

The Paradox of Localism

*Exploring rhetoric and reform promoting the devolution of power,
from 1964 to 2017*

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Declaration

This dissertation is submitted according to the requirements of the Degree Committee of Land Economy. It does not exceed the regulation length of 80,000 words including footnotes, references and appendices.¹ It is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as specified in the text.

¹ Excluding the additional corrections as stipulated in the examiners' report.

Summary

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The Localism Act 2011 is one of many reforms over the past few decades aimed at English local government and its service delivery areas, with the expressed aim to empower citizens and oversee democratic renewal. However, localism has been marked by two fundamental contradictions. Firstly, despite stated intentions of mainstream political parties to localise power, centralisation is widely perceived to be increasing. Secondly, and in relation to this, localism has often emerged as a centrally led agenda rather than through a bottom-up process. Therefore, this thesis problematises the political context of periodic localism. It asks: *what are the political motivations and pressures that result in decentralist / localist rhetoric and reform?*

This thesis explores the uses of localism in relation to two political discourses of governments and political parties: on the one hand, discourse that seeks to legitimise and justify government policy, and on the other hand, discourse that seeks to popularise and delegitimise policies and ideas. Focusing on two types of discourses – one associated with government communicative discourse, and one associated with mainly opposition party communicative discourse observed during election campaigns and most commonly amongst opposition parties, this thesis suggests that legitimacy and populism both offer useful frames for understanding how localism is used and operationalised in the political sphere. The empirical and analytical core can be found in chapters four, five and six, which offers both a historical and contemporary perspective based on qualitative research (interviews and documentary analysis). Chapter four outlines my empirical observations on the Localism Act, discussing where the Act can be situated in a history of decentralising reform, how the government and parliament interpreted localism during the Bill stages, and the strategies central government used to implement it. Chapter five widens the perspective, exploring the link between centralisation (in the form of top-down interventions) and localist rhetoric and policy, from the 1960s onwards, by distinguishing between ‘strategic’ (means) and ‘normative’ (ends) localism as expressed in both rhetoric and reform. Chapter six explores the extent to which localism forms part of populist messaging as well as a party-political campaign strategy, outlining the dynamic between opposition party versus government rhetoric on localism. My main conclusion is that localism is first and foremost a government and / or party-political *strategy*, which explains why localism often remains a poorly implemented policy idea.

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Abbreviations

CLG: Communities and Local Government (in reference to the Parliamentary Select Committee)
CLLR: Councillor
DCLG: Department for Communities and Local Government
DETR: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DoE: Department of the Environment
GLC: Greater London Council
LEP: Local Enterprise Partnership
LGA: Local Government Association
LGCE: Local Government Commission for England
MAFF: Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MHCLG: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
MP: Member of Parliament
ONS: Office for National Statistics
OPDM: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
RDA: Regional development agency
RSS: Regional Spatial Strategy

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Introduction

It was March 31, 2010. Five weeks before the British general election, twelve members of the Shadow Cabinet, including Conservative Party leader David Cameron, were in the Coin Street Conference Centre in South Bank, London, in the company of journalists, party members, and special advisors. The purpose of the gathering? To formally announce the Conservative manifesto commitment on the ‘Big Society’. To anyone familiar with Coin Street’s history of community activism and cooperative housing, it may have seemed a symbolic location. While it is unclear if this motivated the choice, the rhetoric indicated as much: signalling that the Conservatives were more than the austerity party, that they *did* believe in society after all – just not in ‘the big state’. David Cameron announced to the room that their idea of empowering communities is “both incredibly ambitious, but also refreshingly modest”:

Ambitious because its aims are sweeping – building a fairer, richer, safer Britain, where opportunity is more equal and poverty is abolished. But modest too – because it's not about some magic new plan dreamed up in Whitehall and imposed from on high. It's about enabling and encouraging people to come together to solve their problems and make life better (Watt 31 March 2010).

Later that evening, a ‘glittering’ party was held in the nearby Oxo Tower for business and celebrity supporters of the newly launched charity, the Big Society Network, headed up by advisor Steve Moore. The formality of the Conservative Big Society press-conference and the exclusive party that followed contrasted with events exactly 24 years prior, on March 31, 1986. Despite cold winds and a hailstorm, South Bank was brimming with people and festivities. The Greater London Council (GLC)² was holding its farewell bash. The day-long revels ended in fireworks and a concert by the London Philharmonic Orchestra performing Haydn’s “Farewell Symphony”. Once again, a giant banner was hung on the County Hall directed at the Houses of Parliament across the river. This time, it bore the message: “GLC –We’ll Meet Again”. On the 1 April 1986, the GLC was officially abolished by the Conservative Government.³

1.1. Exploring the paradox

With this story of one location, 24 years apart, we get a small insight into the complexities of localism. A normative idea advocating a shift in the geographical balance of power, localism has been periodically operationalised in political discourse. While localism has been enduring, it has seen different manifestations over time, championed by different actors of different political persuasions, at varying spatial scales. Emphasising localism’s ideational *and* strategic forms, this dissertation asks why central government and political parties periodically promise to redistribute power from the central state to local places. Based on a qualitative study of

² A sub-national, metropolitan tier of elected government of London (operating in the years 1965-1986).

³ This comparative anecdote is based on evidence gathered from the following sources: The Times (1 April 1986), The Guardian (1 April 1986), Ganesh (2014), Watt (31 March 2010), and Moore (2018).

interviews and documentary analysis, this research seeks to problematise the discourse surrounding central-local relations.

No party won an outright majority in the 2010 UK general election, leading the Conservatives to form with the Liberal Democrats the first Coalition government since the Second World War. David Cameron's Big Society eventually evolved into The Localism Act 2011. In fact, 'Localism' (with an uppercase 'L') was one of the main policies during the first couple of years of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-2015). The Act granted participatory rights such as neighbourhood planning⁴, development orders, community right to build, community right to challenge, community right to bid, community asset transfer, and community right to contest, reflecting the Conservative Party's flagship 'Big Society' election promise (Conservative Party 2010; DCLG 2010; Norman 2010). Big Society and Localism were heavily interconnected in political rhetoric at the time: often used synonymously, they both described the desire to reign in the roles and responsibilities of central government by devolving power mainly to communities (Higgins 2013). Both concepts experienced use and popularity patterns at similar moments in time, with both relatively quickly falling out of use in government communication (Tait and Inch 2016, 176-7).⁵ The Localism Act also granted rights to local government, the most significant being the General Power of Competence. Localism (with a lowercase 'l') more generally refers to a normative idea indicating the (democratic) benefits of spatial governance reform that devolves political power from the centre. Such powers can be aimed either at a regional, sub-regional, or metropolitan structure, or, a local authority, town hall / parish council, or a neighbourhood / residential community. Throughout this thesis, I see localism as an empty signifier that has similar uses and aims as other popular concepts that concern the spatial location of governance and power, such as decentralisation, devolution, and local self-government. Therefore, I have used these interchangeably. While it is possible to distinguish between these concepts in different ways, on a normative and discursive level they seek to signal similar things, which is empowerment beyond the centre (I will further elaborate on and justify this approach in Chapter 3). This thesis therefore understands localism in mainly a rhetorical and relative, rather than specific, sense.

Coin Street is located on the South Bank, London, but is also a short-hand reference to what was a couple of decades of community-led activism and protests against planned office development during the 1970s and 1980s. Eventually, the Greater London Council, as part of its Community Areas Policy, signed off the land around Coin Street to the community⁶ to build co-operative housing. However, the Coin Street movement was in many ways a blip on the radar, a pinnacle of 'localism', the scale of the community action and of its success some would argue has not been repeated since. As Polly Toynbee argued during oral evidence for the Select Committee Report 'The Big Society', "Wonderful things happen like Coin Street because, at

⁴ A legal right contained in the Localism Act 2011 empowering residents in a neighbourhood area (the neighbourhood *forum*) to produce their own plan (the neighbourhood plan), which, once formally adopted by the local planning authority, the Act grants it the same statutory weight as the Local Plan (as produced by the local planning authority)

⁵ For a rough indication of this, compare google search trends for "big society", "localism", and "devolution" in England, from 01/01/2004 to 01/01/2019 (Google 2019a).

⁶ To the Coin Street Community Builders, a community-run social enterprise and development trust (DCLG 2008, 121).

the very last moment, Ken Livingstone⁷, just before he was bunged out by Mrs Thatcher, gave them a dollop of land. It was the greatest thing he did ... These things are rare” (Public Administration Committee 2011, Ev 19). While the Big Society was a major manifesto commitment of the Cameron Government as a way of empowering communities to “allocate scarce resources and shape services” in the context of austerity (HM Treasury 2010, 32), the Labour Party GLC election manifesto from 1981 emphasised “defending local communities” against public spending cuts by enabling them through targeted funding (The Greater London Labour Party 1981, 11). Through its community policies, the GLC offered its own version of the Big Society, being “not so much a provider of vital services as an enabler, allowing groups to do their own thing” (The Guardian 1 April 1986, 15).

These two anecdotes expose a difference in attitude towards the role of local political institutions in the implementation of localist and devolutionary policy reform (Wills 2019). It also demonstrates the top-down approaches of the most recent policy experiment of Localism and the Big Society, described by Wills as “largely an elite reaction to growing popular disillusionment with the mainstream political process” (2016a, 10). Indeed, the abolition of the GLC offered an extreme lesson that the role of local governments and institutions in the democratic process was subject to the political agenda of central government and its ability to control Parliament. Local government’s role in enabling and promoting localism and participation amongst its local communities was dependent upon the powers it had in the first place relative to central government. Localism, from this perspective, is not simply a normative ideal or ideology: it is first and foremost strategic politics in action. This politically strategic role of localism is, as I argue throughout this dissertation, ubiquitous, and a major explanation of how localism is used politically (and therefore discursively), why it emerges at certain moments, and why it rarely results in satisfactory reform of central-local relations.

Further, in asking *why* localism has appeared in policy and rhetoric, this work also addresses localism’s contradictory nature. The historical anecdote above sheds light on two interrelated paradoxes of localism: firstly, despite stated intentions of mainstream political parties to localise power (such as those made by David Cameron), centralisation is widely perceived to be increasing, and secondly, the ‘means’ of achieving localism through *centrally-led policy* does not reflect its ‘ends’ of bottom-up community, voluntary, and local government organisation (e.g. Coin Street). As Blunkett *et al.* (2016, 555) argue, “Despite the statements of our political leaders, it could be argued that the recent devolution and ‘localism’ agenda represents more continuity than change, in the sense that it reflects a preference for elite, top-down policy-making with limited (if any) public engagement” (see also Bogdanor 2009, 242-4; Copus *et al.* 2018, 14; Wills 2016a, 10). This top-down approach has endured despite the fact that, as one interviewee observed, community engagement does not relate positively or even causally with government policy that promotes it [18]. Localism’s ancillary concepts – decentralisation and devolution – assume in their very wording that the natural location of power and decision-making and policy is in central government, thus encoding “the power structure they purport to undermine”, as remarked by another interviewee [43]. Therefore, not only are the central origins of localism paradoxical, but they are also potentially

⁷ The mayor of the GLC at the time.

counterproductive. It seems then that localism's *means* are divorced from its *ends*, a discussion I will return to in Chapter 5, which has implications for implementation and the possibility of meaningful change. As the same interviewee pointed out, "[localism has] been a kind of top down and kind of carefully managed process by Whitehall. And the public has largely been absent from many conversations around devolution and localism" [43]. This thesis aims to probe further these interrelated paradoxes, controversies and contradictions of localism, where localism as a belief, tradition, or ideal, is not one that can be directly translated into policy, ensuring a continual tension for those politicians and policies that promise it.

1.2. Research motivation

Why is studying localism important? Firstly, localism, as illustrated by reforms such as the Localism Act 2011, is not an isolated policy nor rhetorical tool, and its emergence exposes certain policy-making patterns that relate to democratic reform that are worth exploring, and in many ways is at the heart of some fundamental questions many political researchers seek to answer. Localism's emergence is a reflection of a wider tendency for political actors to promise different forms democratisation and democratic renewal. Indeed, many trace its rhetoric and ideas to a lineage of reforms of previous governments which were similarly aimed at local government and local communities, seemingly in order to spatially re-balance power. These reforms professed an intention to democratise decision-making and services by empowering the communities and individuals that were being directly affected. However, these interventions have been characterised by a lack of a holistic strategy, as well as extensive discrepancies and inconsistencies.

These periodic policy innovations to promote pluralism, inclusion, and democratisation, as manifested in some very specific areas of government administration including the town planning system, education, health, as well as local government more widely, are policy responses and interventions to what is a generally perceived democratic deficiency in the British political system, including inherent qualities of the unitary Westminster model itself as well as the first-past-the-post electoral process more specifically. This deficiency has been compounded by a growing centralisation of power to the capital, London, and within it, Westminster (Lijphart 2012; Marquand 1988; Blunkett *et al.* 2016; Wright 2017). An added dimension of this is the fact that these weaknesses are easy enough to identify and exploit for political gain. Politicians, particularly those in opposition or on the back benches, are often quick to communicate their own and constituents' observations and opinions on the system's democratic deficiencies, as illustrated by commonly used phrases such as there being a 'crisis of confidence' and 'crisis of trust' amongst the electorate. Widespread public opinion of the unrepresentativeness of mainstream political parties has re-emerged recently, alongside a new wave of populist and anti-political, and anti-elitist sentiment (Clarke *et al.* 2018; Wills 2016a). This is a point I will later elaborate on in Chapter 6. Localism in this sense is not a blip, but rather, its policies and discourses are regularly renewed and reintroduced in different forms. Localism can therefore be said to reflect some inherent tensions and contestations in democratic politics, particularly those between government and opposition. As such, this dissertation aims to bring politics and its processes 'back' into the discussion on localism.

Further, it is important, in the context of continued austerity⁸ and recent local council (actual and near) bankruptcies, to remind, reanalyse, the most glaring paradox of them all. Despite the empowerment rhetoric of localism, austerity has had a severe impact on local government and its services across the country for the past eight years. As the years go by, austerity and the threat of Brexit is creating the conditions for the ‘big society’ and ‘localism’ that government policy never achieved – it is creating anger, disillusionment and despair. As one interviewee commented:

I mean, it would be nice to believe that people want to be active and want to be involved in their communities as a sort of enjoyable leisure activity. But generally they don’t. Generally, the thing that brings people out of their houses is outrage, despair, anger, pissed-offness. So, the more money that’s going into communities and the more better off people are feeling and the more comfortable they are, the more likely they are to stay at home [18].

In addition, the on-going political crisis of Brexit has further motivated a discussion on localism. Despite the rhetoric of ‘take back control’, Brexit has resulted in growing centralisation of power to Westminster (see, for example, Fig. 5.1). The promises of democratisation in its various forms is common to both the ideas of Brexit and localism, both of which, simplistically, signify a demand for the decentralisation of power. They both form part of the periodic arguments and pressure for a different kind of democracy – a more direct, and participatory democracy, consisting of greater local power and referendums – which amounted to a crisis in the British parliamentary system in the aftermath of the Brexit vote (see Mounk 2018; Runciman 2018). These discourses indicate that the beliefs, values and norms of localism are in fact deep-rooted, highly political, and persuasive. Therefore, a study on the discursive uses of localism can offer some more general answers from which we can begin to also understand the discourse and ideas surrounding, on the one hand, Brexit, and on the other hand, and more generally, the politicisation of democracy in the form of democratic reform and ‘renewal’.

With these issues in mind, I aim to also contribute to ongoing debates on localism’s place in democratic practice, which has been the subject of several recent book publications.⁹ I discuss these debates in greater detail in Chapter Two. An initial comment is that some of this literature takes the purported benefits of localism at face-value, which informs both research motivation (e.g. “this is important because localism, in the form of local democracy and/or empowered communities, *should* exist”), as well as critique (e.g. “this policy approach is unsatisfactory, because it is insufficiently localist / centralising). As professed by Copus *et al.* (2018, vi), the development of their argument was based “on our love of local government, and our normative approach is therefore an unashamed one”. While I do not disagree with this approach in principle – certainly, most political research is motivated by normative beliefs (Hay 2002) –

⁸ As recently as November 2018, the United Nations envoy on extreme poverty and human rights, led by Professor Philip Alston, argued that while the UK ‘has a system of government that rightly remains the envy of much of the world’, it seems ‘patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty’ (UN 2018, 1).

⁹ For example, Wills (2016a), Brownill and Bradley (2017), Leach, Stewart, and Jones (2018) and Copus, Roberts, and Wall (2018).

there is a tendency for critique to focus only on the substance and implementation of reforms by comparing these against the normative ideal of localism, which in turn is rarely explicitly stated or explained. This is reflective of the political debate generally which is quick to criticise centralisation, or hierarchical power relationships and state intervention more broadly, but slower to offer tangible alternatives. Even those researchers who do explore an alternative central-local relationship, and suggest specific constitutional and policy reforms to achieve this,¹⁰ often fail to explain if the goal is to ‘simply’ strengthen local government or to create an entirely different democratic model (to that of the current Westminster Model), perhaps based on an autonomous form of local self-government or federalist system. As Mackenzie (1961, 5) argued almost sixty years ago, “There is no normative general theory from which we can deduce what local government ought to be; there is no positive general theory from which we can derive testable hypotheses about what it is”.

Highlighting the one-sidedness of the debate is further important given that few can explain exactly why localism is needed or important. Since the economic dividend of devolution remains unproven, its appearance in policy can therefore be assumed to be normative and political. Further, equating more local decision-making with more democracy can also be problematised (to be further discussed in Chapter 2). In general, it seems that local government researchers have not sufficiently explored the implications of their own normative critique on centralised governance. In other words, given this unsatisfactory state of affairs, what are the political imperatives that brought forward these reforms in the first place? Therefore, one might instead ask “*why* does localism and decentralisation, as a centrally-led policy agenda, exist”, and “where might its normative underpinnings originate from”? Since a divergence between rhetoric and reality in the policy implementation process it no longer surprising, perhaps academics in this space should consider a shift in analytical focus.

This thesis compares then more closely to critical research that has explored the association of localism and spatial governance reform, with political and ideological imperatives. This area of research, which mainly uses the theoretical frames of neoliberalisation and post-political strategies (e.g. Jones 2019; Haughton *et al.* 2013; Allmendinger 2016; Inch 2012), tends to approach spatial governance reform as “neither a good nor a bad thing”: rather, the focus is on how these spaces are constituted in pursuit of particular state strategies (Haughton *et al.* 2013, 219). Therefore, the key analytical challenge is “understanding how particular governance assemblages come to be formed, in relation to which types of state strategy and in pursuit of what kinds of politics” (*ibid.*). However, rather than applying neoliberalism or post-politics, this theory seeks to understand the institutional context and the discourses of localism. This leads me on to my main research question: **What are the political motivations and pressures that result in decentralist / localist rhetoric and reform?** This question places the main subject of study the central state and its political parties, placing the paradox of localism as the focal point of the thesis. As such, this dissertation approaches the British political system (as it

¹⁰ For example, Leach *et al.* (2018, 164-167) *do* explore an alternative model and how to achieve it through a combination of constitutional change, local-government finance, local democratic arrangements, and territorial structure. They argue; “all these proposals would do much to strengthen local government, reverse the 40 years of centralisation, and move towards a better central-local settlement” (p. 167). Notice the normative emphasis on ‘better’ and the remaining question of what ‘better’ might be.

relates to England) as the *basis for explaining* localism, rather than simply its context. Therefore, a study of localism has been motivated in order to explore and query a specific tendency of political debate and reform, to offer a perspective on current economic and political challenges, and finally, to address a recurring gap in the literature.

1.3. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two and three form part of the introductory chapters. Chapter 2 will give an overview of the literature, including the localism literature but also more broadly political research and theory concerning the sources of democratic consent and pressures for reform. It concludes by offering a conceptual framework which combines elements of both legitimacy and populism theory as a way of better understanding the localism as a recurring element of political communicative discourse (Schmidt 2008). Legitimation and populism can both be considered common political discourses amongst governments and political parties: on the one hand, discourse that seeks to legitimise and justify government policy, and on the other hand, discourse that seeks to popularise and delegitimise policies and ideas common during elections and particularly amongst opposition parties. By understanding processes of legitimisation, as well as populist strategies, one can better understand the pressures and discourse underlying democratic reform and renewal such as that offered by localism.

This framework allows for both a macro and long-term perspective by exploring how governments operate within a framework of legitimacy and legitimisation. Elements of populism theory will be the basis for understanding the emergence of localism from a more short-term, micro-level perspective, mainly focusing on party-political strategies on campaigning and messaging. Both theories offer different but complementary perspectives on the periodic operationalisation of localism and its contradictions. Chapter 3 will then explore the implications of this conceptual and discursive framework, justifying the research process and the meaning of researching political ‘motivations’, as well as outlining localism’s linguistic foundations. Here, I also outline my qualitative methods, which are based on both interview data and documentary analysis. Chapter 4 offers an introduction to the empirical research, outlining the Localism Act 2011 as an inevitably disappointing manifestation of the normative ideals of localism. The chapter explores its emergence, interpretation and implementation as a case study of political debate, contestation, and strategy. Chapters 5 and 6 will more closely apply the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3 and will approach the origins of localism from a more analytical perspective. Chapter 5 discusses localism in relation to state intervention, and the legitimacy of such intervention and centralisation. To explain how localism can be used to support intervention, I distinguish between two manifestations of localism which are a) normative and b) strategic. Chapter 6 explores how localism can be considered a populist strategy employed by the mainstream political parties. Of particular interest are the differences between government and opposition rather than between political parties and their ideologies *per se*, and the dynamic both within and between the two that impact on the emergence of promises and policies around localism. Each of the three core chapters – four, five and six – strive to offer a different perspective to the main research question, by exploring the following questions:

Chapter Three: How can we study localism in relation to its political uses?

Chapter Four: How did localism come to be concretised through the Localism Act and how has it evolved since?

Chapter Five: Does the promise and policy of localism legitimise centralisation?

Chapter Six: How do political parties operationalise localism as part of their electoral strategy?

Using a conceptual frame of legitimisation and populist strategies to theorise how the political system responds to public opinion (communicative discourse) (Chapter 3), this thesis will draw these discussions together and conclude that, on the one hand, the idea of localism is highly normative and popular, but problematically equally abstract and intangible, ensuring that any attempt to put it into practice is highly contested (Chapter 4). Further, and perhaps for this reason, its tangible appearance in rhetoric and policy indicates it has a deeply political purpose and use. Such uses and motivations I argue can be understood as a) legitimating economic strategies, whether these concern regional economic development or local government finance (Chapter 5) and b) undertaking populist and electoral strategies in the context of an adversarial two-party system (Chapter 6). In other words, while governments and opposition parties tend to approach localism from different angles, they both do so strategically. It seems then that various localism agendas are borne out of this phenomenon where democracy itself – as a concept and principle – is operationalised in political rhetoric, as part of a politically salient vocabulary suited to oppositional politics and messaging. This leads me to consider a couple of implications. First, it questions current approaches to studying localism as insufficiently aware of its political – in the sense of its discursive – origins, as well as its relationship to economic policy, and therefore insufficiently critical of its origins and strategic uses in politics. In addition, these findings indicate that there is no ‘true’ localism, if promoted as a centrally-led policy. Such localism is based in politics, in partisan self-interest, and some ‘approaches’ or ‘manifestations’ will benefit certain groups or individuals over others. This seeks to form some sort of theoretical basis for localism, which I suggest can only be determined, defined and created, by communities themselves, with implications for public policy.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter outlines the literature on localism specifically, and state and democratic theory more generally, to explore *why* the idea of localism has emerged as a political promise and policy. It does this because of identified issues with the localism literature in relation to its analytical emphasis on localism's (often poor) *implementation*, as opposed to *explaining* localism. The chapter will begin by outlining the lack of a coherent theory of localism. Researchers of localism and decentralisation instead study policy change through different theories, including governance, neoliberalism, post-politics, ideology, and policy narratives, which is outlined in Section 2.1 and sub-section 2.1.1. To better understand however the institutional context of localism, the literature review then takes a broader view to consider state theories including the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy has been referred to in discourse theory as a key reason why governments seek to communicate to the public. Certain policies and decisions require legitimation and justification, particularly if the decision is called into question. However, an understanding of how and why the idea and promise of localism emerges periodically in politics requires a broader understanding than just government communication and discourse: the Conservative Party's localism promises during the 2010 general election campaign show the key role of opposition parties in promoting the idea of decentralisation and devolution. Therefore, to understand localism, one needs to understand the communicative discourses of political and electoral campaigning, and opposition parties. Elements of populism theory have been therefore used to seek to broaden this perspective. Taken together to incorporate both government and opposition, this thesis explores localism as an idea associated with the British state and culture more broadly as embedded normative belief and tradition, which is why has been so persistent over time.

2.1. Locating a theory of localism

There is no academic theory of localism. Rather, a number of political and state theories, of different ontological foundations, have been used to describe, explain, and advocate for localism. I emphasise 'advocate' because of the often-normative emphasis on studies of localism (e.g. Stoker 2004b). Here, governance theory has dominated academic research on localism, particularly during the 2000s. Governance theory is itself far from coherent (Bevir 2013, 1; Pierre and Peters 2000), and different elements of governance theory offer different explanations for localism. The most prominent, but also the most critiqued, understanding of the reasons for, and origins of, localism, is localism as an element of a society-centred, networked, and multi-level (territorial) governance. Such governance theory sees localism as part of a wider move away from 'government' to 'governance', with decision-making and policy implementation involving a vast array of non-state actors, therefore diminishing the dominance of the central state (Smith 2006, 21; Sorensen and Torfing 2008, 3; Bevir and Rhodes 2008; Salamon 2002; Stoker 1998; Peters and Pierre 2006). This interpretation demonstrates influence from Foucault's theory of governmentality, which challenged political research focusing on 'the state' as a single object of analysis: "We need to cut off the king's head: in political theory that has still to be done" (Foucault 1980, 121; 1991; 1979). Foucault

instead argued that power moves as a positive force throughout society, as opposed to in the form of a single repressive force from the centre (Finlayson and Martin 2006, 167). Both the governance and governmentality literatures explore the diffusion of power and ruling throughout civil society (Bevir 2013, 150).

