy as not serving their interests but instead as being distinctly remote and unresponsive to their needs. Consequently, many chose not to participate, with none of the residents interviewed in the fieldwork professing to membership or activism within a political party, and attitudes towards the political classes were distant at best.

One resident reflected the views of many by explaining her disconnection from formal political processes. 'I never voted. I think I've only voted in the last three years'. When pressed for the reason for this change, her response illustrated the role played by the extension of her social connections beyond the boundaries of the estate. Her engagement with politics began with her taking a job which required her to work outside Blackbird Leys, working 'around people with more of an understanding. I didn't really understand it at all, I thought "what impact does it have on me?"'. These insights extend throughout the history of the estate. Aside from an initial flush of enthusiasm when the first residents moved in, a time when participation in civic life was relatively high and a number of formal associations were established with the direct aim of affecting public issues, the ways in which many people have treated democratic participation reflect a deeply-felt disconnection. Paul, an employee at the Morris Motors plant, speaking in 1986 suggests that 'it's not like it was when my parents moved here. You can't take on anything which involves any kind of regularity of participation. You cant. People just don't want to know'.

This reluctance to participate in democratic life was often related to the perception of the institutions of democracy as not working for the estate, and this was explicitly expressed in terms of the area's reputation. Carl, who was a teenager during the unrest in 1991, professes a strong lack of interest in democratic participation. 'I don't care. Why should I? You hear the things people say about us when you're out and about. They [the City Council] haven't done one thing for us.' Equally, the comments of another resident are indicative of a broader sense of disconnection on the basis of the area's reputation. 'They've cut housing. Noone cares. They think just because we live on Blackbird Leys we're not worth the trouble. It will never change so I'm just not interested.'

The norms of non-participation on the estate which are indicated above extend beyond direct forms of participation, and affect the level of political discussion. Throughout the recent history of the estate, it is clear that 'political' issues were usually marginalised in everyday talk. Quite simply, in Blackbird Leys, political discussion was not a usual part of social life. As one resident suggested, 'I don't think it was really something that you thought about doing. I've never heard my Mum or Dad say "I'm going off to vote". We never had a conversation to do with politics. It was just living'.

These distinctions between the ways in which residents perceive political behaviour within, and outside the estate can cut across even kinship boundaries. Annie, who grew up on the estate, recalls:

My cousins are interested in politics. Their Mum, my Mum's sister, was thinking about standing for council once. In their house it seems like the kind of thing you can talk about. But not over here [in Blackbird Leys]. I remember going to stay with them and listening to them getting all worked up about Blair and thinking 'what are you on?'. My parents never talked like that, it's just something that no one really is interested in that I knew.

Understanding democratic participation in deprived areas

It is important to note that, although the history of the Blackbird Leys is marked by a reluctance to engage in the formal processes of democracy, and an oppositional stance towards the discussion of overtly political issues, it would be quite incorrect to suggest that participation of any kind does not take place on the estate. In fact, the area has a rich history of informal citizen action, and there is plenty of evidence of residents engaging in activities such as the organisation of civic events, informal provision of services (such as befriending schemes) and improving community facilities – what Insa Koch (2016) has called ‘bread and butter politics’ (see also Dacombe, 2018; Fox, 1990; Newbigging, 2000; Reynolds, 1986; The Young Foundation, 2009). The preference for these forms of democracy is intimately related to the development of the estate itself; the particular timbre of participation in Blackbird Leys is a function of a complex interplay of factors relating to the estate’s history, reputation, physical location and many other issues. In this context, the social isolation of Blackbird Leys can be seen as an important factor in understanding the dynamics of democratic participation on the estate.

As we have seen, in Blackbird Leys, it is clear that the peripheral location of the estate, coupled with numerous physical barriers between the area and the rest of Oxford reinforce a long-established sense that it is a satellite estate, disconnected from the city. Just as importantly, this separation acts in the context of a deeply rooted sense of social disconnection, which has its roots in the very origins of the estate and has been extended through the lasting legacy of the unrest of 1991 and a reputation which plays strongly on the social lives of those who live in Blackbird Leys. The particular form of social connections sustained in Blackbird Leys are important in understanding the kinds of informal political engagement which the residents prefer, and their reluctance to engage with the more formal structures of representative democracy. The social interactions between residents can provide areas for discussion, information exchange and experimentation away from the constraints of formal political life. According to Mansbridge (1999, p. 214), ‘micronegotiations’ between actors in informal settings can serve both to shape preferences over public issues as well as providing opportunities for democratic mobilisation. In Blackbird Leys, the social connections maintained by residents serve a similar function. However, they also work to limit the ways in which residents living on the estate understand their relationship to the structures and processes of democracy.

