# The interrelationships between political parties and their local elected representatives: between supporting local development and strengthening participatory democracy



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***Abstract:***

*The study aims to highlight the role of political parties in local development by focusing on the role of local elected officials as representatives of these parties within their local context, and the most important relationships and links between them and the parties to which they belong. The study is significant in highlighting the position of political parties locally, rather than focusing on their roles nationally. It also addresses participatory democracy and its relationship with political parties. The study concludes that political parties play important roles in supporting local development through their elected representatives. Furthermore, the activity of political parties within participatory democracy is a major gain that enhances their roles and the roles of participatory democracy, which originally emerged to overcome the gaps and transgressions left by representative democracy.*

***Keywords:*** *Political parties; local development; elected officials; participatory democracy; representative democracy.*

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## Introduction

Political parties undertake multiple roles at both the national and local levels. They express local representative democracy through the relationship they have with their elected officials, a relationship defined by the degree of cooperation or conflict between them. It is well known that when political parties engage with local actors they benefit in their own political trajectory, but the strong presence and serious activity of political parties at the local level certainly contributes to consolidating and enhancing participatory democracy. From this perspective, the following question arises:

**What are the most important links between political parties and their locally elected representatives that contribute to supporting local development and strengthening participatory democracy?**

### Hypotheses

**1.** Conflict between political parties and their elected officials weakens the parties.

**2**.Parties play a major role in supporting local development.

**3.** The local activity of political parties is part of participatory democracy.

## Methodology

The study follows a descriptive–analytical approach.

To answer the research question the following outline is adopted:

- Axis One: The concept of political parties and the most important interrelationships between them and their elected representatives at the local level.
- Axis Two: The role of political parties in local development.
- Axis Three: Participatory democracy and political parties.

## Axis One – The concept of political parties and the most important interrelationships between them and their elected representatives at the local level

This axis examines the concept of a political party and the main links between political parties and their locally elected representatives.

### 1-Concept of the political party

The importance of defining the concept of the party stems from the fact that it carries organizational, ideological and functional connotations that allow us to arrive at a definition of the political party.

### A-Organizational connotation

Early studies that addressed party phenomena considered the party an organization for conducting elections to support the party's candidate; **Maurice Duverger** defined the party as follows: "The party is not a single group but rather a gathering of several groups scattered across the territory of the state – party committees, delegations, sections and local gatherings. All these groups are linked by the organizational bond embodied in the party's various organs and this bond is hierarchical. (Duverger, 1954)

**B-Ideological connotation**

The school that adopts this view focuses on the principles and objectives on which the party is based. The philosopher Edmund Burke defined parties as "an organized group of people gathered for joint action to achieve the interest of the nation by achieving the goals and principles they hold."

**C-Functional connotation**

Here the definition of the party is tied to the set of functions it performs. In this regard, Raymond Aron defined the party as "a permanent organization that brings together a group of individuals who work together to exercise power, whether that means taking power or retaining it. Thus the party is a group of people seeking to control the government by legitimate means. (Goui, 2012)"

**2-Elements of the party**

**Joseph La Palombara** identifies four basic elements of a political party:

- A permanent organization: The party must have a relatively enduring character, persisting even after the departure of its leaders.
- A complete organization: Meaning it is present from the centre at the top down to the smallest established unit across the country.
- Aiming to exercise power directly at both local and national levels.
- Possessing a broad mass base (Palombara, 1966).