This literature on localism in the 2000s focused on, in both theoretical and policy terms, the ‘New Localism’ at the time associated with the Blair Government. Alongside the academic writing during this period, there were several think tank publications on the subject, often produced collaboratively with both academics and politicians, on the benefits of localism and decentralisation in its various policy forms. For example, the Fabian Society (Bleas 2003), Adam Smith Institute (Carswell 2004), Localis/Policy Exchange (Jenkins 2004; Travers and Esposito 2003); NLGN (Filkin *et al.* 2000; Corry and Stoker 2002; Corry *et al.* 2004); the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (Power Inquiry 2006); the Smith Institute and the Young Foundation on ‘Double Devolution’ (Edited by Mulgan and Bury 2006); Unlock Democracy (edited by Pacey, Rigby and Runswick 2008). One might argue that the academic influence on developing localism was fairly significant, perhaps even to the point of producing a reinforcing circle, as indicated by this feedback loop between academics, think tanks, and political rhetoric. Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 154) suggest that the implication of this might be that governments have adopted certain types of language strategically to obscure hierarchical control:

Politicians and public servants discussing governance often pepper their speeches and policy documents with references to ‘community engagement’, ‘partnership’ and ‘policy capacity’. Drawing upon such references, academics have documented what they describe as a transition from government to governance. *In this self-reinforcing circle academics and practitioners feed off each other.* Our suspicion is that many politicians and public servants have learnt to use the language of community engagement strategically; it becomes a presentation device to obscure, or at least make more palatable, the exercise of hierarchical control. [Emphasis added]

Partly for this reason, there has been much critique of the theory of society-centred governance, both within and outside the governance literature. Part of this critique is a reflection of the normative influences of pluralism. Here, much of the original critique of pluralism theory, particularly its failure to account for power imbalances, was repeated a couple of decades later in response to governance theory. The parallels between these two theories are outlined by Smith (2006, 32-3), who observes:

The problem with governance accounts of state reform and development is that they fall back on the simplistic assumptions of traditional pluralism. They again confuse plurality with pluralisms and ignore the asymmetries of power that potentially exist even in network relations ... Perhaps the main problem is the way in which the governance assumes that the central state has lost power when there is a raft of empirical evidence to demonstrate the high level of resource and authority that remains within the central state. ... [The governance literature] continue the pluralist error of not problematizing the state. It is seen again as a benign force that has weakened significantly and is now challenge by multiple power centres.

Scholars were increasingly seeking a better analytical framework to explain localism in the context of wider state forces and institutions, political discourses and processes (see Offe 2009,

558-9). Here, we see a move from governance approaches, and the emphasis on *description*, to more use of critical theory, and *explanation*, which will be explored in the following section.

2.1.1. From governance to critique

Criticisms of governance have partly arisen due to diverging ontological foundations in the applications of the premise of governance. As mentioned, this inherent intellectual tension is due to the influence of pluralism theory on governance theory, which had both foundationalist and postfoundationalist applications (Smith 2006, 34-5). As Smith comments: “Radical democrats offer their pluralism as a critique, rather than legitimization, of liberal democracy and in their extreme relativism take a very different epistemology to classical pluralism”. In a similar move, upon facing large political inconsistencies in the localist policies of the Coalition Government, researchers have increasingly applied critical, postfoundational theory, such as post-political/post-democracy theory associated with Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, to better frame their criticisms. They did so partly due to a wish to move away from governance as a theoretical framework: “[governance] appears dead in the water as a mode of societal organisation” (Metzger, Allmendinger and Oosterlynck 2015, 2). Specifically, these writers suggest that empirical research on territorial governance practices and arrangements, even if intending to develop more inclusive and democratic outcomes, have served to ignore or even deepen democratic deficits since governance approaches has tended to favour *consensus* over healthy political *contestation* (ibid, 3; see also Eagleton-Pierce 2014). Therefore, similar to the academic critique of pluralist theory in the 1980s, the “consensus” gained through governance, it was argued, *did not* entail political contentment (Smith 2006, 30; Lindblom 1982, 19-20).

Therefore, while the dominance of governance in the 2000s tended to produce more descriptive and normative accounts of localism, researchers have increasingly analysed the *reasons* behind localism’s emergence, contradictions, and policy failures. Academic interest peaked in the post-2010 era with the reforms introduced under the Coalition government, where the rather conspicuous contradictions of some of these flagship reforms provoked much interest and critique (Painter *et al.* 2011). Urban and planning scholars, and critical geographers, took a particular interest in analysing policy during this period, given that one of the major features of the Localism Act was the neighbourhood planning provisions. Neighbourhood planning, therefore, has been the object of extensive research and literature which I outline below. For this reason, there is significant overlap between the localism and neighbourhood planning literature. This overlap was observed by Wills: “Given its importance in the localism agenda, and the scale of the take up, neighbourhood planning provides a useful window onto the debates about localism” (Wills 2016b, 46). In academic accounts of localism, whether studied generally, or in relation to neighbourhood planning or another of its specific policies, the common denominator has tended to be scepticism and critique.

One element of this critique has been on the aforementioned gap between ‘rhetoric and reality’. The general argument here is that, while there may be political consensus and appetite to pay homage to local democracy, there is much less interest in what is perceived as a ‘radical’ and more ‘fundamental’ reform to promote new forms of local self-government and fiscal

devolution. This view is prevalent across academic and political debate. As the previous head of the Civil Service, Lord Bob Kerslake, recently commented:

... seven years on from the passage of the Localism Act, the fundamental shift in power away from Westminster promised by the legislation has not been achieved. The subsequent devolution deals of the Northern Powerhouse have similarly not altered the fact that we continue to live in one of the most centralised and geographically unbalanced countries in Europe (Locality 2018, 4).

Critical geographers and planning theorists have over the past few years honed this argument on how various decentralising and democratising reforms such as localism have been poorly realised or implemented. To briefly elaborate, this literature consists of two broad camps, both of which tend to focus on neighbourhood planning. The first camp – the ‘muscular / austerity localism’ camp – focuses on a critique of localism and its contradictions in Coalition Government policy, where it is seen as offering highly delineated and prescribed community rights, and therefore is primarily about encouraging local communities, through volunteering, to fill a local government funding gap in the context of austerity, rather than radical empowerment (see Tait and Inch 2016; Allmendinger 2016; Allmendinger and Haughton 2015; Clarke and Cochrane 2013; Raco *et al.* 2015; Parker and Street 2015; and Bailey and Pill 2015).

Many of these academics have argued that localism has been used as part of an agenda to the push forward consensus and shutting down of healthy political conflict. To achieve this, localism is argued to be ‘purposely vague and imprecise’ (Clarke and Cochrane 2013, 11; see also Gallent and Robinson 2012, 23). The emptiness of localism therefore obscures the lack of actual discretion or choice offered through neighbourhood planning, despite the rhetoric of ‘power to the people’ and ‘real choice’. The common example referred to in planning literature is the fact that neighbourhood plans must conform to the Local Development Framework and to the NPPF in accordance with the Localism Act 2011. In other words, local input offers only bounded outcomes, demands a complex technical process which only allows planning for *more* development (than given in the local plan), therefore putting into question whether the offer of empowerment is genuine (Haughton *et al.* 2013, 231; Raco, Street and Freire-Trigo 2016, 218; Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2017). Other researchers have argued that localism is simply an attempt to formalise and co-opt grass roots activism and neighbourhood campaigns, to reduce the threat to existing power relations (Bradley 2014; 2012; Raco *et al.* 2015, 6). Given this, it is argued that localism can end up reinforcing the powers of “controlling institutions” and can be an ‘inequitable, or at least unreliable’ source of empowerment and progressive political action (Parker and Street 2015, 13; Bailey and Pill 2015).

The other – the ‘progressive localism’ camp – expands this argument to offer a more hopeful perspective. This camp argues that despite contradictions and deficiencies, localism and neighbourhood planning still has (radical) potential to confer greater decision-making opportunities to local communities, depending on a favourable institutional context and potential for capacity building (see Featherstone *et al.* 2012; Gallent and Robinson 2013; Bradley 2014; Williams *et al.* 2014; Wills 2016b; Matthews *et al.* 2015; and Lees 2014). These writers recognise that localism has served to politicise and democratise local space and can be a source of resistance. Bradley (2014) for example identifies spatial practices that involve

communities applying the ‘technology of localism’ but sidestepping the regulatory ‘subjectivities of localism’ as a way to ‘challenge the limitations of their positions and imprint promises of empowerment and democracy on space’. Williams et al. (2014, 2798) argue that, while localism and neoliberalism have been widely portrayed as a regressive dilution of local democracy, it ‘has inadvertently opened up a number of ethical and political spaces in which various forms of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation have sprung up’ (see also Lees 2014, 922, 937).

While these accounts do touch on ‘why’ and to what political end localism is being used (which is the analytical focus of this dissertation), there seems to be a tendency in the literature to place most intellectual weight and critique on the implementation of localism. While the gap between rhetoric and reality with regards to democratic reform is often observed, discussed, and critiqued in academic writing, there have been less critique on the debate *itself*. An exception to this is Cairney and St Denny (2019), who recently questioned this academic critique of policy implementation:

It is tempting to assume – without evidence – that the cause of the problem and solution to this puzzle is simple: high rhetoric but low political will. Politicians make too many promises they know they won’t keep, and fail routinely to deliver. Such assumptions are popular in some relevant fields ... but too vague to offer meaningful insight. More importantly, they often get in the way of the types of policy and policy-making analysis that could help reduce the expectations gap (2019, 3).

In concurring with this point, one might further suggest that not only does a discussion on implementation offer limited ‘meaningful insight’, one might even suggest that a gap between rhetoric and reality is simply *the norm* in politics and policy processes, which researchers therefore should adopt as a key assumption in academic research, rather than as the analytical focus. As Bowler and Donovan (2013) observe in their research on electoral reform, the political rhetoric in favour of reform is often aligned with academic arguments, which tend to take the exaggeration of political rhetoric at face-value. They comment: “Regardless of the hyperbole surrounding political arguments about how various reforms will increase electoral competition, efficacy, trust, or voter mobilization, the arguments occasionally echo claims and assumptions common in the political science literature.” (ibid., 5). Unsurprisingly, then, as the authors observe, expectations of reform are generally not met (ibid.). This problem with academic expectations of politics and the political process is one discussed by other political theorists. Hay (2007, 6-7), for example, observed that if politics were better understood, less would be expected from it – yet, reduced expectations might also hamper ambitious politics:

If we understood politics rather better, we would expect less of it. Consequently, we would be surprised and dismayed rather less often by its repeated failures to live up to our over-inflated and unrealistic expectations. We would, in turn, be better placed to set for ourselves political ambition that we had some chance of achieving. This may well be true, but such a rational recalibration of our expectations might also lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement. Indeed, does that not describe the contemporary political condition rather well?

In the localism literature specifically, heightened expectations are notable, and the disappointment consistent. For example, as Copus *et al.* (2018, 15) argue, “it is evident that what we are currently observing in English local government is not a genuine wave of the political devolution of power, but rather a fragmented and inconsistent pattern of the decentralisation (or limited devolution) of authority over specific projects”. This loss of expectation is perhaps a reflection of how academic debate on localism is often normative: the benefit and political rhetoric on decentralising power and decision-making tends to be taken at face value as something that ought to happen, to prevent deepening alienation, remoteness, and distrust amongst the populace, and to promote the spread of political power (Dahl and Tufte 1974; Dahl 1990, 131-5; Stoker 1996; Dearlove 1979, 32; Sharpe 1970, 160; Blunkett and Jackson 1987). In contrast, this thesis explores the intentions of government seeking to achieve ‘localism’ by exploring the discourses and institutions surrounding its origins, rather than extrapolating political intentions on the basis of poor or superficial implementation. We see here some initial indications of the tensions between localism’s normative underpinning and consensus, and the problems putting these into (policy) practice. The remainder of this section will explore the more recent academic critique concerning the emergence of localism, which has sought to explain the policy emergence and implementation of localism through different theoretical frames.

While there has been widespread empirical as well as theoretical accounts of localism, fewer works attempt to *theorise* the political context and motives that resulted in a promise of localism. Those that have, have made use of one of four theoretical frames, mainly to critique the ‘Localism’ of the Coalition Government. These four theoretical frames are: Localism as a form of (roll-back) neoliberalisation (applying Peck and Tickell 2002), Localism as a method of depoliticisation (applying Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2006; Hay 2007), Localism as an ideology (applying Freeden 1996), and Localism as a policy narrative (applying Roe 1994) (see Table 2.1 below). These four frames when applied to the recent policy of localism demonstrate significant overlap in terms of analytical emphasis. For example, the latter three share the emphasis on the use of political strategies to achieve consensus and control in contentious policy areas. While neoliberalisation and post-politics offer a more state-centric perspective on the uses of Localism, ideology and policy narratives offer a more discursive/constructivist approach using insights from the ‘ideational’ and ‘narrative’ turn in political science (Shepherd 2017, 5; Hay 2002; Parsons 2007). More specifically, these two approaches both explore how ideas can become institutionalised and in turn influence policymaking, thus depicting how ideas can influence both structure and agency, which in turn feed into each other.

Table 2.1. Meaning and purpose of localism: applied theories of public policy

| (Roll-back) neoliberalisation | Depoliticisation | Ideology | Policy narrative |
|--|--|--|--|
| This political economy perspectives sees localism as part of the continual and contradictory reinventions of market-based reform to roll | Localism is seen as capable of deferring, displacing and dispersing ‘the political’ (i.e. political conflict and contestation), thus | Political ideology seeks to fix the meanings of contested concepts (e.g. localism) and thus exert control over political | Narratives suggest that people’s perceptions of the world are influenced by internalized theories (Bevir 2013, 17). Policy narratives promote consensus by |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| back the state, including local government and other ‘bureaucratic’ structures (Allmendinger and Haughton 2013; Davies 2009; Jones 2019). | entrenching the post-political condition (Inch 2012; Allmendinger 2016, Allmendinger and Haughton, 2015, 45). | reality (Shepherd 2017; Tait and Inch 2016). | simplifying complex political dilemmas and therefore suppressing conflict (Copus <i>et al.</i> 2018, 42-3). ¹¹ |
|---|---|--|---|

Theories of post-politics and neoliberalisation have both offered compelling critique of wider patterns of state-led change and reform. These accounts have focused on the incidence of austerity with localism in the Coalition Government’s policy agenda, seeing localism as a way of depoliticising, or obscuring, cuts to public services (Featherstone *et al.* 2012; Allmendinger and Haughton 2013; Davoudi and Madanipour 2013; Deas 2013). However, as Bevir (2013, 43) argues, these theories do not necessarily go far enough in analysing or explaining why certain policy making patterns arise:

... abstract concepts that describe patterns do not necessarily do explanatory work. Descriptions of patterns of action, practices, power, and governance do not necessarily reveal anything about either why those patterns have arisen or why they have the particular content they do.

The tendency of post-politics and other theories, including certain governance theories, as well as neoliberalism theory, is to use case studies to fit the argument. In this case, finding instances where localism has shut down political conflict or supported neoliberal policies like austerity. This approach of applying localism to certain theories can only bring critique and analysis so far, as it does not promote a detailed, tailored, or even political understanding of what localism is and why it emerges. Therefore, I concur with a growing literature (e.g. Wills 2016a; Hickson 2013; Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley 2014), that sees existing theoretical frames and arguments of localism, often focused on localism as veiled spending cuts, as insufficient for understanding what localism *is*.

Rather than employing common critical and abstract frameworks, this work seeks to bridge the gap between theory and policy. This thesis can be situated, similarly to the latter two approaches, as a discursive approach to political analysis (Hay 2002; Gofas and Hay 2010; Schmidt 2008). In so doing, it explores localism as both a political idea and discourse. These two concepts are related in the sense that discourse is understood as the “interactive process of conveying ideas”, either in a coordinative form between policy actors or in a communicative form between political actors and the public (Schmidt 2008, 303). This thesis will focus on the former, exploring how ideas on localism are operationalised for political ends and used to legitimise decisions and policies to stakeholders and the wider public. This focus is taken to better analytically incorporate and address the empirical observation of localism being a widely popular political idea yet semantically opaque, while also avoiding an overly prescriptive

¹¹ Technically, Copus *et al.* (2018), following on from Dearlove (1979), have used this frame to explain why centralisation has continued unabated, rather than exploring localism *per se*. This is, according to them, due to the institutionalised narratives prevalent particularly among central government actors that have consistently undermined and under-valued the role of local government and local councillors.

theoretical understanding offered by post-politics and neoliberalism on political intentions. As I will later elaborate in Chapter 3, I explore the uses of localism in relation to two political discourses amongst governments and political parties: on the one hand, discourse that seeks to legitimise and justify government policy, which is the focus of Chapter 5, and on the other hand, discourse that seeks to popularise and delegitimise policies and ideas, the focus of Chapter 6. To justify this focus on these two types of discourses – one associated with government communicative discourse, and one associated with mainly communicative discourse observed during election campaigns and amongst opposition parties, the remainder of this chapter discusses how legitimacy and populism both offer useful frames for understanding how localism is used and framed in the political sphere, outlining a growing legitimisation challenge to the British political system, as well as, on the other side of the coin, the operationalisation of populist ideas. This approach will later inform a conceptual framework to which I have applied my empirical research, as I will elaborate on in Chapter 3. The remainder of this chapter will elaborate on why I focus on legitimacy and populism in my exploration of the uses of localism.

2.2. The context of localism: legitimisation challenges from the 1960s onwards

Having outlined the immediate, academic debate and theories of localism, it is important to take a couple steps back. These next two sections will explore how these debates on governance and localism are themselves extensions of earlier and broader debates on the nature of the state, public opinion, pressure groups, and legitimacy. Situating localism in these broad terms is helpful in better understanding where to place analytical emphasis.

In her book ‘Locating Localism’, Jane Wills sets out the inherent tension of achieving decentralisation and localism on the very first page: despite growing consensus, remaking the state in this way is a difficult thing to do, particularly given that the “institutional infrastructure to support the decentralisation of political decision making does not yet exist” (Wills 2016a, 1). Here, it is important to note that localism is inherently about central government policymaking, and as such, is not immune to wider paradoxes and institutional challenges that exist within the state. While localism is in part a ‘top-down’ policy response to issues such as the need to save money, improving decision making, and reducing the perceived gap between the political elite and the people (Wills 2016a, 79), whether it is a viable solution to these issues is another matter.

Therefore, a perspective on localism, given its appearances in government policy, requires an understanding of the central state, however, as touched upon earlier, current state-centric theories, such as neoliberalism and post-politics, can be overly prescriptive in terms of the nature and emphasis of critique. Notably, newer elements of the governance literature have sought to problematise and reassert the central state as an enduringly powerful actor, as opposed to a hollowed-out participant in the governance of society (e.g. Bell and Hindmoor 2009; see also Sørensen and Torfing 2007; Pierre and Peters 2000, 2005; Hay and Lister 2006; Smith 2006; Flinders 2006; Lister and Marsh 2006). These state-centric approaches emphasise the enduring hierarchical (as opposed to horizontal) movement of power from the state. This perspective suggests that, rather than governance *replacing* government, governance *overall* has increased, and with it, *governance through hierarchy and steering* (i.e. metagovernance).

By expanding governance structures, governments strengthen their capacity to achieve goals as well as remaining a key actor in determining the *nature* of governance relationships (Bell and Hindmoor 2009). Elements of metagovernance theory have sought to incorporate Foucault's theory of governmentality (Foucault 1991; 1979). Sørensen and Torfing (2007) see governmentality as a sub-section of metagovernance strategies, as the "regulation of self-regulation" (Bevir 2013, 61). Bell and Hindmoor (2009, Ch. 5) incorporate governmentality by exploring governance through *persuasion*. They suggest that while non-state actors may have greater powers to change people's behaviour, government retains an important steering role. This is due to the extensive resources – finance, legitimacy, and expertise – the state can mobilise to shape preferences as well as retaining metagoverning responsibilities even where non-state actors are shaping behaviours (ibid.; see also Sørensen and Torfing 2007; Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley 2014). In such ways, they suggest, "Hierarchical governance is not simply an alternative to governance through persuasion; in many cases it enhances the efficacy of governance through persuasion" (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 99).

The state centric approach is advantaged by its analytical emphasis on the *intentions* of the state (or more narrowly speaking, government) from the outset, rather than focusing on its actions from a more descriptive perspective. Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 2) offer a compelling perspective on the strategies of central government and suggest a definition of governance as "the tools, strategies and relationships used by *governments* to help govern" (emphasis added). From this perspective, recent theoretical explanations for localism, as I outline in Table 2.1, can be seen as different ways localism is strategic and has been 'used' by the state in its approach to governance, and obtaining authority and legitimacy in that governance. The governance through hierarchy approach offers a perspective on 'why' there is a divergence between rhetoric and reality when it comes to localism in policy: localism can be considered part of the metagovernance – the tools of steering and governing – of the state, and has nothing to do with actually undermining the centralised state itself, even if word '*localism*' seeks to symbolise exactly that (Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley 2014). Given this re-focus on hierarchy, the theoretical characteristics of the state, and explanations of what it does and why, is useful here. If localism forms part of a process of steering, then what is the government seeking to achieve by it?

The most influential definition of the state is Weberian, which emphasises processes (Hay and Lister 2006, 3). Through the use of dedicated personnel (a bureaucracy), Weber suggested that a state wielded a "monopoly of authoritative rule-making within a bounded territory" (ibid., 8; Weber 1978). Such authority is "the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons", meaning that the state's ability to dominate, there needs to be a "minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* ... in obedience" (Weber 1978, 212). This interest to comply rests on whether citizens believe the state's rulemaking to be legitimate. In other words, legitimacy here describes the processes behind the state *mobilising* and *obtaining* obedience/consent to its authority (1978, 213).

Seen from this perspective, legitimacy is an important concept for understanding the reasons why the state – and its governments – acts in certain ways. In other words, the structure and operation of the state is largely determined by political legitimacy (Gilley 2006, 499). However, legitimacy is an area of contested theory. As a social scientific concept, legitimacy sits across

various theoretical and methodological fields: it has been used for constructivist, discursive, Marxist, and psychological perspectives on politics and political institutions. While much of the theory is based on an interpretation of Weber – in particular, Weber’s emphasis on ‘belief’ of legitimacy – the literature has developed more applied interpretations better suited to the study of modern, democratic states. Here, writers emphasise its role as a signal between those who seek to govern and those being governed (Seabrooke 2010, 90). In this sense, “a state is more legitimate the more that it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power” (Gilley 2006, 500; Lipset 1983, 64). In focusing on this nexus between the public and powerholder, researchers have sought to unpack what ‘belief’ in legitimacy actually means in a both empirical and theoretical sense. Gilley sees legitimacy as the moral or normative *endorsement* of the state by citizens. Such normative endorsement occurs when citizens’ *views of legality*, *views of justification*, and *acts of consent* are aligned with the ways the state has acquired and exercises political power (2006, 502-3). In other words, whether citizens view the exercise of power to be in accordance with their views about laws and rules, and morals, and their general acceptance of such exercise. Beetham (1991, 20) offers a similar interpretation, seeing the legitimacy of state decisions as emerging from the following three criteria: 1) conformity to rules (legal validity); 2) justifiability of rules in terms of shared beliefs; and 3) legitimation through expressed consent (ibid.). This effort to break up legitimacy into its ‘component’ parts is common across the empirical literature, where various research on alienation, trust, modes of participation, and political efficacy all seek to better understand how citizens evaluate government authority. From this perspective, legitimacy is empirically a multidimensional construct (Weatherford 1992, 149-50). However, both Gilley’s and Beetham’s emphasis on expressed, or acts, of consent show an active effort amongst scholars to incorporate democratic elections into the study of legitimacy. By emphasising consent, one can link legitimacy directly to *democratic* mandate (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 15). In other words, if a government does not act in accordance with what voters see as right or justified, then they can be voted out. However, the study of legitimacy in democratic states does not stop at elections, for two reasons. One is theoretical and concerns the inherent and internal tensions between bureaucratic decision-making and democratic accountability in the modern state, and the other is empirical and external, which concerns growing levels of political distrust as well as a growing crisis of representation. Both will be considered in turn.

2.2.1 Internal challenges to legitimacy: tensions between bureaucracy and democracy

There are several political scientists who discuss or allude to a tension between democracy and bureaucracy. Several have suggested that democracy is naturally opposed to the ‘rule’ of bureaucracy, “in spite and perhaps because of its unavoidable yet unintended promotion of bureaucratization” (Weber 1978, 991; see also Canovan 1999). Weber describes the modern state (legal-rational authority) in relation to its employment of bureaucratic administrative staff, arguing that modern democratic states require “complex administrative and juridical provisions to prevent the exercise of privilege” in order to uphold the legitimacy of the democratic process (Giddens 1971, 180; Weber 1978, 220, 983). Here, the close relationship between democracy and bureaucracy is seen as creating a deep tension in the modern capitalist state: while abstract legal frameworks, procedures, checks and balances, and bureaucracies might in the first instance protect against corruption and privilege, these in turn can introduce new forms of

privilege that might be more arbitrary than the previous (Giddens 1971, 180). One of the best descriptions of this tension, from a legitimacy perspective, is offered by Scharpf (1997, 153; 1999), who distinguishes between two different legitimating *beliefs*. Firstly, he uses the notion of ‘input-oriented legitimacy’ to, similarly to Gilley and Beetham, describe the act of active consent and agreement from the public, as achieved through democratic procedures. However, he also adds a second source of legitimating beliefs, which derive more tangibly from effective policies which demonstrate the achievement of the common good and distributive justice – ‘output-oriented legitimacy’ (ibid.). This distinction is useful in demonstrating inherent tensions in democratic policymaking, where there remains widespread expectations by the public that governments solve policy problems and steer society without direct input from (affected) citizens, yet that governments do so in a way that is perceived to be legitimate (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 15, 31). In so doing, Scharpf points out, governments seeking to achieve effective policy solutions can go about it through non-democratic and bureaucratic means as long as these policies are considered to be in the public interest. As he explains:

... even in modern societies some types of binding decisions continue to rely on nondemocratic forms of legitimacy. This is most likely to be true in areas where value or goal consensus is high and where the effective resolution of specific problems is highly dependent on expert knowledge that is neither generally available nor easily acquired. When that is true, even modern constitutional democracies may be willing to empower expert bodies that are shielded from the influence of majorities of the day and to rely on formal and informal systems of professional discourse and peer review to assure the public interest orientation of delegated powers (Scharpf 1997, 153).