Social life in Blackbird Leys is underwritten by the distinctive constellation of social infrastructure which provides spaces and motivation for citizens living in the area to interact.

Even seemingly unstructured forms of deliberation, which do not tackle obviously ‘political’ issues, and do not require binding decisions as a result, nonetheless have a part to play in framing democracy on the estate. The social connections maintained in the area have a wider importance in understanding the ways in which people understand collective problems. The reservoirs of generalised trust that are built up through social life in the estate are what Albert Hirschman described this as a ‘moral resource’, which is to say, it increases with use, and depletes if it is neglected (Hirschman, 1985). For those residents who are marginalised from social life outside of the estate, engaging in democracy can become progressively harder. The ‘habits of the heart’ which participatory democrats value so highly are, in the final analysis, habits, and require an environment conducive to their development.

What is important about these kinds of insight is not that they challenge other ways of considering the relationship between poverty and democracy. Rather, they reveal connections between the way life is lived in deprived neighbourhoods which would not be apparent in more abstract forms of research. Contextual conditions like those discussed here are potentially important to studies of democratic participation because they have something to tell us about the varying ways in which the particular physical and social development of deprived neighbourhoods are related to the actions of local residents. As we have seen, one of the more pressing problems facing scholars interested in the relationship between participation and deprivation is identifying research strategies which expose the mechanisms through which inequalities in socio-economic status affect the level and effectiveness of participation – indeed, this has been underexplored in the literature. An examination of the interplay between the localised social conditions in a neighbourhood, the experience of poverty of residents, and the consequent effects on participation, therefore provides a means of contributing to these discussions.

Conclusions: Why understanding context is important to participatory democracy?

One of the reasons much of the existing work which considers explanations for the ways in which citizens engage with democratic life struggles to explain the ways in which democracy is hindered by poverty is that many writers fail to account for contextual differences which are important in determining whether, and how, participation takes place. The point here is that, regardless of the viability of democratic institutions, individuals make a complex calculation over the utility of participation every time they are faced with a choice over whether or not to engage in democratic action of any kind: democratic participation is, if nothing else, a question of rational decision-making. However, regardless of the importance of factors such as education, party identification and so on, the decision whether or not to participate is not made in a vacuum. As we have seen here, considering individual determinants of democratic participation in the absence of the context in which democracy is played out risks missing significant cues about how it is that these factors are important.

These insights have both theoretical and practical relevance for participatory democrats. As a starting point for theoretical treatments of inequalities in participation, their importance is twofold. First, the data presented here sheds new light on the factors affecting the motivation of residents of deprived areas to engage in democratic life. Democratic participation in Blackbird Leys is low in part because the residents are mistrustful of both the motives of formal democracy, and the potential for positive outcomes resulting from their engagement. As we have seen, this is related to the complex development of social life on the estate, with norms of disengagement from the formal structures of democracy apparent throughout its history. That these norms have implications for the potential for democratic participation in deprived areas is obvious, and an understanding of the variety of pressures at play in areas like Blackbird Leys is an important foundation for any responses on the part of proponents of participation's normative value.

Equally, although it is clear that formal democratic processes are unpopular on the estate, there is evidence that other forms of democratic participation are far more prevalent. Given this, it is a happy coincidence that participatory democrats tend to take a view

of what it is that constitutes democratic participation that does not stop at the ballot box but takes in a wider range of activities. For instance, Fishkin (1995) proposes the random selection of citizens to engage in public decision-making. Fung (2004) favours the employing of 'mini-publics' to gather citizen views, while Pateman (1970) identifies the significance of democracy in the workplace, others highlight the importance of participation in civic associations (Putnam et al., 1994; Putnam, 2000). Given such diversity, tackling the empirical findings at large in the literature seem far less troubling: the normative benefits of democratic engagement might still be enjoyed by the residents of Blackbird Leys, despite the oppositional stance taken to formal democratic institutions.