**3-Definitions of the political party according to some thinkers**

Based on the foregoing, several definitions of the political party can be identified in the political science literature:

- Giovanni Sartori defines the political party as *"a political group that participates in elections and is capable of presenting candidates for public office through those elections."* (Tashma, 2013)
- Josef Thesing, a German political scientist, argues that the term *"political parties"* applies to organizations whose clear objective is to exercise continuous influence over the formation of public opinion. To achieve this objective, the party requires organizational structures and stable programmes, and participation in elections constitutes one of the

essential aspects enabling political parties to attain power and realize the desired influence. (Mansur, 2004)

- Osama El-Ghazzaly Harb views the political party as *"an association of individuals possessing an organizational structure at both national and local levels. It expresses the interests of specific social forces and seeks to reach or influence political power through various activities, particularly by enabling its representatives to occupy public positions, whether through the electoral process or otherwise".* (Rabah, 2010)
- The Dictionary of Political Science defines political parties as *"permanent and organized groups whose members unite around a common political project and shared interests within the framework of representative democracy. Their objective is to attain and maintain power through constitutional means, not through electoral fraud."* (Morin, 1997)

**4- Different links between political parties and their locally elected representatives**

Political parties present their candidates to run in local elections in order to secure good representation in local councils. The relationship between these parties and their elected officials can be based on understanding or conflict, which affects the roles of elected officials locally.

**A- Effects of party control over local elected representatives**

The fundamental purpose of the traditional representative system was the independence of the elected official not only from their voters but also from any collective organization, regardless of its name or purpose. Yet the very party that originally nominated the official may curtail this independence. Party control over elected officials can produce the following consequences:

•The notion of party leaders controlling local elected officials raises serious problems that affect the conscience and awareness of those officials, who may be unable to express their free will on behalf of the community and thus must submit to their party's instructions.

•Stripping elected officials of discretion and making them merely instruments executing the party's directives not only deprives them of initiative and responsibility, but also empties local institutions of value, turning councils into platforms for oratory and machines for voting under the guidance of party leaders.

•The bloc of voters is dominated by a group of activists who are always subject to the leadership bodies that control the elected officials in their name. This jeopardizes the principle of democratic legitimacy when a minority that does not derive its existence from the legitimacy conferred by universal suffrage controls a majority via its grip on their legitimate representatives in local bodies. As a result, elected officials come to see themselves more as representatives of their party than of their constituents.

•When absolute party control over elected officials overlaps with coalitions among several parties to manage local affairs, the risk of administrative dysfunction increases due to party manoeuvres and secret bargaining, affecting the performance of local authorities and the effectiveness of their administration.

•There is a danger of transferring power from legally responsible bodies accountable to voters to unaccountable bodies, especially when party minorities combine with union minorities to impose their views and methods on elected officials.

•Clearly, the dominance of party considerations over administrative competence inevitably leads to the loss of local autonomy in favour of party bureaucracy that imposes its will and viewpoints. (Mohamed, 2010)

**B- Effects of control by elected representatives over parties**

In some cases the opposite occurs: party apparatuses become subject to the control of local elected officials either individually, through a dominant personality with a strong status, or collectively through an organized grouping of elected officials who exert effective influence over the party apparatus.

•The preoccupation of elected officials with party manoeuvres and intrigues aimed at controlling their parties gives them the ability to lead their peers in the council in an authoritarian manner. The situation worsens if these figures are themselves under the sway of interest groups that use them for their own causes.

•Control by elected officials over their parties gives them the opportunity to determine the selection of candidates in subsequent elections and to exclude new faces from within the party, thereby imprisoning the party within this group and depriving local communities of the services of other qualified individuals within the party. (Giovanni, 1976)

**C- Effects of competition between parties and elected officials**

One form of the relationship between parties and their elected officials is conflict and competition rather than cooperation and harmony. The effects that result from this conflict include:

•Tension and confrontation among members of the same party not only risks damaging the party's image in the local community but can also lead to the fragmentation and division of the party when conflict reaches its peak.

•Instead of performing their role in serving their elected officials, supporting their positions, transmitting information to them and organizing their contact with constituents, the party becomes occupied with conspiracy and intrigue that ultimately result in the party and its officials losing their role at the local level (Duverger, 1954).

**Axis Two – The role of political parties in local development**

Political parties, whether at the national or local level, are engaged in important roles to serve citizens and local development. They perform direct roles such as monitoring elected officials and indirect roles such as contributing to development through their elected representatives.