Yet, while the power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is “always great” and often reinforcing, “under certain conditions, democracy creates palpable breaks in the bureaucratic pattern and impediments to bureaucratic organisation” (Weber 1978, 220). This dialectic has been characterised by Canovan as a tension between two faces of democracy – pragmatic and redemptive – which, while in opposition,¹² remain *interdependent* (Canovan 1999, 9-10). From a pragmatic perspective, and similarly to the point made by Weber, democracy *requires* hierarchical institutions to limit the power of the majority, as well as constitute, constrain and make effective democracy itself (ibid.). However, there is simultaneously a strong anti-institutional impulse favouring direct, spontaneous and inclusive forms of democracy (ibid.). In many ways, the constitutional and democratic crisis caused by the EU referendum reflects this fundamental tension. This thesis further suggests a strong spatial element of the tension: on the one hand, hierarchical governance (centralised power), and on the other hand, the need to promote the local, in the sense of engaging people directly. In relation to the former, “the exercise of hierarchical authority remains acceptable as long as policy choices and decisions in individual cases are broadly upheld by the mainstream of professional discourse” (Scharpf

¹² Thompson (1983, 235), who says: ‘democracy does not suffer bureaucracy gladly . . . many values we associate with democracy – equality, participation, and individuality – stand sharply opposed to the hierarchy, specialisation and impersonality we ascribe to modern bureaucracy’. Thompson, D. (1983), ‘Bureaucracy and Democracy’, in G. Duncan (ed.), *Democratic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press).

1997, 154).¹³ However, and in relation to the latter, governing unilaterally through hierarchy can result in a loss of legitimacy, leading governments to justify and legitimise their policies “by developing relations with interest-groups and community bodies” (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 11, 13-4). As Wills observes, “the development of localism is a reaction against this centralisation of political power” (2016a, 9). This tension in hierarchical authority was observed even as early as 1873 when J.S. Mill – widely cited as a great proponent of localism and liberal pluralism in general¹⁴ – lamented in his *Autobiography* how critique of centralisation tended to overlook the *benefits* of such hierarchical intervention:

... centralisation was, and is, the subject not only of rational disapprobation, but of unreasoning prejudice; where jealousy of Government interference was a blind feeling preventing or resisting even the most beneficial exertion of legislative authority to correct the abuses of what pretends to be local self-government (Mill 1981 [1873], 201).

Here, utilitarian thinkers such as J.S. Mill and Jeremy Beetham tended to focus on efficiency and the good government provided by experts, paving the way for a stronger constitutional order of more decision-making channelled through Westminster and Whitehall (Wills 2016a, 53). In contrast, academics such as Jane Wills and John Tomaney, following in the pro-local tradition of local government theorists of the 1980s and 1990s such as Dearlove, Stoker, Jones and Stewart, have proposed an empowerment of the ‘parochial’, in a challenge against the ‘role of the expert’:

Over the past 200 years, calls for expertise and efficiency have tended to outweigh the focus on nurturing democratic public engagement. As a result, the local has been cast as dangerously parochial, often associated with nostalgia and sentimentalism, and even xenophobia, and it is generally thought to be thoroughly bad (Wills 2016a, 3; see also Tomaney 2013).

Therefore, a critical perspective on policy making and reform, particularly reform that aims to promote territorial pluralism and challenge ‘centralised’ or ‘big’ government, needs to acknowledge this inherent tension between the enduring need for bureaucratic and strategic governance (including metagovernance, as previously explored), on the one hand, and more democratic forms of legitimacy, on the other. The following section will explore a second challenge to legitimacy, which, rather than a result of systematic inconsistencies, is a result of changing expectations by the public.

2.2.2 External challenges to legitimacy: turnout and distrust

Secondly, there has been a growing challenge to state legitimacy that is external, rather than internal. Here, there is evidence over a change in the foundations for state legitimacy. Over the

¹³ This is a point dismissed by Offe (2006, 26-7) who argues that legitimacy is not just about the attitudes and opinions of the public but also the ‘modalities of’ or ‘reasons for’ arriving at such opinions, where he proposes that acceptance on the basis that ‘other options are unfeasible’, or, ‘emotional familiarity’, are not strictly speaking *supportive* and therefore do not amount to *legitimising* attitudes.

¹⁴ Despite this critique, J.S. Mill is often hailed as one of the key thinkers behind localism, and it is partly from his philosophy that a tradition surrounding localism has been developed, as will be further explored in section 2.3

past forty years, researchers and theorists have suggested that interest in the obedience to authority has become less forthcoming, resulting in an increasingly difficult environment for authority to obtain legitimacy. Historian Kevin Jefferys observes, since Britain became a mass democracy, both the context of popular politics, and the manner of public involvement, have changed significantly, and political activity particularly from the 1960s has become more diverse (Jefferys 2007, 279-80). Observers have suggested that, in the modern state, obtaining democratic legitimacy increasingly requires authority to *justify itself* and prove its decisions are fair (Marquand 1988, 200). The implication of this is the growing need for governments to engage in legitimising communicative discourse (Schmidt 2008), which is the focus of this thesis, and might also explain the growing phenomenon of the permanent ‘election campaign’ (Deacon and Golding 1994, 4-6; Ward 2007; Stanyer 2007).

In exploring this argument, political scientists point to declining levels of voter turnout, and a growth in political scepticism and distrust. There has been both periodic fluctuations, as well as an overall growth, in the distrust towards politics and politicians (Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2019; Stoker 2017; Hay 2007), which goes beyond healthy scepticism required in democracies (Hart 1978; Pateman 1970). This in turn has undermined the mandate and legitimacy democratic elections confer (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 15). This literature can be considered as part of a wider debate on the viability and sustainability of the liberal democratic regime (Offe 2006; Runciman 2013; 2018; Mounk 2018). It is in this context where localism can be situated as a political promise, where politicians have sought to “bridge the gap between the state and its citizens”, by promoting greater avenues for participation and widened citizen empowerment (Wills 2016a, 83-4).

This longer-term shift in democratic expectations of the public has been observed and chronicled in various government-appointed commissions, committees, inquiries and reviews since the late 1960s, including the Skeffington Committee Report (1969), the Redcliffe-Maud Commission Report (1969), the Kilbrandon Commission Report (1973), the Layfield Committee Report (1976), and the Lyons Inquiry (2007), all of which supported reform and a rebalancing of central-local relations, promotion of citizen participation, and combatting widespread feelings of remoteness by citizens from government and its decisions. On the academic side, there is a wide literature particularly from the 1970s onwards that suggests that this traditional element is being undermined with a shift in beliefs regarding what a ‘democratic’ approach to decision-making *should* be, marked by growing distrust and cynicism of the representativeness and intentions of politicians (Hart 1978). Over the past few decades numerous surveys have charted this development. One of the earliest surveys was commissioned by the Royal Commission on the Constitution, which reported that 49 per cent of survey respondents thought the system either needed ‘a great deal of improvement’ or ‘could be improved quite a lot’, with 55 per cent feeling ‘very powerless’ or ‘fairly powerless’ (Kilbrandon Commission 1973; Marquand 1988, 191; Beer 1982, 117). Later, a study by Marsh (1977) found that 57 per cent of the survey sample thought government could be trusted to do what is right either ‘only some of the time’ or ‘almost never’, and 70 per cent thought politicians told the truth ‘only some of the time’ or ‘almost never’ (Marsh 1977; cited in Marquand 1988, 192, Beer 1982, 115). More recent data has been compiled by the Hansard Society’s audit of political engagement. The 2018 Report found that only 22% of those surveyed thought that the

British system of governing was good at representing the views of most citizens (Hansard Society 2018, 20). The audit reports that satisfaction with the system of governing has fallen by seven points (36% to 29%) since the first audit in 2004, with people's sense of being able to bring about political change also having slightly reduced (37% to 34%) (Hansard Society 2018, 4).

Some authors have attributed these shifts to broader cultural changes amongst the public. Inglehart famously suggested a growth of post-materialist values as the underlying cause (Inglehart 1977). Others have blamed the emergence of a 'new populism' (Beer 1982), resulting in a "collapse in deference which changed values away from hierarchy and class, while emphasising the importance of freedom of speech and more inclusion in political decision-making" (Marquand 1988, 200). Arblaster (1972, 51) attributed this growing distrust to rising living standards and increased education, and therefore independence: "with a greater independence there goes a pride in such independence ... But there has been no corresponding increase in their power either as citizens or as workers" (Arblaster 1972, 52). This sentiment has recently been echoed by Conservative political commentator and advisor Steve Hilton: "... people today have more power than ever before ... But they don't see a corresponding rise in empowerment when it comes to public policy and the structures that are supposed to support flourishing life" (Hilton 2018, 8-9). Both writers suggest a growing expectations gap resulting from socio-economic empowerment.

Regardless of the exact cause of a shift in underlying norms and beliefs on what is politically acceptable and justifiable, such a shift can cause a deficit in legitimacy: "shifts in belief, as gradual as they are also fundamental, will leave a society's established power rules intellectually unsupported" (Beetham 1991, 75). From a more structural perspective, Neo-Marxists such as Offe and Habermas have referred to the idea of legitimation to explain how political absorption of the economic sector, as given by the welfare state, and the ensuing political responsibility for counter-cyclical capitalist regulation and achieving 'crisis-free' continuous growth, has made legitimacy far harder to obtain by increasing expectations (Habermas 1976; Offe 1975; 1984). In more fundamental terms, it is also possible that this external problem is caused by the tension inherent in both bureaucratic and democratic demands of the state, as explored above. Because of this tension there is seems to be a general perception that democracy has deficiencies, or even failings, and this perception could reduce public acceptance of the institutions of democracy (Offe 1996, 95; Canovan 1999). It is arguably out of this tension where populists can source endless ammunition for their arguments.

There are then multiple explanations as to why deference to authority and 'respect for the rules of the game' has gradually disappeared, to be replaced by a demand for participation and the right to be included (Beer 1982). Localism fits into this debate as a more specific challenge to an overly centralised, hierarchical – and, some would argue elitist – decision-making process, and a call for a more locally autonomous, spatially plural, and therefore "more democratic", approach to decision-making. Certainly, these long-term and recent patterns of public trust explain continual reforms and revisions towards an inclusive, pluralistic, and participatory model of democracy, which is often regarded to be closer to an ideal form of democracy, and one often best achieved in *local spaces* (see Dahl 1990). As Hart argues:

... a more participatory definition of democracy has been more widely applied as a standard for the evaluation of the operations of the polity, and institutional innovations consistent with these principles have become a more familiar part of general political debate (Hart 1978, 200).

Given this, one might suggest that the model of legitimation and the sources of (democratic) legitimation shifted in the British state around the 1960s, from ‘authority’ and deference to such authority, to ‘inclusion’ and the wider citizen participation in politics (Marquand 1988, 200; Beer 1982; Offe 1985, 310; Dahl 1971, 10-1; Dahl 1990). Consent, as the basis of legitimate authority, has become analogous to (active) *participation* (Parry 1972, 36; Beetham 1991, Marsh 1977, 176-7). This debate indicates therefore a cultural shift in the beliefs surrounding the political system such that one might argue that the centralised, hierarchal system of authority – while still the basis of the Westminster political model – has been periodically challenged and reformed to suit these changes in norms and beliefs. Indeed, as Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 30-1) suggest, such governance reform and democratisation has been operationalised precisely to address this growing external challenge to legitimacy:

... we should not see a continuing decline in overall levels of legitimacy as being somehow inevitable. Governments have adopted alternative governance arrangements precisely in order to enhance their legitimacy. This is most obviously true of community engagement strategies intended to give ordinary citizens the opportunity to directly influence decisions.

The question then is rather how governments have *operationalised* localism to overcome this dissonance and retain legitimacy. The following section will explore how localism has reflected this underlying pattern, setting out more specifically how these changing norms have increasingly viewed localism – and local (self-)government – favourably, amounting to a, in sorts, ‘tradition’ of localism.

2.3. The tradition of localism

As explored earlier in this chapter, there is evidently much interest in localism and what it offers in terms of shifting the balance of power and decision-making in society. However, one might probe further the origins of this interest – or belief – in the normative value of localism. Therefore, continuing with a state-level perspective on localism, and going back to the previous discussion in section 2.1, it might make more sense to speak of a *tradition* of localism, rather than a theory.

As already alluded to, the ideas underpinning localism are – as many recent publications like to stress – not new (Wills 2016b; Gallent and Robinson 2013; Clarke and Cochrane 2013; Tait and Inch 2016; Brownill and Bradley 2017; Cochrane 2016; Painter, Orton, and MacLeod 2011; Jones 2019). These ideas have been conceptually repackaged multiple times into different political concepts, from home rule, to local self-government, to subsidiarity, to devolution, to community empowerment, and many more in-between. All these concepts have had highly

contextualised definitions¹⁵, reflecting how “historically particular visions of the local have underpinned very different politics” (Cochrane 2016, 911). Yet, the sentiment and rhetorical emphasis has been quite consistently about empowering local people, local communities, and local economies for the purposes of enhancing democracy and democratic accountability, as well as challenging and contesting centralisation and economic imbalances and injustices. One may therefore consider localism as loosely signalling these recurring ideas and traditions, norms and beliefs, which would explain why it seems to resonate with a wide range of people, and instil a sense of meaning, without actually inhabiting semantic coherence. In speaking of a tradition of localism, therefore, one is speaking of a link between identity and place, where place serves to influence an individual’s identity to form a local community or neighbourhood, and *vice versa*. As Bevir (2013, 44) suggests: “the concept of tradition evokes a social context in which individuals are born and which then acts as the background to their beliefs and actions even while they might modify, develop, or reject much of their inheritance”. These seem to be the normative and emotive underpinnings of the concept.

The consistency of localism as provided by historical perspectives suggests there being such a fundamental premise or underpinning, given the emphasis on the similarities between pro-local policies in its various forms, as alluded to above. The examples highlighted in the literature tend to include the New Labour government’s (1997-2010) policies on ‘Modernising Local Government’, the ‘Community Empowerment Programme’, ‘Neighbourhood Renewal’, ‘New Localism’, ‘Double Devolution’ and ‘Place Shaping’ (Painter *et al.* 2011, 10-16; Wills 2016a, 85). Links have even been made to more historic policies. For example, Brownill (2017) compared recent forms of localism with the debates surrounding the Redcliffe-Maud Commission and the Community Development Projects of the 1960s. Wills (2016a, 46-7; 84), making similar references, but going even further back to the Domesday Book of 1086 and the early beginnings of local government and the governance provided through church, parish, and volunteers (citing Webb and Webb 1924). In discussing historical origins and similarities, researchers have also explored periodic patterns (see Allmendinger and Haughton 2013, 14-18; see also Haughton, Allmendinger and Oosterlynck 2013; Jacobs and Manzi 2013; Hickson 2013, 413). Pike *et al.* (2016, 10) describe this pattern as an ‘oscillating pendulum’ between different forms of decentralisation, from ‘One nation regionalisms’ (1940s-1970s), to ‘Thatcher-Major Localism’ (1979-1994), to ‘Blair-Brown Regionalism’ (1997-2010), to ‘Cameron-Osborne Localism’ (2010-2015), to the current period they term ‘Sub-regionalism’ (see also Jones 2019, 30). This longer-term periodic re-emergence may be explained by what Painter *et al.* (2011, 43) term “a hegemonic presence” due to localism’s “powerful ideological pull”:

... it can be assumed that the term localism and its presumed benefits such as community empowerment exhibit a hegemonic presence in policy and academic literatures. In its hegemonic form, localism particularly in its various political avatars, works as a powerful ideological pull with a charm for one and all (even

¹⁵ For example, ‘devolution’ in 1997 referred to constitutional devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while ‘devolution’ in 2014 referred to a devolution of governance within England to sub-regional areas, so-called (mayoral) combined authorities.

at opposing sides of the political spectrum) principally because its definition, resultant meaning and expression are so difficult to pin down.

This lack of meaning, yet ‘hegemonic’ presence and historical reappearance, suggests a deeper political consensus on the tradition of localism and the normative principles this tradition signifies. With this consensus surrounding localism, in relation to its emotive appeal, symbolism, and populism (see Beer 1982; Arblaster 1972; Parry *et al.* 1992; Crouch 1979; Mackenzie 1961; Bogdanor 2009, 235), localism has been secured a place as a valence issue in elections and therefore a recurring theme in political rhetoric. Further, the pervasiveness and popularity of these ideas extends far beyond England. Treisman (2007, 1-2), for example, points out how decentralised government has come to be seen as a solution for a range of political and social ills in many different countries. A localist tradition might explain *why* this consensus surrounding the principles of localism is so prevalent, despite these ideals being so abstract and undertheorized (see e.g. Bulpitt’s [1983, 33] critique). It therefore seems that this belief in favour of localism, and by extension against centralism, is a force unto itself. This is why one might instead speak of a ‘tradition’ of localism.

This tradition arises from both liberal and pluralist thought, which emphasises the liberties and powers dispersed among both groups and individual citizens within the state. While J.S Mill is often cited here, other key thinkers in this space include G.D.H. Cole, J.N. Figgis, and H. Laski, who developed pluralism as a normative theory on what constituted a just, liberal and socialist society (Smith 2006, 22; Hirst 1994; Nichols 1994). Central to pluralist theory is the need to distrust and limit the power of the state (Smith 2006, 23), an idea which is central to the notion of legitimacy in modern democratic states, as authority cannot be legitimate if it is unlimited (see Beetham 1991). The link between localism and pluralism has been explored by Wills (2016a, 11). As she suggests, “Localism is about a spatial and institutional pluralisation of government and agency, moving the locus of political power and decision making from a concentrated executive in the capital city towards a wider diversity of actors across the nation at large”. In so doing, she argues, localism carries “traces of the civic republican and communitarian traditions”, being “the latest iteration of a long-standing normative argument that democracy requires active intermediate institutions and high(er) levels of civic engagement in order to be a success” (*ibid.*). This inherent link to liberalism but also social organisation causes a tension between “two poles of political thought”: “On the one hand, localism represents a cry for freedom from the central state but, in so doing, it raises an apparently contradictory demand that lower-tier organisations and local citizens should act to fill the political space. If we think of localism as an experiment in liberal institutionalism it helps to explain this combination of a call for freedom that is simultaneously aligned with the need for organisation” (Wills 2016a, 12).

These values and beliefs surrounding localism seem then to be linked to a widespread theoretical assumption, as well as a political ideology, that localising power results in greater, renewed, or enhanced democracy, where it is argued that local government offers greater opportunities for participation (King and Stoker 1996; Dahl 1990, 131-5; Blunkett and Jackson 1987). As Wills (2016a, 62) argues,

... contemporary demands for greater localism partly reflect this longer history of local government as a site – however limited – for democratic engagement and perhaps represent a desire for greater local democracy than has ever been practised before.

This assumption rests in turn a common understanding in democratic theory that the active participation of citizens is the basis for a healthy, functioning, and legitimate democracy (Hay 2007, 6; Beetham 1991, 35). While the equation between local and ‘more participation’, and therefore, ‘more democracy’ is by no means an unproblematic thread of assumptions (see, for example Beetham 1996:29; Langrod 1953; Mackenzie 1961; Purcell 2006; Parry *et al.* 1992, 25; Parvin 2018b; Dahl 1990, 132-4), it rests on several waves of philosophical and theoretical thinking. Modern perspectives have been influenced by philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Mill (for more discussion, see Copus *et al.* 2018; Dahl and Tufte 1974). In different ways, these philosophers espoused the general idea that opportunities for citizens to participate “always vary inversely with size” (Dahl and Tufte 1974, 6). Here, it is argued that citizens living in smaller states or smaller forms of government, due to geographical and personal proximity to decision-makers, have greater means to participate in decision-making and voice grievances in different ways, therefore making the process of decision making more democratic. These ideas appealed to an ideal of territorial democracy through the means, and protection, of community cohesion and identity. Indeed, a sense of community identity in England was found to be strongly linked with smaller spatial boundaries, such as the neighbourhood / village level or the town / nearest town level (Chisholm 2000, 75-6; LGGE 1995, 30; Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, 62-3). These arguments remain very much in use today – as the localism debate demonstrates. For example, as recently as the 2019 General Election, the Labour Manifesto argued:

While those who make decisions in Whitehall can seem distant and detached, our local councillors live among us, shopping on the same high street, using the same parks and leisure centres and sending their children to the same schools (Labour Party 2019, 49).

This emphasis on the values of local democracy, local self-government, and citizen participation received renewed momentum in the UK from the 1960s at a time when the interventions of the welfare state became more comprehensive, involving local government reform and new regional structures. Stagnating economic growth as well as immediate economic contractions contributed to growing incursion of central government into local and social affairs (Bulpitt 1983). In response, radical social movements against mainstream politics took hold, with a new generation of political activists proposed “new sets of political demands, new organisational tactics and new cultures of political action” (Wills 2016a, 83).

This debate reached a peak in the 1980s as academics were responding to a widely perceived onslaught of central government power and constriction of local government decision-making, particularly with regards to spending and taxation, during the Thatcher Government (e.g. Duncan and Goodwin 1988; Cochrane 1993; Stewart and Stoker 1989; Boddy and Fudge 1984; Boddy 1983; Burns *et al.* 1994). This literature amounts to a second wave of theorisation regarding the values of local democracy, often referred to as a ‘traditional orthodoxy’, which

was more specific to the British experience. This literature signalled its adherence to the classical, philosophical texts of the first wave described above, as well as to some historical (and perhaps nostalgic) understanding of British local government (Dearlove 1979; Sharpe 1970; Mackenzie 1961; Stoker 1996). It regarded local government as a democratic body that, when compared to nationally elected bodies such as parliament, was, *especially* democratic (Dearlove 1979, 32; Sharpe 1970, 160; Blunkett and Jackson 1987). What this debate shows is that local government, while not technically constitutionally guarded, can be considered part of a wider system of democratic checks and balances and promoting the dispersal of power:

[Local government] presents, first and foremost, a spread of political power. Power is diffused among many different organisations. Local authorities, however, are the only institution other than the House of Commons within the country that can claim the authority that comes from election. Local authorities can represent the dispersion of legitimate political power in our society (Jones and Stewart 1985, 5; cited in Stoker 1996, 12).

This belief can be found in official public documents. As stated by the Local Government Commission for England, “a system of effective and democratic local government is a fundamental requirement of a pluralistic society” (LGCE 1993, 13). A similar point had been made almost twenty years earlier in the Layfield Committee Report, which outlined the “The Need for Local Government”:

[Local authorities] are the means by which people can take part in decisions concerning the services and amenities in their own area. Local government therefore has a value in its own right in promoting democracy. By providing a large number of points where decisions are taken by people of different political persuasion and different background, it acts as counterweight to the uniformity inherent in government decisions. It spreads political power (Layfield Committee 1976, 52-3; see also Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, 11).

This role of local government in constituting part of the legitimacy of the British democratic system as a whole (i.e. in the form of checks and balances and limitations to central authority), has also been expressed by democratic and constitutional theorists. For example, as observed by Bogdanor: “Even though a government might lawfully, through Parliament, abolish local government entirely or emasculate its powers, few would regard such an action as constitutionally acceptable” (Bogdanor 2009, 236; see also Leach *et al.* 2018, 11). Further, as Dahl argues, local forms of governance can serve to democratise the (polyarchic) state more widely (Dahl 1990, 72-4). Local government might then be considered to be protected by both cultural and legal norms and conventions. As similarly argued by Mackenzie (1961, 5-6) almost sixty years ago:

... in some sense of other local self-government is now part of the English constitution, the English notion of what proper government ought to be. Challenge the English to define their beliefs about local self-government, and they become involved in the maze of ambiguities which I shall try to trace. Nevertheless there are such beliefs, surely, as fixed and idiosyncratic, as (for instance) English beliefs about the Crown.

Therefore, while, on the one hand, the political debate in the 1980s, particularly within government, questioned local government's constitutional rights to continued existence¹⁶, its existence has never been seriously questioned on a wider scale. While in strictly constitutional terms local government might be abolished entirely, this does not reflect the legal and cultural precedent of local government, nor the legitimacy it enjoys from citizens:

Many of our survey findings suggest that local government has a remarkably *strong popular mandate in the eyes of its electorate* – that is, the public think that local councils should have the right to take decisions even though that right is denied them by central government and the courts.¹⁷ ... On the whole, people were satisfied with the way local councils run things, much more satisfied with local than with national government (Miller 1988, 239; see also Parry *et al.* 1992, 403; Young 1985).

More recent survey evidence on this subject has been collected by the Local Government Association (LGA), which polls resident satisfaction every four months. They consistently report residents trusting their 'local council' and 'local councillor' more than 'the government' or 'MPs/Ministers' to make decisions about how services are provided in one's local area, by a significant margin (in October 2018, 72% chose local council and 14% chose government) (LGA 2018, 9-10). It seems that the value and widespread belief in favour of local government and local democracy has become heightened during a time when power has become increasingly centralised. While perhaps the British political system "does not have to respect the institutions of local government" (Copus *et al.* 2018, 17), it does need to legitimate its interventions and reforms of local government by reference to the normative and cultural values it reflects. A strong local government can therefore be said to signify what a legitimate, democratic, and participative government *ought* to be. The following section will explore more closely what I mean by this in relation to how the state legitimises any centralising actions through policy innovations and discourse on the protection of localism and local government.

2.4. Exploring a strategic localism

2.4.1. A legitimating discourse?

This chapter has thus far discussed several perspectives on the localism literature and has widened this perspective on the role of the state particularly in relation to legitimacy and the characteristics of legitimisation challenges faced by the British political system. These theories can indicate why government communicative discourse is often required to be *legitimizing*, and a key argument in this thesis is that localism forms part of such a discourse. This section briefly explores the literature that discusses such *legitimisation*:

¹⁶ The Secretary of State at the time, Nicholas Ridley, was said to have thought the ideal local authority would meet only once a year to open the tenders for its services, which would be all contracted out (Foster 2005, 147).

¹⁷ Here, Miller is referring to the previous legal position of local government before the Localism Act which conferred a general power of competence. In the 1980s, local government could act only according to the *ultra vires* principle, making it illegal for councils to do anything which is not expressly *allowed* by parliamentary law (Miller 1988, 239).