Finally, for participatory democrats interested in reforming the institutions of democracy, the findings have practical relevance. The idea that the design of institutions can have an effect on the ways in which citizens engage with democracy has become a mainstay of the recent literature on participation. Numerous writers have suggested that reframing decisions over local amenities to allow for greater citizen involvement can provide alternative avenues for service provision can promote greater levels of accountability, legitimacy and innovation (see Fung, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2001). Understanding the potential of institutional design in this way involves shifting the focus on citizen participation away from the individual characteristics of citizens, such as political knowledge, education, free time and so on (what Archon Fung [2004] has called the 'supply side' of participatory politics) towards the kinds of institution which they encounter. Where these rely on public spaces designed to prompt public deliberation over the issues which affect citizens in particular areas, these can secure citizen engagement in previously unforeseen ways.

Democratic institutions which are designed with sympathy for the particular settings in which they will be employed clearly stand a far better chance of engaging citizens than those which are not. The critical issue here is the appropriateness of institutional design. Too often, public participation is expected, without any thought for the relationship between individual citizens, organised groups and public officials – a point we can trace throughout the history of Blackbird Leys. It is simply unrealistic to expect most citizens to give up their time to engage in discussions over complex public issues in the forlorn hope that they might affect public policy. This is precisely the point Sherry Arnstein (1969) was making when developing her Ladder of Participation – not merely articulating the potential for citizen involvement, but highlighting the shortcomings of the most frequent forms of participatory procedure which citizens face. Empirical evidence suggests that such initiatives, properly designed, can be successful in promoting participation amongst citizens living in deprived areas where participation has previously been stubbornly low (Fung, 2004).

For participatory democracy, inequalities in the levels of participation between the poorest and most affluent sections of society remain problematic. However, the insights presented here demonstrate that responses to the issues raised in this article are possible. By establishing a greater understanding of how, and why, deprivation works against democratic participation, participatory democrats can begin to address what has become a neglected, but decisive, objection to their claims.

Notes:

There are many ways in which democratic participation can be understood. Some writers have found it analytically-necessary to restrict participation to the act of voting.

In contrast, participatory democrats usually include a range of other activities. Some of these are relatively formal, such as taking part in organised protests, signing a petition or writing to an elected representative. Others, such as participation in voluntary associations, are less obviously connected to the formal structures of democracy but are nonetheless still important. Equally, there are a range of views over the setting of democracy; Carole Pateman (1970) identifies the necessity of democracy in the workplace, Baldwin (1955) broke new ground by applying the principles of democracy to the family. As will become clear, in this article I take a broad approach to understanding both civic and democratic forms of participation – indeed, one of the arguments I make is that it is difficult to fully appreciate the relationship between poverty and democracy without understanding participation in this way.

Notes

1. Turnout data is not available at ward level for General Elections, or elections to the European Parliament. However, it is available for elections to the city council. In Blackbird Leys, data is held by Oxford City Council for every local election held since just before ward boundary changes were instituted in 2001. Using a combination of existing accounts of electoral turnout in the city, archival work and contemporary newspaper reports, it has been possible to extend these results to 1973.
2. Littlemore has been chosen as a comparison as it exhibits many demographically-similar features to Blackbird Leys. It is of similar size and population, and physical location at the edge of the city. From rural roots, the area expanded and developed at the same time as Blackbird Leys. Its social profile, too, resembles Blackbird Leys; the ward is among the 20% most deprived in the country, educational attainment is low (38% of residents have no qualifications), and far fewer of its residents work in professional or managerial occupations, compared to the city average. However, despite its position adjacent to Blackbird Leys, the estate has a rather different history, and shares none of its reputation. Any significant difference in the level of participation would therefore raise some interesting questions about the structural conditions at play on the estate.
3. The true extent of the problem, however, is the subject of much debate, and most of the estate's residents question the sensational nature of much of the coverage. Contemporary accounts of this period recall the unedifying spectacle of the world's press descending on Blackbird Leys, seeking out exhibitions of antisocial behaviour. Indeed, some of the joyriding stunts which appeared on news broadcasts at the time have long been rumoured to have been paid for by television crews, a charge repeated in Parliament by the local MP, Andrew Smith (Hansard, 9 December 1991, Cl. 644) who added that 'the extensive national media coverage in August and September of confrontations with the police left many of the wider public with a distorted picture of the problem. Some of the media were only interested in portraying a violent image of Blackbird Leys'. Regardless, by the start of 1992, traffic calming measures and chicanes running throughout the estate's main thoroughfares had put paid to most of the problems.

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