**1-Definition of development**

The concept of development is one of the most prominent concepts that have attracted the attention of scholars in the social sciences. Economics was the first discipline to focus on this topic, although economists differ regarding the content of development due to differing means and objectives. There is a minimum consensus, however, that development refers to continuous changes in the economic structures and institutions of society in a way that sets it on the path of self-sustaining growth (Mohamed Gharbi, 2014) ; Gunnar Myrdal defined development as "an upward movement that encompasses the entire social system. (Fouad, 2001)"

**2-Definition of local development**

Local development is a multi-dimensional movement driven by various factors within a specific local community. It involves building and implementing a self-centred and self-propelling development project for that community.

**The French scholar Xavier Greffe** defines local development as a process of diversifying and enriching economic and social activities within a given territory by mobilizing and coordinating its resources and energies (Yahyaoui, 2011).

**Muhiuddin Sabir** notes that local development refers to a modern concept of social and economic work in specific areas based on social science and economic methodologies. This approach aims to achieve a cultural change in thinking, work and life by raising awareness in the local environment based on the participation of all members of the local community at all levels, both practical and administrative (Qadhi., 2014).

**Batten defines** local development as organized efforts to improve living conditions in the community by encouraging residents to help themselves and to cooperate with each other with the necessary technical assistance provided by governmental or civil organizations (Mounir, 2000).

**Vachon** stresses that local development concentrates efforts on the individual, making the person the core of development and thereby reinforcing human capital. Local development, also called grassroots development, uses local initiatives in small communities and is considered an engine of economic development and a development strategy used in many developing countries (Vachon, 1993)

**3- Contribution of political parties to promoting local development**

Political parties play an important role in contributing to local development through representative councils that serve as a channel for citizens to participate in local affairs and development. Their most important roles include:

**A- Organizing elected representatives**

The party's role does not end with presenting candidates to the electorate and supporting them until they win representation in local bodies. It also extends to organizing them within those bodies, whether they are in the majority, opposition or an independent position. By encouraging elected officials to join party groups within councils, the party helps form organized and cohesive blocs with the power to influence the direction of administrative decisions and to control the management of local affairs in line with its programmes, based on either actual control of power or effective oversight when in the minority (Ware, 1996)

**B- Communication and information transmission**

The importance of this function increases as the size of the local community in which the party operates expands, widening the vertical distance between the individual and the representative local authority. There is therefore a need for an intermediary to connect, communicate and regularly and continuously transmit information between the concerned parties. The individual needs the party to perform the horizontal linking function between them and their peers, and also to perform the vertical link between them and the local authority, conveying their needs, demands and reactions to decisions. Even parties that do not hold a place in local authority can contribute to strengthening the system by transmitting accurate information from society to the authorities. Given the presence of media and other parties, it becomes difficult for a party to supply elected officials with false information (Giovanni, 1976).

**C -Oversight and guidance of local bodies**

Based on the responsibility the party bears towards its voters, who placed their trust in it and its candidates and supported them to win local authority, the party finds itself obliged to monitor its elected officials to ensure they fulfil the commitments recorded in their electoral programmes under the party's banner. Effective oversight of its elected officials not only protects them from pressure exerted by vested interests in the area, but also preserves the party's reputation and image before the voters. The party continually monitors debates and majority decisions and their current and future consequences, keeps officials informed of new information and ensures oversight through dissuasive penalties that elected officials fear. This makes them more disciplined and more diligent in performing their duties. Parties in opposition within local bodies are often better placed to perform this role than parties outside these bodies altogether; although they do not hold a majority, they can prevent much harm within local committees by using persuasive logic rather than numerical strength. (Mohamed, 2010)

**D- An auxiliary factor for solving local problems**

Parties often play an active role in solving local community problems through their official or personal contacts with officials who can find solutions. This role helps local officials manage local affairs successfully and strengthens their positions with citizens. The party's role is more effective when it is a powerful force and has representatives in various sensitive and important local authority positions.