We also need to explain where legitimacy originates, how the principles and beliefs that comprise it are maintained and reproduced, why consent is continually renewed, and what social forces are responsible for the erosion of legitimacy whenever such erosion takes place (Beetham 1991, 101).

This section then puts forward an understanding of legitimisation as both a discursive and material strategy undertaken by governments. To understand legitimacy from a policy perspective, as pointed out by Scharpf (1997, 15), “policies that are in everyone's interest or that agree with everyone's preferences require no additional legitimation”. Rather, governments seek to legitimate policies that are differentiating, and potentially divisive, and they do so by claiming such policies to be in the “common good” (ibid). It is clear from the discussion above that there is a deeply normative and popular belief-system surrounding what a liberal democracy *ought* to be, particularly as a system that incorporates local democratic processes and therefore respects a ‘spatial plurality’ and a certain level of local self-determination, rather than a dominating, centralised, and all-encompassing structure. As such, governments are careful in the rhetoric they use to describe policy and reform. As Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 95) suggest: “In deference to public sensitivities, neo-liberal ideology or even, perhaps, academic writing, governments have sometimes eschewed the rhetoric of hierarchical control and coercive power”. For this reason, localism, in its capacity to promote public participation in local space, can be operationalised to address any perceived legitimation deficits:

Currently, increased public participation is widely seen as the best way to draw disaffected citizens back into the political mainstream and of overcoming increasing perceptions of a ‘democratic deficit’. By involving citizens in some way in the decision-making process, governments then hope to bridge any ‘legitimation gap’. Indeed, a representative body that has sought and considered the advice of constituents is on much stronger ethical ground, even if they subsequently reject that advice, than representatives whose judgment is formed without consultation (Keating 2004, 159).

This is an argument often observed in neo-Marxist literature, which, in applying Weberian theory, sought to explain the seemingly paradoxical but ultimately logical reason why capitalist states might grant pluralising concessions through parliamentary reform, thus in effect increasing the ‘means of resistance’ available to social groups (Offe 1984; Jefferys 2009, 9). This can be observed by the “drawing in of lay representatives, the establishment of local, inter-local, or central parliamentary or other representative bodies, or of occupational associations – these *seem* to run directly against the bureaucratic tendency” (Weber 1978, 991). However, both Habermas and Offe saw such innovations towards participation as a risky way of obtaining consent to authority, particularly if “introduced with great haste and little reason” (Offe 1996, 95). As Habermas explains:

In order to carry through innovations in the planning process, the administration experiments with the participation of those affected. Of course, the functions of participation in governmental planning are ambivalent. Grey areas arise in which it is not clear whether the need for conflict regulation is increased or decreased by participation (Habermas 1988, 72).

The problems facing governments adopting an inclusive and participative model¹⁸ of decision-making was similarly suggested by Offe:

... too much responsiveness toward its clientele would almost necessarily push administrations beyond the limits of what they can do and are required to do within the framework of a capitalist organisation of the economy (Offe 1975, 140).

Further, it has been argued that liberal-democratic states will sooner address popular *perceptions* of the condition afflicting the state, and perhaps ameliorate visible symptoms, than address the systemic contradictions giving rise to the legitimisation deficit in the first place (Hay 1999, 328). Such superficial strategies of ‘minor tinkering’ may only secure state legitimacy temporarily (Hay 1999, 328; Offe 1984). Therefore, while the central state may respond to the constructions and narratives of certain legitimisation crises, it does so without necessarily addressing underlying contradictions (Hay 1999, 328), and may simply defer and delay legitimisation challenges by raising expectations.

For example, in response to growing demands by students and others for greater participation in decision-making processes, the Wilson Government oversaw electoral reform to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 (1970 Act) and as well presiding over a multitude of reports and royal commissions; most notably on local government reform and the constitution, which a particular focus on devolving power to Scotland, Wales and the English regions (Jefferys 2007, 189). Despite this, the Labour Government retained an overall top-down approach (*ibid.*), and this did not go unnoticed. As Marquand (1988, 188) suggested, it seemed as though the real purpose of the royal commissions, local government reorganisation, and devolution, was “to buy off trouble; and to buy it off in a way which would cause the least possible distributable to the system as it stood”. This scepticism with regards to the ‘true intentions’ of rhetoric and reform was, and is, widespread. For example, the trend towards community development and participation in the 1960s and 70s perceived by academic and political commentators at the time as a way of buying off pressure from communities organising independently outside the state, “The apparent extension of democratic practices was severely limited, and in the end largely discredited” (Blunkett and Jackson 1987, 85). Similarly, as Arblaster (1972, 41) argued:

It is generally clear that the conception of participation used by those authorities ... who offer it as a political panacea for serious discontents is something very different from what is envisaged by those who raise it as a demand, as a direct articulation of those same discontents.

These sceptical attitudes towards reform that purports to support democratic pluralism and empower communities, and the criticism it attracts from its own users, is remarkably resilient and recurring, and has been particularly prevalent in the academic community, particularly in relation to recent drives towards localism. As argued by Blunkett *et al.* (2016, 555) with regards to the recent English Devolution agenda:

¹⁸ What Offe terms ‘the conflict/consensus model’ of organising decision-making processes (Offe 1975).

Despite the statements of our political leaders, it could be argued that the recent devolution and 'localism' agenda represents more continuity than change, in the sense that it reflects a preference for elite, top-down policy-making with limited (if any) public engagement.

With this discussion, we get an insight into why the norms about local democracy and the localist consensus, as outlined earlier in section 2.3, seems to be steeped in disappointment when applied to policy. This thesis suggest it is because localism forms part of legitimating discourse, in a strategic sense, rather than an end in itself. Crucially, localism in its historical forms and appearances – but most significantly in its policy application during the Coalition government (2010-2015) – has been repeatedly criticised for not going 'far enough', and not being sufficient in barring, let alone reversing, the growing centralisation of power in England. Further, as Habermas (1988, 70) argues, "the procurement of legitimation is self-defeating as soon as the mode of procurement is seen through". Therefore, while the notion of decentralisation and localism has appeared important and useful as a political promise that can confer legitimacy, it may also be, as indicated by Habermas, problematic. On the one hand, it is capable of heightening citizen expectations to potentially unattainable levels, on the other hand, as a strategy of legitimisation, it is ultimately self-defeating if and when its contradictions become increasingly visible and scrutinised. That being said, governments are not the only actors who promise or put forward reform in favour of localising or pluralising power. The following section explores the literature on populism to theorise the role of opposition parties in retaining localism on the political agenda.

2.4.2. Delegitimisation and populist localism

The interest in the concept of populism has amongst academics, the media, and the general public has exploded since 2016 – a year that saw two particularly divisive political campaigns which resulted in populist victories: the EU referendum in the UK, and the presidential election in the United States (Rooduijn 2018). Perhaps given this renewed interest, researchers are more aware of its analytical potential. One of the most common definitions of populism is Mudde's (2004) understanding of populism as a 'thin' ideology which sees politics as an expression of the general will of the people, and that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004, 543). I argue that there are clear parallels between Mudde's definition – of populism being a polarisation of 'us' versus 'them' – and the empirical manifestations of localism. The local is often used as shorthand for 'the people' and their empowerment – a challenge to the inevitable shortcomings of political and democratic representation. The centre, on the other hand, acts as the symbolic location of the bureaucratic, elitist, unaccountable 'other'. As observed by Wills, "localism is linked to the anti-bureaucratic structure of feeling", while "the elite are understood to be concentrated in Westminster, Whitehall and the posh parts of London and the South East" (2016a, 9-10). To a certain extent, therefore, localism forms part of the common content of populist rhetoric, and can be interpreted as populism *expressed spatially*, or in spatial terms. This point is illustrated by the following quote by Steve Hilton, a self-proclaimed 'positive populist' and 'localist':

Elitists see centralization as benign, even necessary. They are technocrats, foolishly convinced that they can, and should, keep running things from on high.

The positive populist, on the other hand, believes in the diffusion of power: truly competitive markets, localism (Hilton 2018, 9).

Populism as a theoretical concept is intimately linked to an understanding of legitimacy, where populist strategies might seek to delegitimise a government and / or political system by exploiting, or evoking, a sense of anger and resentment amongst the public (Offe 1996, 96). As Canovan (1999, 12) observes; “In so far as populism exploits the gap between promise and performance in democracy, there is no end to it”. Populism therefore questions the legitimacy of the state by highlighting the democratic deficiencies of existing processes.¹⁹ The main of these deficiencies is, as previously explored in section 2.2.1, representative democracy, which populist rhetoric compares unfavourably with idealised forms of democracy such as participative / direct forms of democracy (Taggart 2000, 109-10). This state of affairs ensures that populists can access a continuous supply of arguments for fixing ‘a broken democracy’, often rallying against the shortcomings of representation (regardless of whether it can be fixed) (Wright 2017, 189). More specifically, it has been suggested that populism can influence political debate in three ways. Firstly, by advocating simplicity, populist rhetoric can delegitimise complex or technical policy initiatives. Secondly, by claiming to speak for the people, it legitimises its own claims. Thirdly, by approaching political questions in a binary, dichotomous way, it polarises political questions into ‘good and bad’, ‘right and wrong’, making it harder to argue in favour of a ‘dissenting’ view (Taggart 2000, 112-3; see also Chilton 2004, 111-8). One might therefore suggest that an understanding of populist strategy and populism offers greater theoretical and empirical credence to Hay’s understanding of legitimacy as ‘discursively constituted’, where populism provides a useful perspective regarding by *whom*, *how*, and *why*, legitimating discourses are made. While Hay (1996) focused on media narratives, theories of populism *also* place importance on the narratives of opposition parties and politicians. Populism can therefore be described as a discursive and rhetorical strategy, capable of challenging both structural and immediate weaknesses in a democracy – even those structural elements which are difficult, if not impossible, to solve.

Some might reject that localism is populist on the basis that *populism*, as indicated above, amounts to a rejection of the establishment, including mainstream political parties. Localism has been a policy proposal of all three main political parties in England (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats, see Hickson 2013), however, being a mainstream political party does not necessarily preclude populist and anti-elitist language, strategies, and practices, particularly when said party is in opposition and/or faced with new political competitors (Inglehart and Norris 2019, 12). For example, both Labour and the Conservatives were faced the threat of the new (and populist) anti-immigration and anti-European party UKIP (Wills 2015). As Mudde recently wrote in *The Guardian*, “we are living with a populist zeitgeist, in an era when aspects of populism have become dominant within the political debate. More and more mainstream politicians are using ‘pro-people’ and/or ‘anti-elite’ rhetoric to win voters – in part to fight off electoral challenges from true populist actors” (Mudde 7 March 2019).

¹⁹ Since democracy can itself be considered an ideal form, it will always be deficient in practice – this is what Dahl terms a ‘polyarchy’ (Dahl 1990).

Therefore, it seems that populist rhetoric can reinvigorate and revitalise a political party. This approach has several political advantages: bringing in more grassroots activism, more campaigners, more members, and, ultimately, more votes. Partly for this reason, it is unhelpful to equate populism with political radicalism / extremism (even if the two may overlap) (Canovan 1999, 3). The implication of this is that populism can, and should, be considered more specifically: on the level of a specific policy or type of rhetoric (which is what I refer to with the notion of ‘populist strategies’). When taking this perspective, it becomes clear that not *all* populist policies or rhetoric arise from wider populist movements, but rather, it can emerge in ‘partial and opportunistic’ ways (Higgins 2013, 69). Populism in this sense can be considered a malleable and adaptable strategy in political communication, and one of a number of political techniques used by political parties (Higgins 2013, 59). This perspective offers more leeway in understanding what populism is and how it forms over time. The referendum on the EU in 2016 certainly exemplifies this point: the inherently populist promise given in the Conservative Party 2015 election manifesto, which culminated in a populist and divisive campaign, was an election promise offered by a government and party that otherwise, at the time, was not known as or considered to be particularly populist, but was *strategising* in response to a threat of a more general populist movement instigated by the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

There are several key strands of localism that reflect populist tenets, the main similarity being the narratives that both localism and populism generate regarding the value of certain forms of democracy and empowerment. Steve Hilton, the former strategist for David Cameron, recently argued that “the positive populist is, at heart, a devolutionist. We want to keep power in the hands of the people, to decentralize it whenever possible” (2018, 167). There are similarities here to Canovan’s (1999, 2) argument that “Populists see themselves as true democrats”, adding:

Many [populists] favour ‘direct democracy’ – political decision making by referendum and popular initiative. Their professed aim is to cash in democracy’s promise of power to the people.

Several academics have commented on this link between localism and populism. As early as in the 1960s, Beer associated the shift towards antibureaucratic, participatory, and *decentralising* beliefs with what he termed ‘New Populism’, which he saw being a doctrine emerging mainly from the political left (Beer 1982, 132). This populism also came to influence centre and right-wing politics, which, while not dominating, took on a powerful role in the political culture in the 1970s (Beer 1982, 134). More recently, Tait and Inch (2016, 176) have commented that the Coalition Government’s narrative of decentralisation and empowerment was, in part, “a populist response to a perceived crisis of trust in the British system, rocked at the time by the financial crisis and its mutation into a crisis of public spending”. Wills (2015) similarly suggests a link between localism and populism, with localism used to address growing public disdain for mainstream parties and their politicians. She suggests that Conservative and Labour have adopted localism as a key policy agenda to re-establish an emotional connection to the people and a source of new political solutions (Wills 2015). Further, both Higgins (2013) and Alexandre-Collier (2015, 2016) draw a link between populism and localism, by exploring the populism inherent to the empowerment rhetoric of the Conservatives’ ‘Big Society’ and ‘Localism’, before and after the 2010 election. As Alexandre-Collier observes:

The message of the ‘big society’ was used as a political expedient to build a narrative around ‘the people’, enabling Cameron to reconstruct a relationship which had, arguably, been damaged by years of Thatcherite individualism. It therefore served as a rhetorical device that signified reconnecting with the people and redistributing power to them (Alexandre-Collier 2016, 119).

However, the contradiction of localism of being fundamentally a centrally led policy rather than one led by local people or local government, also means that using localism as a populist strategy creates a ‘dilemma’. As Higgins (2013, 59-60) argues, while much of the Conservative communication strategy drew upon themes of broadened empowerment and the curtailment of unified control, “populism from a position of administrative power presents the dilemma that the animator occupies a place in the very elite system they pretend to strike against” (ibid.). He adds:

We might observe, even if it would be ungenerous to do so, that the adoption of a populist strategy demands straightforward shamelessness: the advantage is with whoever has the greatest willingness to make unabashed claims to common sentiment, whatever the costs to truthfulness or sustainability (ibid.).

However, populism also has a tendency to define itself cynically, or in relation to a negative: “In practice, populists are often more sure of who they are not than of who they are” (Taggart 2000, 94). A cynical, negative, and demonising rhetoric tends to encourage and exploit existing distrust and discontent (Alexandre-Collier 2016, 119; 2015, 144; Taggart 2000, 94). In this sense, just as populism might rally against representative democracy, bureaucracy, and big government, so too does localism rally against centralism, often citing similar concerns. Both these positive and cynical approaches see localism being promoted as a solution, or alternative, to representative forms of democracy, particularly in contexts where political representation is perceived to be centralised to the extent that it is remote and aloof from the will of the people. As Wills argues, “Localism can be interpreted as an argument about the limits of central government to do what the politicians – and the people – want it to do” (Wills 2016a, 9). Given this, it is clear that studying the political and rhetorical uses of localism requires an understanding of its role in furthering a populist strategy, particularly given the link to an understanding of ‘legitimation’. Here, it seems we have two theoretical perspectives that can elucidate how different political actors might operationalise localism to either *satisfy* a dissatisfied public (governments), or, *strike a chord* with the dissatisfied electorate (opposition parties). This understanding of localism as a populist strategy will be applied empirically in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

Localism seems to exist in a constant state of becoming, but never fully appearing, a promise never (satisfactorily) realised. As indicated throughout the chapter, there are two main reasons to this: conceptual and strategic. Firstly, its vague normative and idealistic – even utopian – underpinnings mean that any attempt at implementation would find it impossible to satisfy all, if any, committed localists. This is a condition afflicting democracy more generally, as explored by Dahl (1990). Secondly, as indicated above in section 2.4.1, but will be explored further in

later chapters, state-led reforms operationalise its conceptual emptiness to communicate adherence to its normative values without necessarily overseeing fundamental and constitutional re-evaluation of centre-local relations and financial autonomy. In sum, there is an inherent tension caused by trying to operationalise an inherently normative idea into specific policy forms. In this sense, I concur with Wills that the changes required to achieve ‘localism’ are “much more significant than is often implied”, requiring deep institutional and attitudinal change (Wills 2016a, 20). Despite this, its promise is often reasserted from “voices across the political spectrum” (ibid.).

I have explored how growing distrust, dissatisfaction, and changing beliefs on what democracy ought to be has placed political pressure on governments towards pluralism and democratisation. The link between shifts in beliefs, policy strategies, and reform as governments attempt to absorb and accommodate discontents is not clear-cut, which is what much of the following empirical chapters will be exploring. The literature review and the discussion elucidate a conceptual framework for understanding the political motives and strategic uses of localism. Theories of legitimacy and populism in basic terms concern the political interpretation of public opinion and beliefs, and how such interpretation results in a political *response* in the form of *communication* and reform (legitimation and populist strategies). Populism can be understood as intimately linked to a theoretical understanding of legitimacy, where populist strategies might exploit or evoke a sense of legitimisation deficit in a government. This is why enduring pressures towards bureaucratisation and centralisation require justification (legitimation) and are also susceptible to populist challenges (delegitimation). It is out of this tension and contradiction that discourses and promises in favour of localism and other decentralist/devolutionist spatial governance reform arise: as a legitimating strategy that governments may use to increase acceptability of policy agendas, or a populism strategy where political parties galvanise on existing discontent, discrepancy in norms and beliefs, and populist sentiments, to make claims over the lack of people power. It is this framework which will be applied in the remainder of the thesis, as will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research process, conceptual framework, and methods

How can we understand localism empirically? Normative explanations and definitions of localism are in abundance, but they fail to explain why, in practice, localism is a promise as often made as it is left unfulfilled. This can be explained by the paradox whereby, on the one hand, there is widespread consensus for localism when used intuitively, loosely, and emotively, as I outlined in the previous two chapters. On the other hand, there is no consensus or generally agreed definition on what localism is. While localism *has* manifested in tangible forms (such as the Localism Act 2011), this process of narrowing down and voting through legislation based on a majority vote in Parliament does not necessarily mean such a consensus has been achieved. Therefore, as explained in the introduction, each chapter offers a different perspective to the research question *What are the political motivations and pressures that result in decentralist/localist rhetoric and reform?*²⁰ This is a perhaps slightly unconventional structure of a PhD thesis. The chapters are used to divide the topic thematically rather than address it in a more typical chronological fashion of findings and discussion. Chapter four, five and six all cover *both* findings, analysis and discussion on the different elements of localism uncovered by the empirical research I have conducted. The Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, and Conclusion in turn demonstrate how these themes addressed in chapters four, five and six are interconnected and together form a more general explanation for the emergence of localism in relation to its political and strategic uses.

Chapter Three: How can we study localism in relation to its political uses?

Chapter Four: How did localism come to be concretised through the Localism Act and how has it evolved since?

Chapter Five: Does the promise and policy of localism legitimise centralisation?

Chapter Six: How do political parties operationalise localism as part of their electoral strategy?

²⁰ The research question's emphasis on 'motivations' – which certainly implies a level of *human* intention – could arguably support a theoretical and methodological approach that instead favours a perspective on 'agency'. The importance of agency was in fact a point implicitly made by several interviewees, who attributed the emergence of localism in policy to its champions in government, citing names like Michael Heseltine, Eric Pickles, Greg Clark, George Osborne, Oliver Letwin and Steve Hilton (on the Conservative side) [01, 04, 11, 32, 44, 21, 43, 37, 23, 40, 41, 30, 16], or John Prescott, Hazel Blears, and David Miliband (on the Labour side) [20, 32, 43, 39]. As Heseltine himself commented recently, "It is also important not to underestimate the personal element in driving these deals, particularly in respect of Greg Clark and George Osborne" (Heseltine 2019, 26). At the same time, I have avoided an explicit discussion on the role of such central figures. While they undoubtedly played a part in developing localism, I have retained a more structural perspective on *discourse* rather than more specific intentions of actors, in order to better support a historical analysis of exploring general pressures and patterns, thus assuming personal beliefs as either a constant or something that in turn might have structural / contextual influences.

Why this difference in approach and structure? While most of the literature on localism comes from a normative tradition, a discussion of ‘why’ has been superfluous (‘local democracy is something we *should* protect and enhance’). Instead, these perspectives have focused on, and critiqued, the ‘how’s’ of localism and democratic renewal. However, localism is a notoriously elusive concept. While many seem to be in favour of localism, its actual meaning, and therefore practical implementation, remains obscure. This complexity inspired the thematic PhD thesis structure, which I deemed most appropriate in addressing and analysing localism from multiple angles, thus placing its inconsistencies, complexities, and policy failures front and centre in the thesis, which assumes from the outset that localism is not strictly speaking definable (and therefore testable) in a scientific sense. While there have been laudable and repeated efforts to define the various concepts relating to spatial governance and/or multi-level governance on a social scientific level, including localism, devolution, decentralisation (see, for example, Copus *et al.* 2018), these theoretical efforts have failed to take account of the fact that, in practice – and particularly in political debate and discourse – these concepts are often used interchangeably.

This linguistic phenomenon therefore deserves a discursive analysis. Therefore, this thesis strives to embrace localism’s conceptual fluidity by exploring *why* political actors appeal to the idea of localism in their rhetoric and practice, rather than offer a strict definition as to what they mean. In this sense, the vagueness of the term becomes an object of study in its own right – what value does a concept so prone to slippage have for politicians, political parties and governments? I therefore take a similar position to Clarke and Cochrane (2013, 13), who made “no claims to define localism for use as a social science concept”, but rather, explored “the way in which it has been mobilised in the language of the UK’s Coalition Government”. The task, therefore, “is not so much to compare systems of ideas qua ideas as to explore their performative dimensions” (Laclau 2005, 14). Therefore, I will be putting forward an ideational and discursive approach to studying localism, from an institutionalist and constructivist perspective (Hay 2002; Gofas and Hay 2010; Chilton 2004; Schmidt 2008; Parsons 2007).

This chapter follows on from the literature review, which explored how localism can be understood in relation to legitimacy and populism. In asking how exactly one might study localism empirically in relation to its political uses, this chapter furthers this point. In the following sections, I will first outline the research process which explains how the research design was originally envisaged and how it changed, to then discuss the theoretical framework of studying localism from a discursive and ideational perspective in relation to legitimacy and populism. The chapter will finally outline the more technical aspects of my qualitative research methods.

3.1. The research process

Since embarking on this PhD in October 2015, my thoughts and research questions have gone through a couple of stages of revision. This evolution can be linked to the influence of two factors: first, the new perspectives gained through preliminary research during my first year PhD, and second, my experience of working in government.

In the beginning of the PhD, my focus was on the link between planning reform more specifically and crises (economic and political) from a historical perspective. This choice of approach was informed by the incidence of the 2008 financial crash, austerity, and the Big Society / Localism agenda. However, given the sheer scale of planning reform, I re-focused my research to look at localism specifically. Planning becomes targeted for democratisation partly due the highly political and contentious nature of its decisions (Inch 2012). Such democratisation measures have evolved from more available public information and education, as symbolised by the debate surrounding the Skeffington Report 1969, to greater bottom-up, community-based steering and decision-making. Neighbourhood Planning, as brought forward through the Localism Act, sought to implement this latter imperative. However, localism – in the sense of devolution of power and engaging communities – was by no means confined to planning. Rather, these innovations have been presented as part of a wider debate that questioned the imbalance of power between central and local government, or, the ‘bureaucratic state’ and ‘local communities’ more generally. For this reason, while still accounting for the planning element of localism, which has been ubiquitous through the years, the project was increasingly looking at localism as an area of study in and of itself rather than an example of planning reform.

Part of this change in framework took place against a backdrop of unprecedented political change. Less than nine months after starting my PhD, the UK held the EU referendum, followed by a vote to leave the European Union and the resignation of the Prime Minister, David Cameron. Less than a year after that, the following Prime Minister, Theresa May, called a snap election. This deep and ongoing crisis in government served to sharpen my focus on how abstract, normative ideas could be operationalised and result in material outcomes – including extensive political changes in government and even the country at large. Political ideas, particularly when underscored by normative values, can therefore be said to have unique casual powers (Tønder 2010, 66-7). However, while the idea of localism certainly pales in comparison to the power of ‘take back control’, localism can still offer wider truths on the role of ideas in the British democratic process more widely. Further, one might note the strong parallels between localism and Brexit, both essentially being demands for the localisation of power. This further supports the notion that decentralisation in fact was, and is, popular and symbolic – a widely held view and norm of what governance and democracy *ought* to be – and therefore politically powerful.

The research was further influenced by my employment experiences. In September 2017 I paused my PhD to pursue a six-month internship in the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as part of the opportunities offered to me as an ESRC-funded PhD student. Due to the regulations of the University’s Doctoral Training Partnership, I did not approach the internship as a fieldwork opportunity, however, it did offer access to interviewees, particularly senior civil servants, I would not normally have been able to speak to, and the experience itself opened up questions as to my approach. The perspective of post-politics, a theory I had applied previously in my masters research did not reflect the complex reality of central government as I had experienced it. The theory encouraged some highly sceptical perspectives on government / state intentions as ultimately using policy for

depoliticising and thus insulating purposes.²¹ Taken to its natural conclusions, it suggested ulterior motives in policy-making processes, even though there was not necessarily a widespread capacity for it. The dispersed nature of policy-making processes seemed to leave little room for the pursuit of ulterior motives by specific ministers and (even less so) civil servants. Further, the departments at the centre do not amount to a homogenous unit, particularly with regards to “their attitudes and operations towards local authorities” (Bulpitt 1983, 28). In government, I saw first-hand the complexities and intricacies of central government that Clarke and Cochrane (2013, 17) describe well:

History teaches that governmental intentions rarely translate straightforwardly into governmental effects. This is because governments tend to lack coherence – say between the Treasury and the Department of Communities and Local Government. Rationalities, mentalities, and programmes of government also tend to lack coherence – say between centralisation and decentralisation, or between representative and participatory democracy. Meanwhile, people tend to resist change and attempts to govern their conduct because they have interests vested in the status quo and/or because they are persons capable of reasoning and seeing the flaws of proposed developments.

The main problem with this theoretical approach was its tendency to force through a critical angle even when it might be contrived, an issue I discuss in section 2.1.1. Bevir (2013) similarly takes aim at the monolithic theory of neoliberalism and proposes a decentered theory. This thesis is similar in its problematisation however, rather than decentralising, aims to be *politicising*: by which I mean, it takes the gap between rhetoric and reality as a given, thus assuming deficiencies as part of the political process rather than adding to the large literature that focuses on critiquing this gap. While still sympathetic to the general premises of theories of neoliberalism and post-politics and the wider state-level patterns they observe, this experience confirmed the scepticism I had regarding how well these could be applied empirically, further encouraging a discursive approach.

My research design changed, too. While I had begun to conduct interviews to pursue two case studies on the implementation of localism in Cambridge and Southwark, I became more interested in the more conceptual discussions interviewees offered with regard to central government. The role of central government was ubiquitous in various localist reforms and agendas. Local government interviewees would labour on the conflict between austerity and localism, questioning central government strategy and intentions. Certain Southwark-based interviewees further highlighted the history of activism in the area which contrasted with top-down forms of localism (which inspired the anecdote on Coin Street in the beginning of this thesis). With these experiences, my interests increasingly focused on the political *uses* of localism, particularly considering its periodic re-appearance in the last few decades. Later, particularly as my access grew, interviewing central actors in the civil service and parliament

²¹ While mainly associated with the theories of Rancière (post-democracy) and Mouffe (post-politics), this is a fairly common Marxist view that can be viewed also in Habermas (1988), who argued that “pressures of legitimation can be mitigated only through structures of a depoliticized public realm” (p. 58), or in Offe (1984), who suggested that the administrative system within the state requires insulation from the problems arising in either the economic sphere or the normative (legitimation) sphere (p. 53).

added further a perspective on the motivations and intentions of politicians pursuing localism. Over time, I was confronted by the fact that studying localism as a concept, while a concept relating to space, does not strictly speaking amount to, and therefore require, a *spatially anchored analysis*. Lefebvre highlights how “the concept of space is not in space”:

The content of the concept of space is not absolute space or space-in-itself; nor does the concept contain a space within itself. ... Rather, the concept of space denotes and connotes all possible spaces, whether abstract or ‘real’, mental or social (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 299).

This supports the approach of this thesis of not directly exploring governance but rather the ideas of governance (localism) more widely. Therefore, while case studies of specific localities are largely absent from this dissertation (save for a brief discussion in section 4.4.3), this does not detract from an empirical focus on the *concept* of localism.

3.2. Studying localism discursively

As I shifted my focus towards localism, as outlined in the above section, I began to appreciate the extent of its conceptual obscurity. This fundamental problem in turn could become a potential methodological difficulty: if adopting a more circumscribed definition of localism, this may preclude a comparative analysis, but if adopting a wider understanding, my work might be criticised of conceptual confusion and conflation. Adopting discourse theory has permitted a more open and flexible qualitative approach and avoids a potentially unnatural delineation of what localism is. For example, while decentralisation, devolution, and localism might not be the same thing, a discourse approach supports a more general understanding on the uses of localism, as signifying a wider perspective on the normative and affectual values that underpin the narratives on devolving power and contesting centralisation. From this view, localism is an idea and narrative used to explain, deliberate and *legitimise* political action (Schmidt 2008; Hay 2006). It is ideational, but also purposeful. What I mean by this is that localism as a political promise and policy agenda is seeking to address public opinion. Or rather, decision-makers’ *interpretation* of public opinion: I cannot claim to offer a thesis on public opinion per se, however, by using the concept of legitimacy, this thesis acknowledges the ubiquitous nature of public opinion. While public opinion is commonly studied directly through polls and quantitative research, perhaps of more every-day interest is how decision-makers and politicians interpret public opinion, and how they act upon it and communicate accordingly. Indeed, the link between public opinion and government communication strategies has become increasingly pronounced as parties in governments use their position towards longer-term political campaigning (Deacon and Golding 1994, 4-6; Ward 2007). As suggested by James Stanier (2007, 42; cited in Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 104):

An obsession with promotion increasingly shapes all government communication efforts . . . many of the techniques pioneered in the public relations and public opinion industries, and practiced during election campaigns, have become the mainstay of government communication, the belief being that such promotional techniques are essential for administrations to get their message across.

This section will therefore briefly outline the implications and theoretical discussion concerning conceptual obscurities in the social sciences, and how a discursive theoretical and methodological approach can address and account for, and support a better analysis and interpretation of, this inherent characteristic of localism.

As mentioned, few publications on localism fail to highlight its conceptual obscurity. Tangible manifestations in policy, such as that given by the Localism Act, seem to cover a wide grouping of ideas and principles, some of which only seem to be tangentially linked to localism. This discussion reflects a much wider criticism in the social sciences, where certain concepts – from democracy, to identity, to crisis, and many more – are regularly criticised as being obscure and lacking a clear definition (e.g. Lummis 1996, 14-5). This criticism has been similarly applied to the concepts of localism, devolution, and decentralisation, as concepts that have been used interchangeably with insufficient distinction and meaning (Copus *et al.* 2018, 11). Here, Copus *et al.* go on to explore quite meticulously how one can instead define and distinguish these concepts (Copus *et al.* 2018, 15). Émile Durkheim made a similar complaint on the obscurity of popular social science concepts:

In our present state of knowledge we do not know exactly what the state is, nor sovereignty, political freedom, democracy, socialism, communism, etc. Thus our method should make us forswear any use of these concepts so long as they have not been scientifically worked out. Yet the words that express them recur continually in the discussions of sociologists. They are commonly used with assurance, as if they corresponded to things well known and well defined, while in fact they evoke in us only confused notions, an amalgam of vague impressions, prejudices and passions (Durkheim 2013 [1901], 33-4).

With this discussion, Durkheim, a founding figure of positivism, argued that social science methods should focus on ‘physical facts’ or ‘things’, such as those found in legal codes or a population census, which, to him, are formed *externally* to the consciousness of individuals, rather than internally, and as such promote emotional detachment and rigorous scholarship (Durkheim 2013, Giddens 1971). This strict understanding of scholarship has over the years been challenged. Instead of approaching the ‘ideational’ and ‘material’ as separate and distinct, Hay (2002, 213) has emphasised the importance of understanding the relationship between discourse / ideas and the material: discourse, ideas, and beliefs are real and have material effects. With an emphasis on the external, material, and ‘real’ effects of internal ideas and beliefs, theorists of different ontological and epistemological background increasingly asked ‘why’ rather than ‘what’, embracing instead a linguistic, rhetorical, discursive analysis. For example, Le Bon, a French political psychologist who studied mass behaviour, sought to explain the political use and significance of certain words, rather than their definitions – an approach which contrasts quite a bit to that of Durkheim’s:

The power of words is bound up with the images they evoke and is quite independent of their real significance. Words whose sense is the most ill-defined are sometimes those that possess the most influence. Such, for example are the terms democracy, socialism, equality, liberty, etc., whose meaning is so vague that bulky volumes do not suffice to fix it precisely. Yet it is certain that a truly magical power is attached to those short syllables, as if they contained the solution

of all problems. They synthesise the most diverse unconscious aspirations and the hope of their realisation (Le Bon 1995 [1895], 124-5; cited in Laclau 2005, 22).

It was linguistic theory, as influenced by philosophies on multiplicity and complexity of meaning, such as Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances²², or Peirce on multiple layers of meaning and indexing (Kocklemann 2005), which refuted Platonic theory that suggested, for any general term to be intelligible, "a person *must* be able to provide a definition of it" (Forster 2010, 71, emphasis added). Laclau further challenged this philosophical assumption with the now widely used academic concept of 'empty signifier', which he describes here in relation to the concepts 'order' and 'justice':

It would be a waste of time trying to give a positive definition of 'order' or 'justice' – that is, to ascribe to them a conceptual content, however minimal it might be. The semantic role of these terms is not to express any positive content but, as we have seen, to function as the names of a fullness which is constitutively absent. ... Since it names an undifferentiated fullness, it has no conceptual content whatsoever: it is not an abstract term but, in the strictest sense, empty (2005, 96-7).

Several researchers have suggested that localism is an empty signifier (see e.g. Clarke and Cochrane 2013, 11; Tait and Inch 2016). For example, the clearest and least disputable definition of localism is *negatively* formulated (in other words, everyone can agree what localism is *not*, in the sense of centralism and top-down bureaucracy). Positive definitions are wider and can be equally obscure. However, while 'empty signifier' might be *semantically* empty, it is understood as being "filled by affect" (Kølvraa 2017, 103; Laclau 2005, 110, 116). The reason why many seem able to relate to localism intuitively and how it can be operationalised politically can therefore be explained by the emotional investment that has been made onto the word itself, amounting to a 'tradition' of localism explored earlier (section 2.3). This explains why, regardless of how many concepts and definitions are inferred onto localism, "there is always something more that could be said" (Kølvraa 2017, 103-4). This is what I mean when I describe localism as being inherently normative. This emphasis on the political uses of localism can in turn be related to a wider literature in linguistics that explores functionalism (the study of motivated meaning). For example, the idea that some 'utterance can be used as an instrument to purposely affect context' (Kockelmann 2005, 263) was advanced by both Malinowski's 'phatic communication', where language was 'not an instrument of reflected but as a mode of action' (1936: 315; cited in Kockelmann 2005, 263-4), and, Austin's (2003) 'performatives', where 'utterances do not merely describe events in the world, but actually perform actions on the world' (Kockelmann 2005, 284).

While I accept the linguistic argument that certain political concepts – like localism, in this case – are *strategically* devoid of semantic content (i.e. are empty signifiers), this thesis diverges from Laclau in seeing its emergence as anchored to the national sentiments, and institutions,

²² Family resemblances can be understood as concepts and words which might as a whole not share a commonality, but nevertheless between themselves share "similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that" (Wittgenstein 1958, 31-2). This relationship between concepts results in "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (ibid.).

that exist at the time: the question is not only ‘why was localism politically useful’, but also ‘why was it useful *at particular points in time*’ (see discussion in section 2.3 on localism’s periodic emergence). One of the main institutions I explore are those that concern the democratic process, and the workings of legitimacy, as localism is operationalised in political rhetoric and policy by governments and party election campaigns. This is the emphasis in the following chapters: chapter four explores the operationalisation of localism in rhetoric and policy from a case-study of the Localism Act 2011, outlining the key roles of decision-making institutions: government, opposition, and parliament. Chapter five takes a more historical and broader perspective. It explores localist political rhetoric and government policy from the 1960s onwards, linking localism’s periodic emergence to contemporary economic policy: specifically, challenges relating to regional economic development and public spending. Chapter six devotes analysis instead to key *non-government* actors: opposition and minority parties, and the appearance of localism in election campaigns. What links these three chapters is an effort to interpret the discourse and rhetoric of localism from an institutional perspective, and how institutions absorb key normative values that localism represents. These values are held by the public and politicians alike and filter into the development of policy and institutions, following the theory of discursive, or ideational, institutionalism (see Schmidt 2008; Hay 2001, 2006). In other words, interpretations and meaning can only be established and understood within discourses, contexts or traditions (Furlong and Marsh 2010, 199). As Schmidt observes, normative ideas reflect how policies seek to meet the aspirations and ideals of the general public, and how such policies resonate with a deeper core of principles and norms of public life (Schmidt 2008; 2000). Given this, she argues, “The big question for scholars of ideas is why some ideas become the policies, programs, and philosophies that dominate political reality while others do not” (Schmidt 2008, 307). Moving on from both governance and critical theory, therefore, this thesis therefore seeks to provide an interpretivist perspective of what localism is by exploring its political and discursive processes.

Following on from the previous discussion in section 2.5, I have developed a conceptual framework to support a discursive and political interpretation of localism. This approach emphasises localism’s uses in both populist and legitimising terms. I distinguish between these two because of an early empirical observation that governments and opposition parties in the UK normally communicate and act upon the values of localism in different ways. In defining legitimisation, Chilton’s explanation is helpful here: “What [legitimation] means is that humans using language politically seem to feel a strong pressure to justify their actions or proposals for action in terms of oppositions between right and wrong” (Chilton 2004, 199). Legitimacy and populism, when revised to account for political *action* (e.g. legitimisation and populist *strategies*, as indicated in Table 3.1), can serve to describe how powerholders (discursively) respond to and communicate perceived public opinion, which may result in material effects (e.g. policy reform). This approach touches upon political/mass psychology and seeks to better explore the “nexus between elite and political behaviour” (t’Hart 2007, 100). Powerholders use discourse to mobilise popular support for their political agenda. More generally, a supply of political ideas, policy and reform, one may assume, is a response to a demand for such ideas from the public. From this view, one might suggest that the supply of political reform tells us, indirectly, what public opinion is. This need for legitimisation, Schmidt argues, is particularly prevalent in unitary models of democracy such as the Westminster model.

Since authority is channelled through a single authority, with policies usually imposed without much consultation with those affected, governments must offer a sufficiently legitimating discourse when communicating those policies to the public, or else face sanctions in the form of interest group protest, loss of public confidence, or even election losses (Schmidt 2008, 312-3).

Therefore, on the one hand, legitimisation can provide a framework for understanding the context where a *government* might oversee localist rhetoric or reform to *justify* policy and satisfy citizens' concerns (as discussed previously in sections 2.3 and 2.4, and which I will further explore in Chapter 5). On the other hand, populist strategies can advance an understanding of how political parties (opposition parties in particular), use the rhetoric and practices of localism to instead *challenge the legitimacy* of governments as well as connect with the public (or 'the people'). This is a point I will advance in Chapter 6. Both these approaches aim to explore how political actors continually seek, communicate, and act upon, an interpretation of public opinion. Therefore, I suggest that localism as expressed in rhetoric and reform (i.e. in both ideational and material forms) can reflect either populist or legitimating imperatives, as I chart out in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1. Legitimation and populist strategies as an empirical link between politics and public opinion

| Political responses to public opinion and beliefs | Expressed by | Materialisations |
|--|---|--|
| 'Legitimation': signal adherence to norms. | Governments | Government communicative discourse (expressed intentions and rhetoric) that justifies current policy as primarily observed in policy papers (white papers and green papers). |
| 'Populist strategies': signal adherence to 'the people'. | Opposition, minority parties, and occasionally governments. | Opposition communicative discourse expressing disapproval of government agenda (as insufficiently reflecting public opinion, norms, or beliefs) mainly observed through Hansard debates and election manifestos. |

However, as alluded to, this thesis is also concerned with the *relationship between* the ideational and the material, particularly since it is the contested and (often disappointing) materialisations of localism, such as during the passage of the Localism Bill and its enactment in 2011, is what initially motivated this research. The links between localism in its ideational and material forms has been iterative and causal (Tønder 2010, 66-7), where the idea of localism has had both material *outcomes* and material *origins* as earlier policy forms have inspired later approaches, as I argue in Chapter 4. Further, as I will explore in Chapter 6, populist localism has been materialised through electoral practices and strategies, such as community politics, which in turn has further influenced localist promises. This contestation and dissatisfaction with localism's materialisations through decision-making institutions *vis-à-vis* decision *makers* was reflected in academic debate, where several researchers have to varying degrees questioned the vagueness of localism in policy and rhetoric. Particularly in light of its poorly implemented promises, critical academics discussed to what political ends localism was obscure. In the mid 2010s the dominating academic research localism were those applying the radical and critical theory on depoliticisation and tended to result in highly critical arguments on the intentions of

localism. The obscurity of localism is interpreted as an intentional rhetorical device/strategy to disguise underlying political motivations which might in actual fact be in opposition to, or a complication of, the normative principles of localism itself (however these might be formulated). In other words, localism was often criticised for being a discursive *disguise* for centralisation (Mackinnon *et al.* 2015, 204-5; Clark and Cochrane 2013, 11; Copus *et al.* 2018, 30). From this perspective, while localism's conceptual obscurity is politically useful, I do not necessarily argue it is purposefully so. Similarly, while it is certainly *political* in the sense it has the power to confer coherence and unity to range of different democratic demands, for better or for worse (see Laclau 2005, 98), it is not necessarily intentionally *deceptive* or *depoliticising*, only in-so-far as much political rhetoric is by its nature highly open, normative, subjective, exaggerated, and therefore difficult to put into practice. As Chilton (2004, 199-200) observes, "At the heart of what we call 'politics' is the attempt to get others to 'share a common view' about what is useful-harmful, good-evil, just-unjust. Language is the only means for doing this."

In sum, then, this theoretical approach supports an understanding of localism being a performative and functional concept, where its widespread intuitive and deeply normative interpretations was and is useful for achieving certain political ends. Therefore, rather than explore how ideas (specifically, the beliefs and norms surrounding localism and local democracy) have influenced, and been internalised into, institutions and policy-making processes (e.g. using a policy narrative or ideological approach), this thesis explores how ideas are *communicated*, and as such, operationalised for political ends: here, the specific content or strict definition of the idea matters less than the political purpose these ideas serve (Schmidt 2008).

Taking this theoretical position that localism is fundamentally *politically useful* is fairly uncontroversial (for example, it has been offered as part of an election manifesto commitment – such a promise suggests at the very least a political intention to gain popularity or convince voters). However, it does lead to an epistemological problem. Exploring political 'intentions' is a preserve of only loose inference since it cannot be directly studied (see Bulpitt 1983, 29). Further, by analysing localism as serving strategic functions "is an interpretative act on the part of the hearer and analyst" (Chilton 2004, 111). My methodology, therefore, rather than offering 'an answer', instead offers a way of thinking – an inevitably personal *interpretation* – of localism as a phenomenon, rather than straightforwardly explain it (Hay 2002, 88). My methods – a combination of different forms of qualitative data – have then been devised to approach it in this broad way.

3.3. A qualitative approach: interviews, documents, and a historical perspective

Having outlined these theoretical aspects as inherent to the concept of localism, and highlighted their implications for my methodology, in this section I will discuss the precise methods I used. Qualitative methods generally are a widely accepted approach to studying ideas and discourse (Rapley 2007). The focus of empirical research is to unpick the *communicative discourse* of localism: "[communicative discourse] consists of the individuals and groups involved in the

presentation, deliberation and legitimation of political ideas to the general public” (Schmidt 2008, 310).

It is clear that localism as a functional, performative, concept in political discourse and rhetoric requires some care with regards to the methods for researching it (Reisigl 2008). Certainly, while “empirical evidence alone is never enough it is an important and necessary starting point”, thus forming the basis from which interpretation and explanation can be built (Hay 2002, 252). The empirical material upon which this dissertation is based on is qualitative; consisting of 44 semi-structured interviews as well as documentary analysis, both of which have to varying degrees supported a historical perspective as well as triangulation (Reisigl 2008, 103-4). A qualitative, discourse analysis approach was chosen based on the fact that ideas and discourses are best studied and interpreted through the lens of other’s actions, experiences, opinions and interpretations, preferably of many different people from different viewpoints. My experience of this method is that it amounts to a steady but powerful building of knowledge through a collective and collaborative effort between a researcher and their interlocutors.

When I began the interview process, I had already some experience with similar methods, having used qualitative interviews for both my undergraduate (2014) and masters (2015) dissertations, and spending the first year (2015/16) of the PhD attending qualitative method research courses and reading up on the literature. The difficult part of the qualitative interview is that, aside from obvious ethical mishandlings, there is no one ‘best’ approach, and the advice one finds in the literature is vague. For example, Rubin and Rubin (2005, 14) advise readers to show respect for and curiosity about what people have to say, a willingness to acknowledge what is not understood, and the ability to ask about what is not yet known. In other words, for many researchers, the qualitative method is often honed through a process of ‘learning-by-doing.’

Further, localism, and the question of central-local relations, is a fairly abstract topic to study. This difficulty has been encountered before. For example, the Kilbrandon Commission Report (using survey methods) observed: “The abstract nature of our subject caused difficulties for the survey. Concepts such as devolution may be familiar to those in government and to others with a close interest in public affairs, but for many people they have little meaning” (Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 267). Understanding the interpretation and the reception of localism required both an understanding of what was happening at the centre of Westminster as well as its reception, and interpretation, by local government actors and stakeholders. Therefore, I sampled my interviewees through a combination of purposive selection (i.e. identifying actors who were in different ways involved in the localism agenda mainly through documentary analysis), as well as snowballing (where interviewees and other contacts would recommend someone they knew or knew of). As an IfG report observed:

... decentralising requires a major co-ordination effort. At least three main groups must either support or acquiesce to reforms: national politicians; local politicians; and, of course, the public. These groups often have different interests, are not internally cohesive, and have differing priorities and values – all factors which make securing sufficient support difficult (Gash, Randall and Sims 2014, 3).

In line with this point, interviewees can be roughly divided into three categories: ‘Westminster’ (politicians, peers, civil servants, and advisors in central government / parliament), local government (councillors and officials), and stakeholders (think tank directors, community activists, academics). This combination of different categories of interviewee is also reflective of the key actors who engage in communicative discourse: political leaders, government officials, and party campaigners engage in “mass process of public persuasions” (Schmidt 2008, 310; Mutz *et al.* 1996). In addition, members of opposition parties, the media, community leaders, social activists, public intellectuals, experts, think-tanks, and social movements also engage in communicative political discourse (Ibid.) From these different spatial, professional, and cultural *contexts*, I was able to listen and absorb different perspectives on localism (Wodak 2008, 10-1). These three groups were fairly evenly distributed as demonstrated in the pie chart below (Fig. 3.1). Table 3.2 below offers an overview of the dates and professions (this has been vaguely described for purposes of anonymity). This table provides a catalogue for readers, where quotes and references in the text will include the number from the specific interviewee according to the anonymised numbering system.

The semi-structured, face-to-face²³ interview offered excellent opportunities for interviewees to steer the conversation, gifting me with at times highly rich data. Other times however, it did feel like ‘information overload’. Further, despite the targeted sampling, the abstract character of my research could at times be difficult to convey through tangible, straightforward questions in interviews and did at times lead to confusion. Certainly, this open-endedness suited some interviewees over others (while it suited politicians and peers well,²⁴ it worked less well with some civil servants). As a result of this observation, I adjusted my questions for each interviewee, taking into account these factors.

²³ As I outline in Table 3.2, three interviews were conducted over the phone due to logistical issues, and one was ‘conducted’ as a written answer.

²⁴ Indeed, as the reader might observe in Chapter 4, (British) politicians and peers appear particularly keen to contribute to more conceptual discussions.

Fig. 3.1. Distribution of interviewees

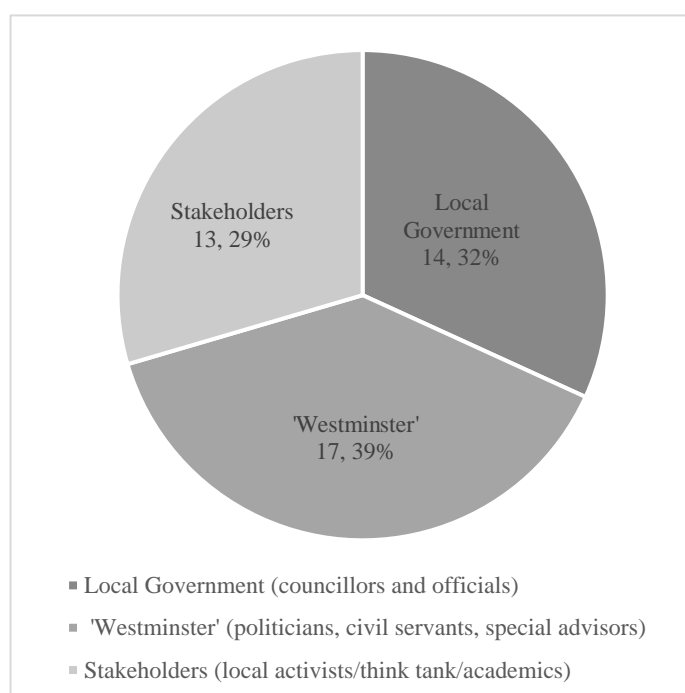


Table 3.2. List of interviewees

| No. | Date | Profession/organisation | Category |
|-----|----------|---|-------------|
| 01 | Mar 2016 | Local government professional [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 02 | Mar 2016 | Previously a senior planner [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 03 | Apr 2016 | Local councillor [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 04 | Apr 2016 | Local senior planning officer [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 05 | Apr 2016 | Local Enterprise Partnership officer [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 06 | Apr 2016 | Local councillor [Cambridge] ²⁵ | Local gov. |
| 07 | Apr 2016 | Previously a senior planner [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 08 | Nov 2016 | Senior planner / civil servant | Westminster |
| 09 | Dec 2016 | Local councillor [Cambridge] | Local gov. |
| 10 | Dec 2016 | Academic | Stakeholder |
| 11 | Dec 2016 | Academic | Stakeholder |
| 12 | Dec 2016 | Academic | Stakeholder |
| 13 | Jan 2017 | Senior planner | Westminster |
| 14 | Jan 2017 | Academic | Stakeholder |
| 15 | Feb 2017 | Academic / activist / local government councillor | Stakeholder |
| 16 | Feb 2017 | Local resident and activist [Southwark] | Stakeholder |
| 17 | Feb 2017 | Planning lawyer and researcher | Stakeholder |
| 18 | Feb 2017 | Academic / councillor / activist ²⁶ | Local gov. |
| 19 | Feb 2017 | Senior independent policy adviser | Westminster |
| 20 | Feb 2017 | Academic / councillor / political advisor | Local gov. |

²⁵ Conducted over the phone

²⁶ Conducted over the phone

| | | | |
|----|------------|--|-------------|
| 21 | Feb 2017 | Senior civil servant in DCLG and local government | Westminster |
| 22 | Feb 2017 | Senior Labour Party MP | Westminster |
| 23 | March 2017 | Liberal Democrat peer | Westminster |
| 24 | Apr 2017 | Local activist [Southwark] | Stakeholder |
| 25 | Apr 2017 | Local resident and neighbourhood planner [Cambridge] | Stakeholder |
| 26 | May 2017 | Local councillor [Southwark] | Local gov. |
| 27 | May 2017 | Planner and policy adviser ²⁷ | Westminster |
| 28 | June 2017 | Local councillor [Southwark] | Local gov. |
| 29 | Jul 2017 | Senior local government planner [Southwark] | Westminster |
| 30 | Jul 2017 | Developer and community activist [Southwark] | Stakeholder |
| 31 | Jul 2017 | Local government planner [Southwark] | Local gov. |
| 32 | Feb 2018 | Senior civil servant in the Cabinet Office | Westminster |
| 33 | Feb 2018 | Senior civil servant in MHCLG | Westminster |
| 34 | Mar 2018 | Liberal Democrat peer | Westminster |
| 35 | Mar 2018 | Conservative SpAD and think tank director | Westminster |
| 36 | Mar 2018 | Senior civil servant in DCLG and local government | Westminster |
| 37 | Mar 2018 | Liberal Democrat peer | Westminster |
| 38 | Mar 2018 | Senior civil servant in MHCLG ²⁸ | Westminster |
| 39 | Mar 2018 | Think tank director | Stakeholder |
| 40 | May 2018 | Senior civil servant in MHCLG ²⁹ | Westminster |
| 41 | May 2018 | Think tank director | Stakeholder |
| 42 | Jun 2018 | Liberal Democrat special advisor | Westminster |
| 43 | Jun 2018 | Think tank director | Stakeholder |
| 44 | Jul 2018 | Senior LGA member and peer | Westminster |

The semi-structured approach also at times served to deepen the power-dynamic in certain interviews: a majority of the interviewees could be classed as ‘elite’ (in all three categories) and the majority were also male. This did at times create a tricky dynamic, particularly with regards to steering and taking charge of the conversation. In terms of the logistics, the interviews on average lasted around one hour each although there was some deviation from this, the shortest being 20 minutes (a busy politician), and the longest being over 90 minutes. All except three were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). The coding was not strict but rather used to detect and compare general themes across the documents. Therefore, while the focus was on content to explore the range and nature of views on the subject, care was taken to reflect the *way* interviewees expressed these events, experiences, and reflections, and the context in which they expressed them (Abell and Myers 2008). All interviewees were anonymised for a couple of reasons: a) a significant number requested it, b) anonymising all interviewees offered methodological consistency (as far as possible, the interviewees were placed under similar conditions), and c) it encouraged as far as

²⁷ Conducted over the phone

²⁸ Requested no recording, transcription based on notes

²⁹ Requested no recording, transcription based on notes

possible interviewees to feel at ease during the interview. I was given ethical approval from my Department through a formal application process where I outlined the nature of the information collected (which I deemed to be generally uncontroversial), and the safety procedures I followed to ensure confidentiality and data security.