**E- A supportive factor for the local official's mission-**

This role becomes easier when turning to representatives of the official's own party for help in solving their problems. That does not prevent them from seeking help from a local representative from another party in the same area who may be more capable and effective in solving local problems. Shared geographical solidarity and unity of purpose in achieving a local public interest bring their efforts together (Mohamed, 2010).

**4- Benefits that political parties gain from their local activity**

Political parties gain many advantages from their movement at the local level: (Mohamed, 2010)

•**Revitalizing party organizations:** The struggle parties wage within local systems for power serves as a suitable opportunity to energize their apparatuses and to train new members in electoral organization, propaganda and contact with the masses (Palombara, 1966).

•**Real political test:** Local election results constitute a real political test for parties that cannot be ignored. They are a realistic measure by which parties gauge the depth of their roots in society and the popularity of their candidates. Often local elections are not merely a form of fierce conflict between competing parties spread throughout the country.

•**Training of winning candidates:** Success in elections enables parties to train their winning candidates in working and bearing responsibilities, especially if they are still in mid-career. It also allows the parties to test their discipline and loyalty to the political line they espoused and were elected on.

•**Rewarding supporters:** A party's victory in local elections gives it the opportunity to reward its activists and political friends for their loyal services by granting them administrative positions or benefits.

•**Enabling local spread:** Control by a political party over local authority allows it to spread locally.

•**Utilization of local authority resources:** Having local power through party representatives allows the party in reality to use some of the resources of this authority for its own benefit.

•**Attracting supporters by effective management:** When party representatives manage local affairs efficiently, especially when performing tasks in which their predecessors from other parties failed, thereby meeting pressing

popular demands that make everyday life easier, this success inevitably reflects positively on the party itself and helps attract supporters, even from among those who previously opposed them.

•**Creating consistent policies:** When local power is in the hands of party representatives it ensures a degree of cooperation in implementing a unified policy without raising difficulties, especially when local entities have genuine autonomy that gives them actual decision-making authority in a wide range of important administrative matters. Jack Brand notes that the national party does not merely have political entrenchment in local government, but also bolsters its policy when it encounters similar minds thinking in the same way.

•**Building a power base for national struggle:** Control of several important local communities becomes a winning card for the party in the struggle for national power because it provides a springboard and a basic base for parties that are distant from the sphere of national power.

•**Supporting national rule**: Control over local authority in several important cities gives the same party that exercises national power a huge supportive force in its struggle to continue its national course.

•**Prolonging the life of a declining party:** A fading or threatened party can extend its life thanks to the municipalities it holds on the political map while waiting for a suitable moment to rise again.

**Axis Three – Participatory democracy and political parties**

Participatory democracy is an important concept that was introduced to rebalance political activity and avoid the shortcomings left by representative democracy, especially at the local level. In order to establish participatory democracy within the local community and ensure its success, many mechanisms are needed. Participatory democracy is not an alternative to representative democracy led by political parties, but rather it enhances their roles to achieve broad and integrated political participation at the local level.

**1- Participatory democracy and local affairs**

The problem of representation begins with the principle that the people are the source of all authority and that they exercise their sovereignty through referendums and through their elected representatives. However, in many countries this notion is quickly undermined when compared with reality: the people are not actually sovereign, and the elected authority is unable to exercise all the delegated powers and maintain them (Qadhi., 2014).

Some argue that local democracy should not be restricted today to representative democracy alone; it should also include a form of participatory democracy that guarantees citizens the right to monitor, follow up and exert continuous and effective influence on the management of local affairs in the periods between electoral consultations. The population has the right to

information (regarding administrative decisions, public contracts and agreements), the right to consultation on decisions affecting them (through general or local consultations or through the formation of a local advisory committee) and, fundamentally, the right to see substantive respect for human values and principles in the decisions taken locally: equity, equality and social justice (Bouhania, 2015).

Participatory democracy is a form of deepening democratic ideals that requires redefining many practices in representative democracy. It is a new form of democratic practice based on the recognition that every citizen has the ability and competence to participate in deliberations and collective decisions. Trust in the citizen constitutes its main foundation (Ramadan, 2010).