The weaknesses I encountered with the qualitative interview method were partially offset by triangulating interview data with documentary analysis (see Yin 2003, 92). Documents offered opportunities to corroborate interviews (I also used interviews to corroborate subsequent interviews, ensuring an iterative approach). Interviewees would sometimes recommend documents which furthered supported my efforts in locating important texts. At times, documents were used to kick-start the interview and provide structure to the discussion. These documents, such as the Localism Act 2011, offered a helpful anchor during interviews given the abstract nature of the subject area.

The Act and its debate more generally offered a useful starting point for empirical research, because it symbolised the intersection between the ‘ideational’ and the ‘material’, which is the basis of Chapter 4. However, the Act is of course not an isolated piece of legislative reform, nor was the political debate that surrounded it. A historical perspective, as suggested by Bulpitt (1983, 54-5), is therefore highly useful in the study of central-local relations and was one of the main original intentions of the research project from the very beginning. Here, I analysed and coded a range of documents sourced online and through the University Library’s ‘archive’, which, being a legal deposit library, stocks both electronic and hardcopies of official UK government publications. Similarly to the interview transcript data, NVivo was a highly important software to coordinate the vast amount of information I collected. NVivo was used to methodically move through documents and highlight useful and interesting content (creating nodes). The size and repetition of such nodes can then uncover more general themes. NVivo also provides helpful word query tools, with permitted faster access to certain ideas and repetitions. I include the categories of the documents below in Table 3.3, which explains how and why documents were used for this research.

Table 3.3. Documents and their uses

| Type of document | Documents used | Why documents were used |
|---|---|---|
| General election manifestos (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat) ³⁰ | Labour Manifestos 1964-2017 Conservative Manifestos 1964-2017 Liberal Party/Liberal Party-SDP/Liberal Democrat Manifestos 1964-2017 | Election manifestos are documents published at regular intervals (election years) that can give an insight into the origins of policy and legal reform, as well as an insight into party political narratives and the nature of election promises with regards to local government and democratic renewal. Election manifestos therefore offer an opportunity to study a consistent document-type over time, and to clearly |

³⁰ 1900-1997 of the three parties was republished by Ian Dale in three different volumes (1999a; 1999b; 2000), London: Routledge. More recent manifestos were found online.

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | | compare government (party in government) against opposition rhetoric. |
| Parliamentary (Hansard) debates ³¹ | Cited in text | Parliamentary debates, as transcribed through Hansard, offer an insight into contemporary political ideologies and partisan antagonisms, public opinion (as communicated through a member of parliament or peer), as well as contemporary political challenges. |
| White papers (i.e. government proposals for legislation), related policy statements, and annual reviews, as well as Green papers (government consultation documents) | DoE (1970; 1971a; 1971b; 1979a; 1979b; 1983a; 1983b; 1986c; 1991a; 1991b; 1994); Office of the Lord President of the Council (1976); DETR (1997; 1998b; 1999); DTLR (2001; 2002) Cabinet Office (1991; 1999; 2000; 2010); HM Treasury (2004a; 2004b; 2006; 2010); DCLG (2006; 2008a; 2017a); HM Government (2009a). | Government produced policy papers provide an insight into the government's policy agenda and rhetorical emphasis, as well as a shift in approach. Policy papers are devised with the media and public opinion in mind which makes accounting for the rhetoric even more important. |
| Committees of Inquiry, Royal Commissions, Reviews and related research/evidence | Skeffington Committee (1969); Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969); Kilbrandon Commission (1973); Layfield Committee (1976); Widdicombe Committee (1986); Working Party (1993); Local Government Commission for England (1993; 1995); Lyons Inquiry (2007). | These independent but government-commissioned reports are not useful indications of either the governments' or the oppositions' view on a particular issue (at times they have been completely ignored, at other times, their recommendations are partially absorbed into a governments' legislative agenda, very rarely if ever taken completely at face value) but are often well-researched (comprising several years of evidence collection) and can give a good snapshot of public/stakeholder attitudes and contemporary values. |
| Parliamentary Select Committee Reports and related evidence (oral/written) | Relations Between Central and Local Government Committee (1996a; 1996b); ODPM Committee (2006); Communities and Local Government Committee (2007a; 2007b; 2009; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016); | Select Committees are groups in Parliament (both in the Commons and the Lords) that do similar work to the independent government-commissioned reports but are less formal and compose of members of parliament / peers. They invite experts, stakeholders, local councils and central government departments, senior civil |

³¹ Up until early last year, Hansard debates were accessed on two separate websites depending on dates: historic debates (1803-2005) were accessed at <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/index.html> (previously <https://hansard.millbanksystems.com>) and contemporary debates on the official Parliament website. Since July 2018, a new website - <https://hansard.parliament.uk/> - amalgamates these two sources and offers the full records of both historic and contemporary debates.

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | Public Administration Committee (2011); Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2013); Committee of Public Accounts (2016) | servants and ministers to provide oral and written evidence on a topical issue (often related to government policy), usually resulting in a final report that includes recommendations for government. This process provides parliamentary scrutiny on government. This is useful for research as it can shine a critical light, from the viewpoint of Parliament, on the processes and thinking behind a government's policy agenda which would not otherwise have been obvious to an outsider, as well as a snapshot of political and stakeholder opinion. |
| Government replies to Select Committee Reports | HM Government (1996; 2007; 2009b) | Governments may issue formal responses to these reports which give an insight into the government's position, rhetoric and flexibility. |
| Departmental reports/Annual Reports, Impact Assessments, Guidance, Progress Reports | DCLG (2010; 2011a; 2011b; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2017b); MHCLG (2018a; 2018b; 2019) | These documents provide an insight into governments' policy expectations, policy progress, and shift in priorities. |

Conclusion

I have outlined the theoretical frames and methods underpinning of the thesis. Localism is an idea that periodically forms part of communicative discourse amongst governments and political parties. In this discourse, localism is both rhetoric and policy, and in its policy forms and promises, it results in material outcomes and impacts. This does not necessarily mean it can be defined by these materialisations (e.g. Localism Act 2011), but rather, that it cannot be strictly defined save for it being a concept of political use; a concept that can absorb and support political intentions and imperatives depending on the challenges at the time. Therefore, the task for the current researcher is to explore what are the political imperatives behind localist rhetoric have been, given these practical outcomes, and how these can explain localism's contradictions. The following three chapters are devised to explore this empirically, weaving in contemporary and historical evidence from documents as well as interviewees, and at times offering context in the literature. All chapters rely on both documentary and interview material. Chapter four explores the Localism Act, with a particular emphasis on the parliamentary debates on the Localism Bill, as well as interviews and data indicating how localism was implemented. Chapter five relies on more historical documents to explore how governments referenced localism in conjunction with otherwise centralising policies on regionalisation and local funding. Chapter six focuses more on recent debate, using interview evidence as well as documentary evidence to explore the party political, and populist, element of localism.

Chapter 4: A case study of the Localism Act

Dorothy: The idea is to return power to the ordinary people and take it away from the town hall machine. Make local government genuinely accountable.

Jim: Yes, but how?

Dorothy: It's all in an article in this month's political review, by Professor Marriott. Now, you create little voting districts; 200 or so households, electing their own little parish council. A city village. And the chair of this little parish council is their representative in the local authority ... with the result that every councillor would be in door-to-door contact with the people who voted for him.

Jim: Dorothy, this could be like the great reform act of 1832. These councils are like little old rotten boroughs. You get half a dozen people deciding who's going to be in the town hall for the next four years.

Dorothy: Oh, precisely.

Jim: And *I* shall be the great reformer!

Yes Prime Minister, Season 2 Episode 5, "Power to the People", January 1988

While this thesis takes a fundamentally abstract approach to localism by defining it in relation to its political uses, localism has appeared in highly tangible forms. The Localism Act 2011 demonstrated that rhetoric *did* sometimes become 'reality' after all. Whether this reality was satisfactory, however, is another matter. Acts of Parliament require a process of narrowing down and voting through based on a majority vote. The legislative process therefore is unlikely to be an effective medium for reaching a consensus on localism's meaning. The basis of this chapter is then to demonstrate empirically the contradictory and contested character of localism by focusing on the political debate that surrounded the Localism Act, where its ideas came from, and how it was implemented. This can then in a concrete way 'show' the discourses of localism, which indicate that localism has politically strategic uses. The Act was not an isolated piece of legislative reform, nor was the political debate surrounding it, and this historical and institutional perspective on localism will be further unpicked in Chapter 5. Yet, the Act offers a recent and unique perspective on the intersection between the 'ideational' and the 'material' from which to further explore the character of localism as a discursive, and strategic, concept. In other words, the Act can shed light on how localism can be concretised through a move from the political (rhetorical) to the legislative and policy sphere, and its evolution since. Ultimately, it concludes that problems in relation to localism's reception by stakeholders, and its implementation, relate to inherent issues caused by putting a normative idea and principle into practice. By outlining the empirical character of localism, this chapter pre-empts the more analytical discussion in the following Chapters (5 and 6), which focus more closely on the reasons and origins of localism.

4.1. Defining localism

The meaning and legal manifestation of localism has been shaped by its normative intuitive uses and widespread political consensus over a longer period of time, and which has in turn shaped debate. As indicated in the previous chapter, seeing localism as an empty signifier can explain some of its empirical characteristics and why it is useful in political communicative discourse. In particular, localism seems to have few – if any – agreed *positive* definitions, but some very clear negative ones. While it seems that everyone can agree that localism is *not* centralism and top-down bureaucracy, positive definitions (whether in academic writing or in political rhetoric) tend to be wide and obscure. For example, one Conservative MP likened localism with the “principles of individuality, community, libertarianism, greater accountability and democracy” (HC Deb 17 January 2011 Vol. 521 c611), a definition which offers more questions than answers. With a lack of positive definitions, the principle of localism was, despite being described as ‘radical’ in Conservative Party rhetoric, not considered controversial, and commanded cross-party support (CLG Committee 2011, 3). It appeared that the normative and emotional values of localism which spearheaded the Localism Act 2011 were widely held amongst many legislators (see previous discussion in Section 2.X). This consensus has been observed by several researchers and commentators (Copus et al. 2018, 6; Wills 2016a, 32; Bogdanor 2009, 235). As early as 2003, an *Economist* article read:

These days, everybody is in favour of “localism”. The Tory local-government spokesman, Eric Pickles, cheerfully beats his breast over past errors: “We were absolutely wrong. We’re born again local”. ... Even Tony Blair, no great fan of local government, has begun to remember the lines he used to spout before he became prime minister about local diversity and strong, empowered communities (The Economist May 3rd 2003, 42).

This consensus might explain why the debate on localism ignites a sense of repetition (Clarke 2012; Jones 2019, 3) and why stakeholders seem to have a vague and intuitive understanding of what it entails. In fact, this intuitive understanding and sense of tradition surrounding localism has led to resistance against a clear definition of it. As one peer suggested; “the more one tries to define localism, the more one is at risk of destroying it” (HL Deb 20 June 2011, Vol. 728 c1054-5). This reflects Laclau’s observation that “... in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings” (Laclau 2005, 18).

However, a *policy* of localism requires more certainty than the concept is capable of offering. The need for certainty despite conceptual obscurity, as required in legislative change, has meant that concrete localist and decentralist policy has often been characterised and defined in relation to its previous materialisations, and has therefore seen a significant amount of recycling and repetition, both within and between political parties. This is true for policies such as the general power of competence, as well as community forums and community rights. I include below examples of such recycling and re-emergence of spatial governance reform over the past few decades by reviewing two of the major policies in the Localism Act: first, the ‘general power of competence’, which conferred a general right for local authorities to act within the law, which contrasted with the ultra vires principle where local authorities could only act where expressly permitted. Debate concerning such a competence has been on-going since the 1960s and has

emerged through an evolutionary process. Secondly, is the policy on community rights and neighbourhood planning, which generally concern empowering communities in relation to plan-making and service delivery. Similarly to the general power of competence, these community empowerment rights have evolved over time in relation to previous policy and political debate. I will consider each in turn in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1. Localism's policy evolution and conceptual recycling

| | General power of competence | Community rights and neighbourhood governance, decision-making, and planning |
|---------------------|---|---|
| 1960s, 1970s | Section 6 of the Local Government (Financial Provisions) Act 1963 granted local authorities 'a power to incur expenditure in the interests of their area or its inhabitants but not otherwise authorised'. However, the 1963 Act limited this expenditure by 'the product of a rate of one penny in the pound for their area for that year for certain purposes not otherwise authorised' (6(2)). This financial limit was recommended by the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969) to be abolished. This was later discussed in the 1970 White Paper (DoE 1970, para. 68-9) and 1971 White Paper (DoE 1971a). Later, the 1972 Local Government Act, section 137, repealed Section 6 of the 1963 Act and widened the power of spending, including the financial limit (to two penny) (137(4)). | Debate on parish councils (also termed 'local councils' and 'neighbourhood councils') in the 1970 and 1971 White Papers culminated in new rights in the 1972 Act. Community Development Projects (CDPs) was a policy of targeted community funding established by the Home Office in 1969 (Wills 2016a, 65, 84), and the 1968, and 1972 Town and Country Planning Acts (the latter in turn informed by the Skeffington Commission Report 1969 ³²) expanded rights for residents to be consulted and informed in the planning process. |
| 1980s, 1990s | A more general power of competence (to act, rather than just to spend) was promised in three different general election manifestos: Labour 1983, Labour 1992, and Liberal Democrat 2001. A General Power of Local Competence was supported in the Select Committee Report 'Rebuilding Trust' in 1996 (HL 97, para. 3.13-3.17), the 'spirit' of which the government | Decentralisation within local government in the form of ward-level governance structures was experimented by several local authorities, up until the 2000s (e.g. Southwark Council). National policy brought in village design statements gave communities new planning powers (Countryside Commission 1996). The 'Single Regeneration Budget' supported a |

³² The Skeffington Report was commissioned by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to "consider and report on the best methods, including publicity, of securing the participation of the public at the formative stage in the making of development plans for their area" (Skeffington Committee 1969, 1). The report recommended policy innovations including promoting 'community forums', 'advisory panels' and 'co-option', 'community development officer', 'special statutory rights of consultation', 'involvement by activities' (see pages 13-18), as well as expanding opportunities to communicate information, such as through 'public meetings', 'exhibitions', 'films', 'press conferences', 'publicising intention to prepare a plan', 'surveys', and 'a statement of proposals' (see pages 28-36).

| | | |
|---------------------|---|--|
| | accepted, and agreed to review the scope for action and to assess whether such a general power ‘is practical and advisable (in the light of broader priorities) and, if so, what this might be’ (HM Government 1996, 12). | bottom-up, partnership approach in urban regeneration, with the original bidding guidance (DoE 1995; cited in Rhodes <i>et al.</i> 2007) encouraging the involvement of the community in local area regeneration (even if this was generally considered insufficient, as indicated by the parliamentary debate HL Deb 8 February 1995 (Vol. 561 cc221-54). |
| 2000s, 2010s | A general power of well-being was introduced in the Local Government Act 2000, and later extended in 2003. Later, a more encompassing General Power of Competence was introduced in the Localism Act 2011. | The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal ³³ , and its associated ‘Community Empowerment Programme’ (Social Exclusion Unit 2001) and Parish Plans ³⁴ expanded community powers in planning and regeneration (DETR/MAFF 2000). Neighbourhood planning (the idea of which, as one civil servant explained, was augmented with existing policy on Parish Plans [22]), neighbourhood development orders (Localism Act 2011), Community right to challenge, community right to bid (assets of community value), community right to build, right to approve or veto excessive council tax rises, as given by the Localism Act 2011. |

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, local government theorists in the 70s, 80s and 90s termed this consensus regarding the inherent value of localised power the “traditional orthodoxy”. While vague and intuitive, this orthodoxy has accumulated and strengthened over time. The consensus might even be said to be self-perpetuating, where political parties seem to increasingly demonstrate commitment to, and accommodate, a vague commitment to localism. As one interviewee argued; “I think the kind of recognition that more engagement is needed has increased over time” [41]. Interviewees argued that, once promises have been made, governments may struggle to reel these in, certainly in such a way that is legitimate. Promises of localism set the bar for future governments to meet, or extend, but less so to retract. And the outcome might be an inverse, negative sort of localism: it is not the promise itself that

³³ Communities in the 88 most deprived districts were targeted for additional funding through a ‘Community Empowerment Fund’ (£35m), and ‘Community Chests’ (£50m) to fund local small grant schemes to enable communities to run their own projects and participate in Local Strategic Partnerships (Social Exclusion Unit 2001, 10).

³⁴ Comparing Village Design Statements and Parish Plans, Owen (2002, 83) commented: “Both are meant to enhance the contribution that communities can make to their own futures. Both are initiated and prepared at the community level. Both are intended to feed into the planning system through the adoption of relevant parts as supplementary planning guidance. Both are focused on decisions and action”. This quote reflects the point I make above on conceptual recycling.

necessarily wins votes, it is the back peddling of promises, or the perception of failure to reach these promises and the resulting distrust, that loses them. This institutionalised, path-dependent discourse has been described by Schmidt (2008, 312) as ‘rhetorical entrapment’. As she explains:

Most generally, discourse serves not just to express one set of actors’ strategic interests or normative values but also to persuade others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action.

This creates a political commitment and consensus to a certain discourse surrounding the benefits of localism. As an ex-junior minister in DCLG argued: “there is now political consensus: nobody wants to abolish combined authorities, nobody wants to abolish neighbourhood plans”, adding; “once the demon is out of the box you can’t get it back in again” [37]. This point further explains the rhetorical entrapment of localism, its conceptual recycling, and why its policy has evolved in path dependent ways.

Therefore, despite the seemingly widespread consensus surrounding localism, the consensus rarely extends beyond a generally positive ‘feeling’ or ‘intuition’ amongst politicians and citizens alike and thus is a very difficult and contested policy to put into practice. A memorandum submitted by Barnsley Council to Select Committee evidence put it well:

... the problem with ‘localism’ is that like sunshine, no one can be against it, which means that everyone is a ‘localist’. But the concept is sufficiently broad so as to invite a number of varying interpretations from a range of people and political parties. Often, this ensures that there is a perpetual sea of uncertainty and structural and functional change, some of which is genuinely supportive of localism, some of which, despite the stated claims, is profoundly not (CLG Committee 2011, 11).

Indeed, this explains why attempts to define it positively, legally, and materially (such as that by Lord Greaves as I will outline below in Section 4.2), as well as efforts in Select Committees³⁵ and the European Charter of Local Self-Government (which the UK signed in May 1997) can be challenging, contentious, and even futile, often remaining unimplemented and unrealised. This was the experience when the Chairman of the LGA, Sir Simon Milton, and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, signed the ‘Central-Local Concordat’ on the 12 December 2007, where it was observed that, “nothing much appears to have changed as a result” (CLG Committee 2009, 53). Even more severe, attempts to legislate entail a multitude of contradictions, since a general understanding of what localism should look like in practice, does not appear to exist (as will be further explored in this Chapter). As one Conservative special advisor observed; “localism just meant so many different things for so many different people. You know, the Big Society was too big” [35]. The difficulties of achieving ‘localism’ through policy is inherently due to its conceptual ‘emptiness’.

³⁵ For example, Select Committee on Relations Between Central and Local Government (1996); Communities and Local Government Committee (2009); Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2013).

While there is a consensus as to its positive attributes on an intuitive level, this does not seem to produce consensus in relation to its implementation, in terms of whether to prioritise it at all (no implementation), or how to implement it. The consensus, then, was and is skin-deep. This observation further supports the observation made previously in Chapter 3, where localism is best approached empirically as having populist or legitimating uses which are separate to any specific meaning it might have. Therefore, this chapter further explores how localism can be better understood as an empirical concept, in relation to its practical uses. As Brownill argues, “it is more useful to identify the many meanings and purposes associated with localism than to define it” (2017, 21). The following section will explore this point in relation to the Localism Act.

4.2. Tangible manifestations: The Localism Act 2011

While this chapter so far has explored the difficulties of defining localism and the tendency to rely on intuitive understandings of it, localism *does* extend beyond rhetoric. This section explores localism as a tangible piece of legislation, as given by the Localism Act 2011. In the Bill’s second reading, Eric Pickles hailed the Bill as a “triumph for democracy over bureaucracy”, promising a fundamental “shake up the balance of power in this country, revitalising local democracy and putting power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people” (HC Deb 17 January 2011 Vol. 521, c558). The statute itself is of course as tangible as an Act of Parliament can be – a fairly hefty 500-page document.³⁶ Although, as Lord True commented during the second reading of the Bill, “probably only Whitehall could think localism and write a 430-page government Bill to deliver it” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol 728 c239).

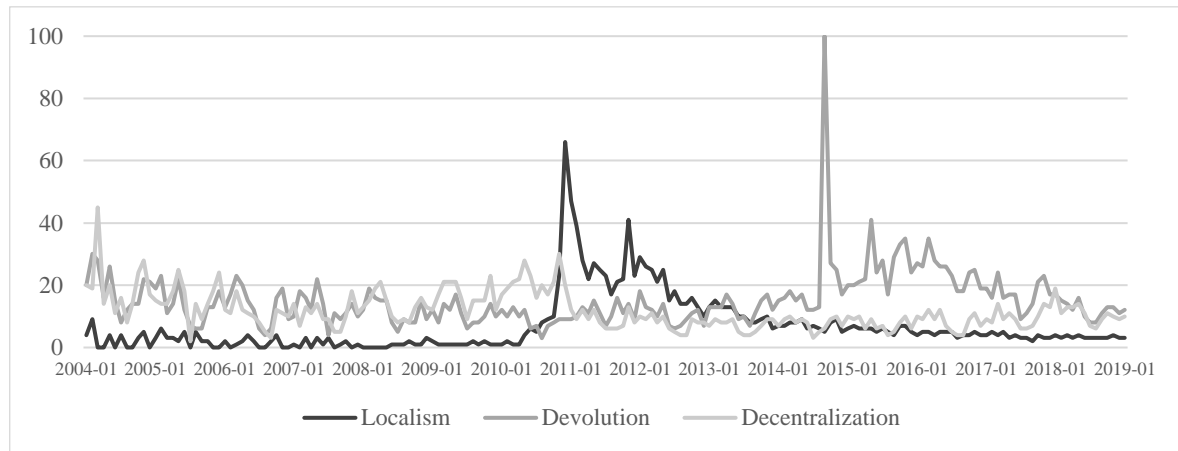
The Localism Act can be situated as part of a collection of recent statutes which have sought to revise the balance of power between the centre and the local. Starting in 2009, with the Local Government, Democracy, and Construction Act (under the Labour government), to the Localism Act 2011, the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, and the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, we see a string of statutes that in their very titles refer to ideas of multi-governance, devolution, localism, community empowerment and democratic renewal. In this section, I explore the Localism Act 2011, in particular, the Act itself and the policies it represented, to better understand what localism *is* in the context of the Coalition government reforms.

To get a rough idea of the term’s relative popularity, a Google trends chart (Fig 4.1), indicates that localism was not necessarily a mainstream or common concept amongst the wider population, experiencing a spike in December 2010 (the date of the Bill’s first reading) but has since the period 2010 – 2012 slowly drifted back into relative insignificance.

³⁶ As Lord Beecham described it in its second reading: “[This Bill] sprawls over 510 pages, with 215 clauses and 25 schedules. Together with 111 pages of Explanatory Notes, it weighs 2 pounds, 13 ounces, to which must be added impact assessments weighing all of 8 pounds, 11 ounces. As Churchill might have said, ‘Some impact, some assessment’. No wonder the Government have had second thoughts about their plans for forestry” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol 728 c151).

Fig. 4.1. Google trends: localism, decentralization, and devolution google searches in England, Jan 2004 - Jan 2019³⁷

Source: Google (2019b)



The introduction of the policy, and the preparation and publications of these Acts coincided in spikes in the Google searches for localism as well as devolution. Its brief period of popularity indicates that it was something of a political buzzword compared to the other two concepts, decentralisation and devolution, which have received fairly consistent interest over the past 14 years, although with devolution similarly experiencing a peak in September 2014, two months after the launch of the Chancellor’s (George Osborne) Northern Powerhouse policy, with heightened interest in the period 2014 – 2017.

Given this relative spike in Google searches on ‘localism’ coinciding with the ‘Localism’ Act, and the Act becoming the focus of much academic study, in exploring localism’s manifestations, it is useful to question why ‘localism’ was chosen as the title of the Localism Bill/Act in the first place. One of the junior ministers at DCLG during that time, who claims to have suggested the title ‘Localism’, argued that it was not always destined to be the ‘Localism’ Act. As he explained: “... the civil servants thought it should be the Local Government (no. 3) Bill, and I may have got the number wrong, but very very uninformative title and none of the ministerial team were the slightest bit happy with that” [37]. The debate on its name continued. I was particularly curious as to the divergence between its name during the early Bill stages (Decentralisation and Localism Bill) and the adopted Act (Localism Act). When asked why it was that Decentralisation quickly got dropped from the title, the minister explained:

... we wanted it to be very clear what it was about, and decentralisation doesn’t say anything about power it only says something about functions. Localism, well, it might in itself be a little bit opaque but ... I mean, there’s a difference between devolution and decentralisation. I guess that’s the fundamental point. And we were talking about the devolution of power, not the decentralisation of power. And so decentralisation didn’t seem to be an appropriate word [37].

³⁷ The numbers in the y-axis in the above chart represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. For example, a value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term, while a value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there is insufficient data (Google 2019b).

This exposes some of the thought-process behind the title of the Localism Act. While localism was admitted being ‘opaque’, the minister seemed surprisingly certain as to the difference in meaning between these concepts. The emphasis was on ‘power’: to ensure a radical approach to decentralisation. On the other hand, using the word ‘localism’, a word at the time unfamiliar to a lot of politicians and stakeholders, there was a sense of novelty and momentum in a policy area that was undergoing revival, a revival which the new government wanted to portray as radical. However, as debated in the Commons, Caroline Flint MP suggested a different reason for dropping the word ‘decentralisation’: “Far from devolving power as we were promised, this Bill represents a massive accumulation of power in the hands of the Secretary of State. If nothing else, at least we now know why the Government were forced to drop the word ‘decentralisation’ from the Bill’s title” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 c569). Indeed, the title was considered a poor choice given its contested definition, as Lord Tope observed: “... it seems strange that we should have a Bill with a one-word title that clearly means very different things to different people, and parts of which seem to contradict a common understanding of its title” (HL Deb 7 June, Vol. 728 c156). Further, as another Labour MP, Alan Whitehead, sarcastically observed:

When the Secretary of State introduced the Second Reading of this illuminatingly entitled Bill, I was reminded of Humpty Dumpty’s phrase in “Through the Looking-Glass”: “When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” For the avoidance of doubt, I do not wish in any way to associate the Secretary of State with Humpty Dumpty, nor to suggest that the word “localism” is capable of as many meanings as one wishes to put on it. However, the Bill’s title – incidentally, this is the first time that I have come across a Bill named after a tendency – suggests to me that it is intended, to some extent, to persuade people that opposition to it is fruitless, because if one is not in favour of localism, one must be in favour of centralism, and that is a bad thing (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 c621).

This polarisation between ‘good’ (localism) and ‘bad’ (centralism) indicates the populism inherent in the title of the Act (see Taggart 2000, 113). The intuitive and emotive power of the title was further indicated by a Conservative MP, who observed that “anything with the words decentralisation or localism in the title has generated significant enthusiasm” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 c642). From this discussion on the title and the evidence from the Google trends, localism was evidently a fraught concept that was, to an extent, ‘made up’ by ministers in DCLG at the time. Localism became a buzzword, with politicians and stakeholders alike being quick to insert onto it whatever intuitive or internal principles and opinions they already had on empowerment and local democracy. As a Labour MP argued during the Localism Bill debate; “I must warn [Ministers] that local people are interpreting for themselves the references to considerable levels of influence and autonomy in making local decisions, and I want to know whether Ministers can guarantee – and intend – that level of influence and autonomy” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol 521 c631). This word which provoked such idealistic associations amongst so many was however being operationalised for the purposes of highly specific reform. An overview of what this specific form *was* is included below through the contents of the 2011 Act:

Table 4.2. The parts and chapters of the Localism Act 2011

| Part | Chapter | Title |
|--|----------------|---|
| Part 1: Local Government | 1 | General Powers of Authorities |
| | 2 | Fire and Rescue Authorities |
| | 3 | Other Authorities |
| | 4 | Transfer and Delegation of Functions to Certain Authorities |
| | 5 | Governance |
| | 6 | Predetermination |
| | 7 | Standards |
| | 8 | Pay Accountability |
| | 9 | Commission for Local Administration in England |
| | 10 | Miscellaneous Repeals |
| Part 2: EU Financial Sanctions | | |
| Part 3: EU Financial Sanctions: Wales | | |
| Part 4: Non-Domestic Rates Etc | | |
| Part 5: Community Empowerment | 1 | Council Tax |
| | 2 | Community Right to Challenge |
| | 3 | Assets of Community Value |
| Part 6: Planning | 1 | Plans and Strategies |
| | 2 | Community Infrastructure Levy |
| | 3 | Neighbourhood Planning |
| | 4 | Consultation |
| | 5 | Enforcement |
| | 6 | Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects |
| | 7 | Other Planning Matters |
| Part 7: Housing | 1 | Allocation and Homelessness |
| | 2 | Social Housing: Tenure Reform |
| | 3 | Housing Finance |
| | 4 | Housing Mobility |
| | 5 | Regulation of Social Housing |
| | 6 | Other Housing Matters |
| Part 8: London | 1 | Housing and Regeneration Functions |
| | 2 | Mayoral Development Corporations |
| | 3 | Greater London Authority Governance |
| Part 9: Compensation for Compulsory Acquisition | | |
| Part 10: General | | |

Through the Act itself, one can empirically observe localism in a material, rather than ideational, form. The Act, then, implicitly defined localism as bringing decision making closer to communities and the individual, by reforming governance and policy in relation to local government, planning, and housing, as well as bringing forward new rights for communities. However, materialisation has also entailed, certainly in this case, contestation, particularly as

its materialisation was highly political in accordance with Conservative and Liberal Democrat ideology. Certainly, debates on the Localism Bill further elucidate how it was mainly Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians (as the parties in government) saw the Bill as a generally positive move, as I outline in Table 4.3, which has themed and coded the key attributes of the Localism Bill, as indicated by MPs during its second reading (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 cc558-660).

Table 4.3. Key positive narratives on the attributes of the Localism Bill

| Key narratives | Examples | MPs |
|---|--|--|
| “Reverses Labour’s 13 years of centralisation”: reduces red tape, top down control and standardisation | Abolition of housing targets, abolition of the standards board, ending ringfencing, expensive and inefficient bureaucratic performance monitoring | Eric Pickles (c558, 560); Paul Beresford (cc574-575); John Stevenson (c589); Kris Hopkins (cc608-9); Henry Smith (c612); Alok Sharma (c629); George Hollingbery (c635); Eric Ollerenshaw (c639). |
| Empowers local councils and promotes local democracy | General power of competence and greater discretion, restores trust in local councillors, elected mayors, localised decision-making on services, commitment to mutualism. | Eric Pickles (c560-561); John Stevenson (cc589-590); David Burrowes (c597); Martin Vickers (c605); Henry Smith (c611); Stewart Jackson (c615); Jack Lopresti (c627); Eric Ollerenshaw (c640). |
| ‘More power to the people’: pushes power down as far as possible, to neighbourhoods, community groups, and individuals | Referendums (on council tax rises), community right to buy, community right to challenge, a coherent philosophy on political decision-making for citizens, enables local people to take over ownership and delivery of local services, a catalyst for greater civic and community engagement in local politics. | Eric Pickles (c562); Simon Hughes (c581-2); Rory Stewart (cc585-6); David Burrowes (c598); Stewart Jackson (c615); Fiona Bruce (c619-20); Jack Lopresti (c626); Sheryll Murray (c633); George Hollingbery (c635); Iain Stewart (c639); Simon Hart (c643); Greg Clark (c654-5). |
| Returns planning to the people | Abolition of RSSs and housing targets, introduction of neighbourhood planning which supports more positive planning, greater community input on wind farms, permission given to councillors to speak on planning application (revision of rules of predetermination), Duty to Cooperate, Community Infrastructure Levy, abolition of the Infrastructure Planning Commission, supports neighbourhoods in bringing forward housing, better local control and protection of the high street | Eric Pickles (c563); Paul Beresford (c576); Simon Hughes (cc579, 581-2); Stuart Andrew (cc593-4); Greg Mulholland (c593); David Burrowes (c597-8); George Freeman (c605); Kris Hopkins (cc608-9); Fiona Bruce (c619); Andrea Leadsom (c623-4); Alok Sharma (c630); Sheryll Murray (c632); Iain Stewart (c638-9); Eric Ollerenshaw (c641); Nicky Morgan (c641-2); Simon Hart (c644); Angie Bray (c644-5); |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | Zac Goldsmith (c647); Nicola Blackwood (c649). |
|--|--|--|

Here, I identify four key positive narratives: a) reversing Labour’s centralisation of bureaucratic targets and standards; b) promoting local democracy; c) empowering communities; and d) localising planning. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the adversarial nature of even its attributes, as indicated in point a), the Bill was also contested. In the Bill’s role of signifying what was a highly normative idea, yet *circumscribing it* in material form according to government policy, the idea moved from being ‘generally welcomed’, to hotly debated: “When Ministers had the good, original idea for what we now call the Localism Bill, it received a wide general welcome in outline across the board before the Bill was published – I stress, *before* the Bill was published” (Lord Tope, HL Deb 23 June 2011, Vol 728 c1409, *emphasis added*). Indeed, an analysis of the Bill’s second readings³⁸ shows how MPs and Peers repeatedly voiced concerns that the Bill was inherently contradictory and paradoxical due to certain centralising elements. Further, despite this seemingly practical materialisation of localism in the form of an Act of Parliament, it remained unclear whether the Act and the rights it created were tangible and practical in the sense of implementation and accessibility. As one interviewee argued, “[the Localism Act is] a very interesting piece of legislation that can be thought of entirely in terms of David Cameron and his circular view about governance. ... As an idea, you know, picked it off the shelf, how wonderful. Without actually understanding that it creates all kinds of very interesting contradictions” [11]. Lord McKenzie of Luton summarised this concern well towards the end of the Lords’ second reading of the Bill:

... there remains a massive inconsistency at the core of the Bill, which the Government heralded as having the intent to transfer power to local authorities and local communities, but which is everywhere fettered by constraints and regulation-making powers held at the centre. The powers that will be wielded by the Secretary of State under Clause 5 were referred to by my noble friend Lord Beecham and by many other noble Lords, and are simply not acceptable. The Bill was described by the noble Lord, Lord Shipley, as not written in the spirit of localism, and referred to by the noble Baroness, Lady Hamwee, as antidemocratic. It also caused the noble Lord, Lord Tope, to question his understanding of “localism” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 c246)

As a Liberal Democrat Councillor forcefully argued during an interview, “Well the Lib Dems all called it the centralisation bill, that was the nickname they had. We thought it was a bit of a joke ... To us, it read like the classic conservative distrust of local authorities, and this is a way of giving communities ways of acting sort of on the local authority, or without the local authority, you know, outside the local authority” [03]. I include below in Table 4.4. an overview of the main concerns and critiques voiced by legislators (MPs and Peers) during the second reading of the Bill in the Commons (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 cc558-660) and the Lords (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 cc148-254).

³⁸ The second readings of a bill tend to be a more general discussion (pre-amendment stage) and offer therefore a good overview of the main political divisions and conceptual discussions.

Table 4.4. Main criticisms to the Localism Bill³⁹

| Major criticisms | Examples cited | MPs (Commons) | Peers (Lords) |
|--|--|---|---|
| More powers to the Secretary of State | “140 ⁴⁰ new powers” to the secretary of state; imposition of shadow mayors (as appointed by the Secretary of State); power to levy EU fines on local councils; determines the benchmark for what is excessive council tax increase; determination of annual budgets; Clause 5(3) circumscribing the power of general competence. | Toby Perkins and Nick Raynsford (c559); Chris Leslie (c561); Caroline Flint (c565, 567); Clive Betts (cc576-578); Simon Hughes (c580); Shabana Mahmood (cc591-592); Barbara Keeley (c596, 650-1); Stewart Jackson (c616) | Lord Beecham (c151, 153); Baroness Eaton (c161); Lord Shipley (c178); Lord Jenkin of Roding (c191-2); Lord Berkeley (c192); Lord Ouseley (c204-5); Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (c221); Baroness Greengross (c224); Baroness Thornton (c236-7) |
| Austerity and resourcing | Smokescreen for unprecedented cuts on local authorities; Replacing services that deal with complex needs, with poorly resourced community volunteering; No duty to provide necessary resources for communities to use powers conferred; Broadening of powers for local authorities and communities but with less money to use these; cuts falling on the poorest neighbourhoods. | Caroline Flint (cc565-566); Joan Walley (c588); Shabana Mahmood (cc590-591); Andy Slaughter (c599); David Lammy (c603); Hazel Blears (c606-8); Alan Whitehead (c607); Pat Glass (c613-4); Sheila Gilmore (c634); Toby Perkins (c636); Barbara Keeley (c651) | Lord Patel of Bradford (c163); Lord Reay (c208) |
| Insufficient community rights | No rights of first refusal; no community rights to appeal (planning), community right to buy tokenistic, community assets insufficient to save pubs; abolishing planning aid while offering neighbourhood planning | Andy Slaughter (c599); Greg Mulholland (c601-2); Pat Glass (c614); Zac Goldsmith (c648) | Lord Adebawale (c168); The Lord Bishop of Derby (c173-4); Earl Cathcart (c182); Viscount Simon |

³⁹ Unsurprisingly given the different political roles between the houses (the commons being highly politicised and adversarial, and the Lords being divorced from the electoral process), it is clear from table 4.4 that Peers and MPs tended to approach the subject from a different perspective. As observed from the coding process, most peers would in their speech offer both their views on the pros and the cons of the Bill and were more likely to engage in a conceptual discussion.

⁴⁰ Different individuals indicated a different number of new powers to the secretary of state. Toby Perkins cited “126”, Caroline Flint “more than 100”, Clive Betts “140”, Lord Best “146”.

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| | inconsistent with supporting poorer neighbourhoods; community rights more accessible for wealthier citizens; aside from elected mayors, council tax rises, and neighbourhood planning, referendums on 'local matters' are only advisory / non-binding. | | (c200); Lord Reay (c206-7) |
| Unintended consequences of planning reform | Abolition of RSSs and the replacement with duty to cooperate and neighbourhood planning will lead to a planning vacuum resulting in less housebuilding and less infrastructure; Reform will create uncertainty and instability; Neighbourhood planning will lead to NIMBYism; financial incentives (clause 124) distortive; lack of reference to sustainable development. | Clive Betts (cc577-578); Toby Perkins (c578, c594); Raynsford (c584); Joan Walley (c587); Shabana Mahmood (c592); Alan Whitehead (c622); Barry Gardiner (c624-5); Gordon Marsden (c628); Toby Perkins (c636-8); Peter Aldous (c646-7); Barbara Keeley (c652) | Baroness Andrews (c170-1); Lord Cameron of Dillington (186-7); Baroness Parminter (c194-5); Baroness Valentine (c197); Viscount Simon (c199-200); Baroness Young of Old Scone (c212-3) |
| Top-down regulation and bureaucracy | Size and complexity of the Bill undermining its good intentions; Additional regulations and obligations (e.g. referendums, neighbourhood planning, list of assets of community value) on local authorities without additional funding; Bottom-up self-organisation, rather than top-down legislation, as the essence of localism. | | Lord Bishop of Norwich (c158-9); Baroness Eaton (c161-2); Baroness Scott of Needham Market (c166); Lord Wei (c175); Baroness Bakewell (c177); Earl Cathcart (c181-2); Earl of Lytton (c218); Baroness Greengross (c224); Lord True (c239) |

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| Undermining local democracy | Commitment to localism requires central government to trust local government; growing conflict between neighbourhood bodies, local authorities, and mayor; Lack of financial devolution, autonomy and accountability; Referenda on council tax increases was seen as ‘capping through the backdoor’; referenda requirement of 5% is too low and can lead to many referenda burdening local authorities | Nick Raynsford c584; Douglas Carswell, c580; John Stevenson c590; Alan Whitehead (c622) | Lord Beecham (c154); Earl Cathcart (c181-2); Baroness Hamwee (c243) |
| Conceptual dissonance /obscurity | Is localism empowering local authorities, local communities, or both; Should it be the role of central government to empower localities; Lack of consensus of the meaning of localism, no coherent philosophy; no clear definition of ‘neighbourhood’, assumes sufficient interest amongst citizens to participate. | Simon Hughes (c559); Clive Betts (cc576-579); Alan Whitehead (c621) | Lord Beecham (c151); Lord Tope (c155-7); Lord Bishop of Norwich (c159); Lord Wigley (c180); Lord Ouseley (c204); Lord Greaves (c230-1); Lord True (c240); Lord Boateng (c241); Lord McKenzie of Luton (c246) |

The major criticisms⁴¹ and contradictions of the Bill as voiced by MPs and Peers were 1) More powers to the Secretary of State; 2) Austerity and resourcing; 3) Insufficient community rights; 4) Unintended consequences of planning reform; 5) Top-down regulation and bureaucracy (voiced by Peers); 6) Undermining of local democracy; and 7) Conceptual dissonance / obscenity. These debates show how efforts to bring a manifesto commitment of decentralisation into law was far from straightforward, exposing the inherent contestations of the localist consensus itself. Indeed, a demand for a clearer definition of localism constituted one of the challenges in the amendment stages of the Localism Bill, as one interviewee recounted. An amendment was moved by Liberal Democrat Lord Greaves on the 20 June 2011 who suggested a definition of localism to be included in the Act itself, which is worth reiterating here:

Before Clause 1, insert the following new Clause— “Purpose of this Act

(1) The purpose of this Act is to promote a political and administrative system and culture which—

(a) is based on the principle that each decision should be made at the lowest practical and effective level, and that where there is a conflict between decisions

⁴¹ I have here excluded the parts of the debate concerning the reforms to social housing and homelessness mainly to keep the discussion on the subject of governance. These concerns however were voiced by many MPs and Peers and constituted a major critique to the Bill.

at a higher or more local level there is a presumption that the local level will prevail unless there are clear and over-riding reasons why it should not; (b) is underpinned by basic rights for all persons and safeguards against arbitrary discrimination against any person; (c) focuses public decision making on bodies which are elected, representative and accountable; (d) may incorporate minimum standards for the provision of public services that may be established by Parliament, government and elected bodies at a higher level than that at which decisions are made, but otherwise welcomes diversity of provision on the basis of locally determined needs and preferences; (e) includes a restriction against regulations and orders by government and bodies at higher levels than the minimum absolutely necessary; (f) shapes the structures of local government in ways that are designed to facilitate the involvement of local citizens, individually and as members of their communities and neighbourhoods; (g) welcomes and encourages the involvement of local citizens in the design of such structures and participation within them; and (h) encourages the formation of bodies by local citizens in which they may organise to influence public decision-making, take part in processes of local governance and help to provide local services (HL Deb 20 June 2011, Vol. 728 c1045).

The debate on this amendment lasted for about an hour and had fourteen contributors, where one interviewee who was present observed that “it became very clearly very quickly that right across the house people had quite different views about what they thought localism was” [34]. Table 4.5. provides an overview of the points that were made.

Table 4.5. The main arguments made in the Lords amendment debate 20 June 2011, Amendment 1

| Order of debate (peers) | Supports amendment? | Key comments |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Lord Lucas | Yes | “... I hope that at this stage of the Bill we should have a good exposition of where the government stand on localism at the moment” (c1049) |
| Lord Jenkin of Roding | No | “[the amendment] is not going to achieve anything in the direction that some of us would like to see. You have to look at the individual provisions of the Bill if you actually want to reduce the degree of central control or direction of a locally exercisable power” (c1049) |
| Lord Shipley | Yes | “I believe that defining the principles and the culture of this Bill matters profoundly to our understanding of the debates” (c1050) |
| Lord Ouseley | Yes | “... important that we establish some understanding of the principles of the Bill, to try to remove some of those confusions” (c1051) |
| Lord Plumb | No | |
| Lord Taylor of Goss Moor | Yes | “Having a Bill of this size that calls itself the Localism Bill illustrates the flaw inherent in our body politic: we do not understand the principle of devolving decision-taking to others or that that decision-taking has to involve devolution of responsibility for the ‘how’, not just the principle of the ‘what’” (c1053) |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Baroness Hamwee | Yes | “It would be easy during debates on the Bill to say that such-and-such is local or localist, without analysing what that means and what it should mean in each context” (c1053) |
| Lord Elystan-Morgan | No | “With the best will in the world, the new clause, laudable though it is, would, if carried, create a massive constitutional problem to which there is no real answer” (c1054) |
| Lord Dixon-Smith | No | “The more one tries to define localism, the more one is at risk of destroying it” (cc1054-5) |
| Baroness Byford | No | “The Bill clearly sets out what it wants to do. When we come to the individual clauses within it, there may well be important issues that we want to look at and reflect on in greater detail” (cc1055-6) |
| Lord Tope | <i>Brought forward amendment with Lord Greaves</i> | “Unusually, we have a Bill with a one-word title: ‘localism’. It seems to mean different things to different people and it appears to mean different things in different parts of this Bill. Above all, it seems to mean entirely different things in different parts of the Government” (c1056) |
| Lord Beecham | No | “Nowadays, we are all localist, but that definition of localism is, to put it mildly, somewhat elastic. I think the noble Lord, Lord Greaves, has set out as good a definition as one might reasonably expect” (c1058) |
| Baroness Hanham (the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government) | No | <p>“There really is no way that one can start a Bill with a purpose such as this because it will never measure out exactly what the purpose of the legislation is, and it rather puts one into a straitjacket for the rest of the debate” (c1060)</p> <p>“I would only say that I think that the principle of localism is well established. ... It pushes out as far as possible into communities and neighbourhoods, and into the hands of individuals and community groups, but in doing so it does not undermine local democratic principles. Localism means handing power down directly to councils, freeing local government from central and regional control. At other times, it means creating new rights for local communities to become more involved in local affairs, which is what I have been describing as what neighbourhoods and communities can do” (c1061)</p> |

Source: *HL Deb 20 June 2011, Vol. 728 cc1045-1065*

The amendment was put forward mainly for the purpose of prompting debate and Lord Greaves withdrew it afterwards. It resulted in a useful exercise. This snapshot of the debate in Table 4.2 demonstrates, firstly, a general view amongst peers that localism lacked clarity. Many agreed with the general premise of Lord Greave’s definition, particularly as a way of setting out a criterion for what can be considered localism, while others emphasised how localism was more context dependent. Some disagreed and suggested (in a rather circular fashion) that the Bill itself set out clearly what localism was, while the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State offered a definition of localism which to her seemed “well established” and therefore did not require explicit reference. Some have suggested it is a particularly British approach to

government to avoid any “excesses of systematic thought or empirical research in policy making” (Beer 1982, 114), and as MP Jesse Norman argued in relation to the Big Society: “It is vague at the edges, as all political ideas are vague at the edges” (2010, 200). This was reflected in Lord Elystan-Morgan’s concern that Lord Greave’s amendment, one that offered some highly generalised definitions, would cause “a massive constitutional problem” (c1054) with regards to legal interpretation. Therefore, despite the apparent widespread political consensus as to the benefits of localism, this consensus was practically impossible to translate into practice due to an inability – in a linguistic, conceptual, and constitutional sense – to clearly define what it means.

The resulting gap between rhetoric and reality was suggested by several interviews: “again, I’m not sure it ever really stretched much further than rhetoric on a lot of things ... there was that kind of disjuncture between what the politicians and what the I guess senior civil servants were saying and actually how these things really played out” [41]. It has even been recognised in parliamentary debates, where Conservative MP Rory Stewart observed during the Localism Bill debate: “A fundamental problem faces Members of all parties—the difference between the expert, with all the ‘Yes, buts’ and ideas, and the reality on the ground. There seems to be a fundamental gap in our culture between rhetoric and reality” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol.521 c585). Later, Lord Reay observed, “does the title of the Bill and the rhetoric used to support it conform to the reality of what the Bill will bring about? I have doubts” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol.728 c206). While Greg Clark MP – who would later become Minister for Decentralisation – observed, and perhaps foreboded, in 2003: “Labour claim to understand where they have gone wrong. They have long promised ‘modernisation.’ But whilst they refuse to understand the reasons behind these failures, their decentralising rhetoric can never be matched by reform” (Clark 2003, 1). The question then remains whether any decentralising rhetoric can be matched by reform. While evidently not a convenient or easy option for governments, there seem to be underlying pressures to introduce variances of these promises, these underlying pressures are further explored in Chapter 5 and 6. The next section will further explore the efforts to implement, and institutionalise, localism following the 2011 Act.

4.3. Implementing Localism

4.3.1. Institutionalising localism: The Department of Communities and Local Government

During evidence for the Select Committee Report on ‘Localism’, Stewart and Jones argued how centralisation could be attributed to ‘departmentalism’. They were referring to a lack of a co-ordinated approach and internalisation of the localism agenda amongst government departments, as well as their centrist approach to policymaking and a lack of understanding of the cumulative effects of decisions on the freedoms of local authorities (CLG Committee 2011, Ev 140). As they argued in a memorandum to the Committee:

Past experience shows it is easier to announce a policy of decentralisation than to ensure it happens. The reasons lie in the working of central government departments. Even when the initial policy is accompanied by measures of

decentralisation it is not long before the operations of departments reassert the dominant centralist approach. Michael Heseltine, when Secretary of State for the Environment (1979-83) held “a bonfire” of 300 controls. Over time new central controls more than replaced the number abolished (CLG Committee 2011, Ev 140).