**2- Definition of participatory democracy**

**Benjamin R. Barber** defines participatory democracy as "the participation of all of the people in at least some aspects of self-government at least some of the time." (Barber, 1984)

The Algerian researcher **Al-Amin Sharit** defines participatory democracy as "a new form of democracy in which citizens directly participate in discussing public affairs and making decisions related to them. It also means expanding the exercise of power to citizens by involving them in dialogue and public discussion and in making the resulting political decision (Bouhania, 2015)."

**Riane Eisler** argues that participatory democracy is theoretically superior to all dominator systems and that it alone preserves the dignity and value of the individual. It helps the government find solutions to crises by involving citizens in decision-making. She adds that full participatory democracy, as she described it, requires a great deal of voluntary work from every ordinary citizen (Eisler, 1987)

Drawing on **Hannah Arendt**'s concept of the public realm — the space in which citizens appear before one another through speech and action — participatory democracy can be understood as the arena where citizens freely exchange ideas and opinions to achieve the collective public good. She argues that the democratic process should end in the happiness of the community, not in narrow individualistic interests governed by purely material considerations and economic benefit that subordinate politics to the rule of businessmen and oligarchic influence. Achieving the happiness of those individuals does not necessarily lead to the happiness of society and citizens (Arendt, 1958)

**3- Requirements of participatory democracy**

Several conditions must be met to achieve participatory democracy on the ground:

•Affirming the sovereignty and authority of the people: This means that the people are the holders of sovereignty, the source of authority and legitimacy; the government is accountable to the citizens' representatives and subject to their

will. They have the right to monitor the implementation of laws to protect their public rights and civil liberties.

•Open organizational plurality: Freedom to form parties, organizations and political associations without restriction. This mechanism is related to the party system.

•Deepening the concept of citizenship: Citizenship is an important indicator: it is a permanent feeling inherent in the individual that makes them committed to responsibility towards others who share the same land.

•Achieving social justice: This constitutes the economic dimension of participatory democracy, including the fair distribution of wealth and the returns of growth. This is the opposite of what happens in authoritarian states. Equality and distributive justice are essential requirements for building participatory democracy.

•Peaceful rotation of power: Power should be gained or relinquished according to the will of the governed. Participatory democracy rejects the theory of monopolizing rule by one party or one individual. (Zakaria, 2011)

**4- Local affairs through the lens of participatory democracy**

Applying participatory democracy in local affairs achieves the following:

•Linking the widest possible segment of citizens to the local decision in its various stages: preparation, implementation, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation.

•Facilitating access to local mandates and making them consistent with professional activities, while improving the conditions for exercising the mandate by strengthening the training capacity of local elected officials.

•Ensuring transparency in preparing development and equipment projects by strengthening information and communication devices.

•Strengthening the rights of local elected officials, especially those in opposition. Democracy does not mean only majority rule; it also hinges on the ability of the majority to respect the rights of the minority and to enhance direct communication between the administration and citizens by simplifying procedures and qualifying human resources.

•Establishing prominent institutions that complement political representation and allow citizens, collective formations and associative movements to intervene effectively in managing local affairs (Qadhi., 2014)

**5- limits of Practicing participatory democracy**

While participatory democracy strives to create natural harmony among the various actors involved in making local decisions, some obstacles or risks can emerge in its application (Zakaria, 2011).

Participatory democracy has several drawbacks that may harm the choices of elected councils and strategic planning, including the possibility of turning groups of citizens into ignorant experts who may damage large development plans and long-term strategies devised by the authorities and experts along with decision

makers. Citizens may have a limited perspective on local development plans and weak diagnostic skills regarding phenomena. Participatory democracy may result in citizens monopolizing society and dominating decisions while excluding other actors, reducing transparency in management or damaging the legitimacy of the elected authority and its image in society. Conflicts and disagreements may arise among citizens, leading to developmental regression and failure of the participatory experience. Citizens may deviate from objectivity if they establish narrow sectarian or personal interests. Participatory democracy may diminish the role of local elected officials in the face of broad and increasing participation by civil society and the private sector or because of intense and excessive populist mobilisation by groups of citizens, which ultimately aims to reduce state authority at the local level and to cause the central administration to lose control, oversight and even sovereignty over a "highly open" local reality. Populist politics establishes new forms of legitimacy that depart from democratic mechanisms by implementing popular demands without relying on election, voting, representation and accountability processes – operations which can protect people from the risks and complexities of popular choices and their irrational directions (Bouhania, 2015).

**6 -Activity of political parties within participatory democracy**

As stated previously, in democratic countries participatory democracy emerged as a result of and an effort to support positive development equations that had been achieved with representative democracy playing a fundamental role. In developing countries participatory democracy arose to cover the shortcoming left by elected representatives who were supposed to represent citizens' interests. Nevertheless, political parties can still reinforce their position within participatory democracy through several points, including:

**A- Consultation**

The relationship between local elected officials and their parties is originally based on established ties and trust built on organized consultation. This ensures mutual understanding and joint cooperation and unified positions regarding local work. Elected officials who hold the majority do not engage only in consultative relations with their own parties but also with opposition parties and all other organized social forces in society to reach common consensus on important issues on which views differ. This enables elected officials to acquaint themselves with various perspectives from several different sources. On the one hand, it restrains their movements because their decisions are more adaptable, better prepared and more consistent with established facts in society, and on the other hand, achieving a joint agreement as a result of this consultation ensures that their decisions are implemented without resistance. Such consultation brings parties and representatives into constructive dialogue with all political forces without excluding or discriminating against anyone, on the basis that they represent the entire local community (Pateman, 1970)

**B-Initiative through proposals**

Parties, whether in the majority or in the opposition inside or outside the council, can use this procedure either directly through their official organs or indirectly through some organized forces in the local community to advance initiatives that include specific proposals. These receive party support and they strive to achieve them through those responsible for decision-making in local bodies. A party's task becomes easier when it has strong links with its representatives on councils and enjoys popular support demanding the implementation of these proposals, which conform to the real demands of most citizens in the local community. In addition, the dynamic role that parties play in this domain not only gives them leadership within the local community but also provides them with actual abilities to intervene in directing local affairs. Of course, this depends on their strong means of exerting influence on local officials (Mohamed, 2010).

**C- Popular protest**

Frequently political parties – particularly opposition parties – resort to this method with the aim of forcing the local authority to retract its decisions and modify its positions. Parties may use this procedure alone or in cooperation with some other societal forces to gain a strong pressure force against officials. Protest can take the form of closed letters or distributed pamphlets or press conferences. In other cases protest appears in the form of peaceful demonstrations led by party leaders and activists or a general strike. When parties succeed in using peaceful means to reach their goals by forcing officials to reconsider their positions in line with the demands of the local majority, they undoubtedly become influential and effective actors in guiding decisions and controlling the course of affairs, gaining strength on the political scene. Yielding by local officials to party-led protest is possible when this protest is supported by full popular backing against wrong positions and decisions (Tarrow, 1998).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it becomes clear that the interrelationships between political parties and their locally elected representatives constitute a fundamental pillar for promoting both local development and participatory democracy. Local development is not limited to infrastructure or service projects; it is an integrated process built on transparency and accountability that derives its legitimacy from the participation of local actors in decision-making. Participatory democracy emerges as a bridge that links the political legitimacy of parties to societal aspirations; the local elected representative becomes an active intermediary who turns popular demands into actionable policies. However, this interaction is not without challenges, necessitating the strengthening of oversight and evaluation mechanisms and the entrenchment of a culture of sound governance that

prioritizes the public interest over partisan considerations. Ultimately, deepening this complementary relationship between parties and their elected officials is not merely an option but a necessity to ensure sustainable development that meets the aspirations of society and restores confidence in political parties, laying the groundwork for a new phase of collaborative political work.

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