This departmentalism also exposed the fundamental problem of the superficial consensus of localism. This problem was recognised by the Coalition Government, and efforts were made to institutionalise *their* version of localism to ensure its successful implementation despite this confusion. As one senior civil servant observed, “government became interested in interpreting localism as a specific set of things, not decentralisation as in ‘let’s look at everything we do and think about how we devolve them’” [36]. Of all the central government departments, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (at the time known as the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006-2017), has traditionally been the department that directly concerned local government and central-local relations: “DCLG have always been, kind of, like the champion of decentralisation in government” [32]. The Department was given the lead responsibility to deliver decentralisation during the Coalition Government, and steps were made to empower the department to oversee the implementation of localism. The main manifestation of this was to create two senior posts in both the Cabinet and the civil service: a minister, as well as director, for Decentralisation, based in DCLG. As a CLG Committee Report observed:

DCLG is expected to be influential in and affected by the agenda more than most. ... The crucial role of the DCLG is confirmed by the location within the Department of the first Government Minister for Decentralisation, Rt Hon Greg Clark MP. The Minister’s remit is to encourage decentralisation across all departments and to investigate how effectively they are taking steps to achieve it (CLG Committee 2011, 7-8).

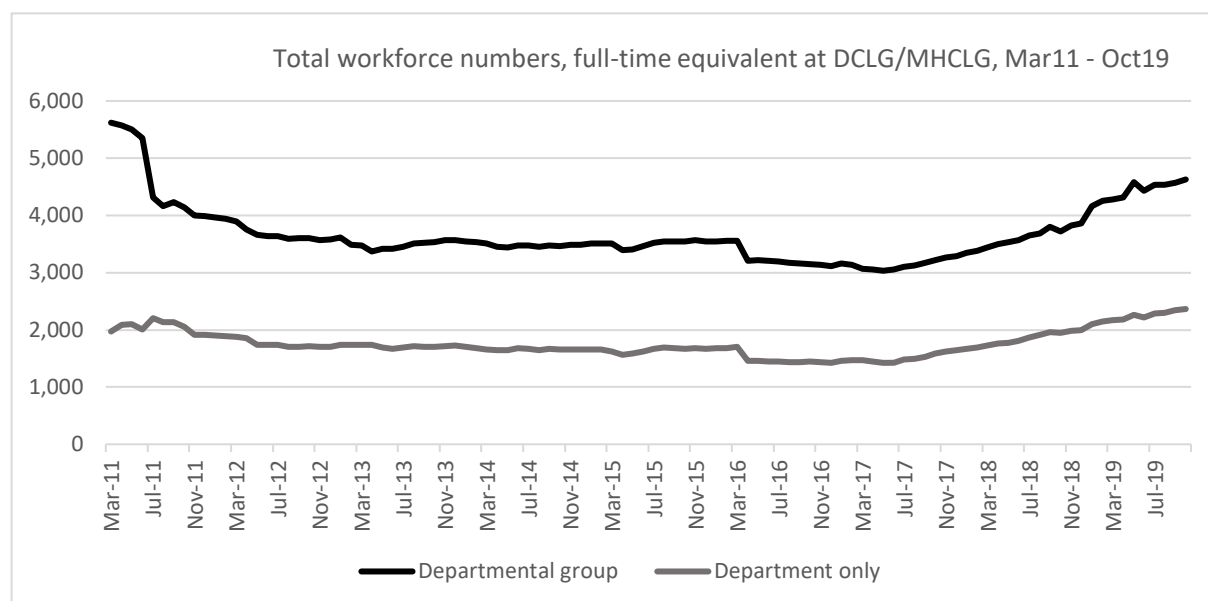
While the first, Greg Clark also came to be the last such minister. He described his role during oral evidence as making sure “that every government department is doing what the coalition set out to do”, to offer departments guidance and best practice, and ultimately influence them to pursue decentralisation (CLG Committee 2011, 18). However, the CLG Committee harboured doubts over whether the Department had sufficient clout to take on this role, and whether such a ministerial post might have been better suited in the Cabinet Office instead (ibid.). Even more drastically, some politicians suggested that, for localism to become institutionalised, a department like DCLG would need to be abolished and its strategic functions on central-local relations subsumed by all other departments as part of a complete rebalancing of such relations (Davey 2004, 61). A less drastic version of this idea was ‘departmental downsizing’, which was set out in the 2010 Spending Review as part of the austerity programme. The review set out “decisive action to cut the cost of central government, with a 34 per cent cut in the administration budgets across the whole of Whitehall and its Arm’s Length Bodies” (HM Treasury 2010, 10). The Department of Communities and Local Government was to make the largest cuts, with the Spending Review setting a -51% cumulative fall to the programme and administration budget of DCLG which amounted to the highest spending cut by far of all central government departments (followed next by the Treasury at -

33%) (HM Treasury 2010, 10). To set an example and show leadership in the Localism agenda, DCLG took the task of downsizing seriously. One previous civil servant in the Department for Communities and Local Government recollected how DCLG was at the forefront of this move: “we decided that we would do ours upfront, so we would have a reorganisation right at the beginning. Um, some really backloaded theirs and kind of kept the same staff group until the-right the end” [36].

The impact on the workforce can be clearly shown in the chart below (Fig. 4.3). The size of the Departmental *group* dropped significantly as it underwent restructuring of its various associated agencies. The motivation for reducing the workforce was, according to an interviewee, to a) show solidarity with local government, where, “there was a clear view by Eric Pickles, probably more so than other Secretaries of State, that if we are putting screws on local government, that we shouldn't ... be shy to show that we were ready to do the same with our own organisation” [36], and to, b) reflect the overall sentiments and dedication to localism of reducing central power; the sentiment was described by a senior official as “we are rubbish at making these decisions as the men and women of Whitehall, and you [local government and communities] ought to be making them yourselves” [36]. As the then Permanent Secretary of DCLG, Sir Bob Kerslake, explained in the Departmental Annual Report in 2011-12: “We are becoming a smaller and stronger Group that uses its resources – people, public money and property assets – as efficiently and creatively as possible to deliver real change” (DCLG 2012a, 4).

The Department (only), over a period of 71 months, eventually reduced its employees to 1,425 (full-time equivalent) by June 2017. However, by October 2019, these numbers had swiftly returned over and above ‘pre-austerity’ employment numbers, to 2,364 FTE in the Department, and a steep rise in the Departmental Group from a low of 3,033 in May 2017 to 4,624 in October 2019 (Fig. 4.3). This policy failure and reversal is likely due to staffing requirements associated with preparations for leaving the EU. This process of re-centralisation as measured by the size of central departments (as I also illustrate later in Fig. 5.1), following a vote to “take back control”, might be considered ironic. As the previous Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Sajid Javid himself argued, “... there is no point in us taking power back from Brussels only to hoard it in Westminster” (DCLG 2016b, 5). It appears then to be the case that a constitutional restructuring and crisis such as that caused by the EU referendum result is one that demands centralisation of power and steering.

Fig. 4.3. Grand total workforce numbers (monthly), full-time equivalent at DCLG/MHCLG March 2011 – December 2018.



Source: *Workforce Management Information, DCLG and MHCLG (MHCLG 2019)*, collated and analysed by the author.

4.3.2. Short-lived or repurposed momentum? Localism to devolution

Localism enjoyed a certain level of momentum in the beginning of the Coalition Government, as recounted by a couple of interviewees. One previous senior civil servant in DCLG recollected how they would see Steve Hilton, David Cameron’s advisor and ‘spin-doctor’ “every week, and we go through the progress of [localism] in No. 10 ... it was pretty central to the things they wanted to do, for a period of time” [36]. The civil servant explained that, when Steve Hilton was still in No. 10, it was a requirement that government departments used ‘Big Society’ and ‘Localism’ as touchstone words in their comms activities, such as issuing press releases and other written documents. However, eventually, “[localism] waned as other things emerged. But I think those first couple of years it was really important to the government” [36]. Despite its role in promoting decentralisation, the Department ran into a conceptual challenge: its commitment to drastically reducing its workforce became a contradiction in terms, as this coincided at a time when it was supposed to take on a leadership and even scrutiny role in central government for ensuring the implementation of localism across the board. This was a pertinent issue, considering that the Department did not inhabit a strong position in Whitehall, both in general, and with regards to promoting localism more specifically.⁴² Therefore, there was some question whether DCLG could eventually gain “the degree of influence which will be necessary to deliver localism consistently across Government” (CLG Committee 2011, 19). Yet, reducing its size relative to other departments potentially deepened its already weak position. For these reasons, the co-operation of all government departments, and in turn the implementation of devolution and decentralisation, became less likely. As Mount (2012, 246)

⁴² Even its White Papers required validation; as was stated in ‘Communities in Control’, “This is a Government, not *just* a Communities and Local Government White Paper” (DCLG 2008, 12, emphasis added).

commented, “In June 2011, a year after the Coalition had come into being, there was little immediate sign of any retreat from ‘top-down government’”.

This was demonstrated by the progress report. One of Greg Clark’s tasks as Minister for Decentralisation was to put together a decentralisation progress report by July 2011. Intended to be an internal report for the Prime Minister, Clark ‘let slip’ he was writing such an assessment and there was pressure from Parliament to publish it (CLG Committee 2013, Ev 1).⁴³ This was eventually published in December 2012 – by this point, Greg Clark had moved post to Cities Minister, a ministerial post to improve coordinative working between the Cities Policy Unit based in BIS and DCLG (later the Cities and Local Growth Unit) and HM Treasury, with the aim on delivering city deals and later devolution deals. The report scored each department against the “six essential actions for decentralisation”, listed in section 6.1.2, as well as scoring the overall implementation of these six actions. While the remit of the report was on service delivery – which justified the exclusion of the Treasury itself for scrutiny – the report exposed that most departments were not making a sufficient effort to incorporate the agenda, confirming a suspicion voiced earlier by the CLG Committee: “There is a risk that only the Department for Communities and Local Government will participate fully and that other departments will be allowed, to varying degrees, to ignore the agenda” (2011, 65). This echoed a report a couple years’ previously, which questioned “the extent to which CLG is taking other government departments with it. If a rebalancing of power is to take place, there has to be consistency and commitment across Whitehall” (CLG Committee 2009, 42). Particularly considering the possibility of a positive bias given that the scores were devised and rated by the government itself, they indicated limited adoption of localism across departments: most departments were scored 3 out of 5, and two departments 2 out of 5, as outlined in Table 4.4 below. The six actions more specifically fared worse, with the four highest only scoring 3 out of 5 in achievement/implementation.

Table 4.6. Total ‘decentralisation’ scores of the departments/actions

| Department | Total score (out of 5) |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department for Communities and Local Government • Department for Education | <p>4</p> <p>“Ambitious decentralisation programme underway – further action required on some issues.”</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Home Office • Cabinet Office • Department of Health • Department for Business, Innovation and Skills • Department for Work and Pensions • Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | <p>3</p> <p>“Significant progress on individual reforms – full programme of reform still in development.”</p> |

⁴³ In an interesting exchange during oral evidence for ‘Decentralisation’ in the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, Greg Clark argued how the report was never intended to become public; “It is an unusual report, Chair [Clive Betts MP], as you know. It was an entirely personal assessment to the Prime Minister that you caused to be put into the public domain, so it is not as if it were a report from an inquiry that was commissioned, to which the Government responds in a formal way” (CLG Committee 2013, Ev 1).

| | |
|--|---|
| • Department of Energy and Climate Change | |
| • Department for Transport | |
| • Ministry of Justice | 2 |
| • Department for Culture, Media and Sport | “Major reforms not yet at implementation stage, but opportunities are under active consideration” |
| Six Actions | Total score (out of 5) |
| • Lift the burden of bureaucracy | |
| • Empower communities to do things their way | |
| • Diversify the supply of public services | 3 |
| • Open up government to public scrutiny | |
| • Strengthen accountability to local people | |
| • Increase local control of public finances | 2 |

Source: DCLG (2012b)

It seemed that the implementation and institutionalisation of localism within the processes and priorities of central government departments had largely stalled, with the momentum by 2012 already slowing down drastically. As one interviewee argued; “within months of passing the Localism Act and putting in place the very good balanced national planning policy framework, the old instincts – and these aren’t about Conservatives or Labour – the old centralist instincts returned” [22]. The ministerial post for Decentralisation disappeared when Greg Clark became Minister for Cities in September 2012 – this shift was symbolic of a more general shift from localism to devolution. The shift in DCLG/MHCLG’s stated policy priorities / strategic objectives (as given in the Department’s annual reports), similarly evolved: from an emphasis on ‘radical’ redistribution and decentralisation of power in the years 2010/11 to 2013/14, to instead economic growth and housing supply from 2014/15 onwards (DCLG 2011; 2012a; 2013b; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017b; MHCLG 2018).

As already discussed, it was clear that localism required the backing of the more heavy-weight departments. Most important was HM Treasury, a department traditionally associated with perpetuating a centralist approach to governance. However, as a senior civil servant in a central government department recalled, when the Coalition Government came in there seemed to be a “really solid indication of a switch in the Treasury view” towards decentralisation. They observed in internal Treasury meetings how decentralisation became “the orthodoxy”, the extent to which that anyone who challenged the idea of decentralisation was “shut down very quickly” [32]. This buy-in from the centre of the civil service enabled at the time a more rapid roll-out of the overall decentralist agenda. This buy-in however also meant a shift in focus which occurred gradually from localism to devolution, and a temporary transfer of policy responsibility from DCLG to the Cabinet Office when the Cities Policy Unit was created, closely with the Treasury. This confirmed earlier suspicions that DCLG did not have the leverage, influence and power in central government to take on the decentralisation that mattered (see also Gash, Randall and Sims 2014, 21). This was not well-received in the Department as one interviewee, a head of a local government thinktank, recounted:

Localism was out of DCLG; however, devolution came out of Treasury initially, and moved back to DCLG after the 2015 election. I remember talking to a director at DCLG at the time who was furious and just said, ‘what the f*** am I here for? This is all ... this is what we are meant to do. If we are here for anything it is for negotiation of localism and local power and it's been done across the road’ ... that sort of crucial period in 2014 when the Manchester deals were done and it all really kind of kicked off, that was George Osborne and that was Treasury there. ... I think it's a reflection of the Treasury being a big powerful department, DCLG is not. DCLG is kind of at the back of the queue. At that stage it was still literally at the far end of Victoria Street. Kind of isolated. I think George Osborne was a very powerful figure of government ... and the problem was that meant that one of the consequences of that was that the whole devolution agenda was framed entirely on terms of growth [43].

The Unit was tasked with negotiating city deals, but later, as city deals evolved into devolution deals, the unit evolved into the Cities and Local Growth Unit and worked across three departments: Cabinet Office, DCLG and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (CLG Committee 2016, 7). The difference between city deals and devolution deals was largely related to governance. While city deals were originally aimed at LEPs, funding for a devolution deal was largely granted on the basis of there being an established combined authority (a collaborative of neighbouring local councils) and an elected metro mayor. While the Localism Act had already brought in the right to elect city mayors by referendum, this proved to be, according to a senior civil servant, a ‘false start’, with only one out of ten referendums resulting in a local mayoral system [38]. The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 can then be said to be a second attempt at reforming local governance. Yet, as the interviewee indicated above, this agenda tended to be framed around ‘growth’ rather than democratic innovation or accountable governance per se.

Given this dominance of devolution, it is no wonder one of my interviewees – a senior civil servant – described localism as “a blip” [32]. A local councillor was similarly sceptical, arguing how “most British legislation is a ragbag and the Localism Act ... I think it's a largely irrelevant piece of legislation” [06]. The similarity of rhetoric between devolution and localism indicated continuation in policy agenda to decentralise power, however as previously mentioned, devolution had much stronger roots in economic policy, and was steered from Cabinet Office and the Treasury rather than DCLG. As one interviewee, a senior member of the LGA, observed:

George Osborne largely was a fan for devolution, but not completely 100% sold on it. And because Greg was, and because they got on really well, there were some legs in it. But now we've got a Chancellor who doesn't believe in it. We've got a new Secretary of State who's ... it's not his bag either, really. He comes from a pedigree of centralised control. The impetus behind it is stopping. We're seeing that with devolution deals. There's hardly any work being done on devolution deals now [43].

Here, we can see devolution might be suffering from a similar fate to ‘localism’. On the one hand, if one considers the devolution agenda to be a continuation, or a revitalisation of the

localism agenda, the Conservative Government under David Cameron, elected in 2015, demonstrated perhaps a surprisingly strong and durable commitment to the normative values of localism. Yet, even here it has been overcast with the loss of key advocates, including George Osborne, and a shift of priorities, particularly following the change in party leader and a new Conservative Government under Theresa May following the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the snap election in June 2017: “now we’re in a bit of a sort of stasis point where Brexit is going to wash everything away” [39]. Here, while the first annual report on devolution 2015/16 was published in the autumn of 2016 with a special foreword from the Secretary of State Sajid Javid, the second annual report for 2016/17, published unceremoniously and many months late in January 2018, to confirm that in that year, the Government had not reached any new devolution agreements. Only one devolution area has been confirmed since the report.⁴⁴ The political impetus, and the promise of localism, has been overshadowed by the pressing question of Brexit⁴⁵. This empirical observation again highlights the tension between localism’s normative character and the difficulties seeing these norms put into public policy. It also emphasises the deeply political character and origins of localism to which I will further explore in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.4. A case study on Neighbourhood Planning

This section elaborates on two parts of this chapter. First, sections 4.1 and 4.2 define localism in relation to its manifestations in policy and practice. What has yet not been discussed is that a major manifestation of localism is neighbourhood planning, which has supported a tangible communication and description of what localism is, even to the extent that the two are sometimes used interchangeably. Neighbourhood planning comprised one of the most significant elements of the overall Big Society election promise, as given by the Conservative Party Green Paper ‘Open Source Planning’ (Conservative Party 2010)⁴⁶, as well the as legislative and policy agenda of localism, as given by the Localism Bill itself. Second, this section elaborates on section 4.3 which considered the implementation and institutionalisation of localism. Neighbourhood planning is important to this discussion because it is one of the few – if only – elements *left* of the Localism Act. As one interviewee observed:

The only part of Big Society that remains is Localism, the only part of Localism that remains with any real substance, credibility, people understanding it or whatever, is neighbourhood plans. And neighbourhood development orders are virtually dead, community right to build virtually dead. Neighbourhood plans are motoring... With lots of advisors by the way. But they are still supported, and in principle a great idea [43].

⁴⁴ North of Tyne Combined Authority was formed on the 2nd November 2018.

⁴⁵ A later addition here to briefly comment on recent political events: given the election of Boris Johnson with a strong Conservative majority in December 2019, brought through a voter shift in the northern ex-Labour heartlands, there appears to be a strong impetus back towards devolution in policy and in the civil service more broadly.

⁴⁶ The paper was authored by John Howell MP, in whose constituency (Henley) one of the first neighbourhood plans (Thame) was situated (Brownill 2017, 24).

The government attempted to reconcile the conceptual obscurity of localism by circumscribing what it meant through some highly specific regulatory frameworks: neighbourhood planning can be considered to be such a demarcation. A discussion on this conceptual reconciliation and implementation is therefore incomplete without a discussion on neighbourhood planning. Therefore, a condensed case study on the policy of neighbourhood planning is useful to highlight the different strategies, monitoring, and incentives that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (formerly DCLG) used to implement the policy, as well as how local actors reacted to it.

4.4.1. The link between planning and democracy

Along with certain community rights, neighbourhood planning was a policy that sought to devolve power beyond existing representational structures, below local government level. Wills (2016a, 164) sees it as a form of institution building at the local level, creating new opportunities for local community engagement, however, with questionable implementation given diverging community capacities across the country. According to an interviewee [21] and a recently published book by Steve Hilton (Chief Strategist for David Cameron, and widely considered the person behind the localism agenda) one of the inspirations of localism and more specifically its ideas on community rights, local referendums, and neighbourhood planning, came from Swiss '*Landsgemeinden*', or cantonal assemblies, which oversee open-air assemblies and localised referendums. This idea has emerged through the influence of Think Tanks (in particular, Policy Exchange), which had framed the Swiss and German model as a way of rethinking the problem of housebuilding [21]. However, while Hilton argued that neighbourhood planning became "one of the most surprisingly effective policies enacted during the time I worked in government" (Hilton 2018, 178), my interviewee, a senior civil servant who had worked closely on developing the idea, argued that neighbourhood planning "ended up being an almighty compromise" between what the politicians and strategists (Oliver Letwin and Steve Hilton) wanted, and what was practical [21]. Given this, the civil servant conceded that neighbourhood planning ended up being fudged: it diverged from its own claims of democratising the planning system, since in practice "there's not a whole lot you can do in a neighbourhood plan" – in particular, it cannot overrule local or national plans [21]. The result was described as window-dressing and bureaucracy [21].

Generally speaking, the appeal of democratising and decentralising the planning and housing sector can be seen in relation to a longer historic pattern of reform, where much of the rhetoric and reform concerning democratic renewal has targeted the planning system over the past few decades starting most famously with the Skeffington Committee Report in 1969 and its influence on the legislative agenda. As one interviewee indicated, this theme has been particularly recurring over a longer period of time:

... if you read Hansard on the 1909 Bill, or the 1918 Bill, or the 1932 Bill, or the 1947 Bill, or the 1971 Bill, or the 1990 Bill, people say the same thing over and over again. Planning isn't working, and it needs to be fixed, and here's our view for it! And it's an insoluble problem of trying to make everybody live together happily. Planning is not going to solve that, but politicians always think that they can [17].

The coincidence of planning with rhetoric of democratic renewal is likely due to the tensions and emotions that arise from local development, where “planning is often on the forefront of local complaints” [11]. In particular, the tension between the local unpopularity of development projects and national imperatives to intervene and regulate land markets for strategic economic purposes. This tension makes planning a highly political activity which attempts to reconcile these interests. As Baroness Hanham, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, argued in the Localism Bill’s second reading in the House of Lords:

The trend towards central control has been *particularly damaging in the planning system* and the Government believe that it is now time to introduce far greater democratic and local control. The regional strategies, which set housing targets for different parts of the country and then had to be implemented by local authorities, will be abolished (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 c150, emphasis added).

Planning in general is a public service area which has seen repeated reforms struggling to reconcile these pressures towards centralisation. On the one hand, the pressure to centralise arises from the fact that local communities often do not directly benefit from large scale housing or infrastructure projects, and therefore, if decisions are too localised, development would be resisted (this phenomenon is often referred to as NIMBYism – ‘Not In My Back Yard’). This centralisation has also emerged in connection with a process of liberalising planning which has sped up in recent years. A previous civil servant who worked on planning policy in DCLG remarked on the Treasury’s free-market bias, and its tendency to attribute housing supply issues to the planning system [21]. Therefore, a dominant approach to planning reform has been either to liberalise and deregulate the system so that fewer types of development require planning permission, or, to “take the decision centrally somewhere, away from where the opposition is going to be” [21]. On the other hand, such centralisation can overload the government with the politically precarious task of mediation and conflict resolution. This problem was described by Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones (1997), where the Conservative government in the 1980s, upon removing local plan-led planning, struggled to reconcile the conflict that emerged between two groups of its lobbying and voter base: that between the development industry that sought to build large new settlements in rural areas, and the ‘shire Conservative Party supporters’ who opposed such development [02]. This enduring tension within the Party has been described by Inch (2018, 586-7) as one between a ‘market liberal’ ideology and a ‘localist protectionism’. Considering this context, policy innovations to democratise the planning system, such as neighbourhood planning, can be seen as a way to reconcile and depoliticise this contention between communities’ opposition to house building and central responsibility. This point was made during interview by the senior civil servant:

... what you also get, politically, is the backlash to [centralisation]. And so, you then get a whole load of initiatives largely in parallel, seeking to, you know, increase control of the local community, or incentivise the local community, to make the right decision. And this is where you get quite a lot of smoke and mirrors, because a lot of it will be talking about local community control, but while at the same time what is actually being produced is actually making it more centralised. Which is why the planning system is so complicated. Nobody actually

understands it anymore. And it's almost sort of done on purpose, because, you know, if you had something that was clear to everybody, it would be quite hard to talk about planning in terms of local community control, while you're doing something else at the same time. So, that level of confusion is probably quite helpful to some people [21].

In this case, neighbourhood planning aimed to give local people a) more say over the character of development through creating neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood development orders, and b) financial incentives, including in this case 25% of the total developer contributions to the neighbourhood forum of an adopted neighbourhood plan (community infrastructure levy, CIL). These concessions and powers sought to legitimise and justify a policy agenda of housebuilding, as well as transfer the tension that had existed between communities and central government downwards. Here, observers note how tension and conflict between communities and their local councils grew – particularly with regards to the CIL for neighbourhood forums. This created great concern amongst local officials and councillors [04, 21, 24]. As the civil servant, pointed out, “I think it's fair to say most local authorities would regard neighbourhood plans as at best a pain in the arse. And at worse, actually counterproductive to what it is they're trying to do on planning” [21]. As one local government official observed:

There is a concern about Neighbourhood plans and CIL, just in that when we negotiate our Section 106 or secure CIL, there isn't enough money to fund the basic infrastructure that it's going towards anyway, and then you get the neighbourhood plans come in top-slice up to 25% of it to put it into play equipment or, which, maybe, very nice for the local community, but then you don't have enough money for the school ... but we got to provide the schools, and so we- we then just end up having to fund them, and so I think there is a- we have some issues with the policy [04].

This idea of participation, of giving power to the people, has inherent populist elements, and as one interviewee, a politician involved in the Localism Act, indicated, neighbourhood planning as a policy was pushed through despite hostility from local government. In fact, the conflict described above was not accidental, as one interviewee, a junior minister at the time, described how several provisions were devised for the sole purpose of limiting the ability of local government to obstruct or sabotage neighbourhood plans coming forward in their local area:

... councils were pretty hostile to neighbourhood plans. What they wanted, I mean, what everybody wanted, devolution, is that they wanted to devolve down as far as they are. They don't want to devolve it anymore. ... There're several provisions in there that were designed to make it more difficult for them to sabotage neighbourhood plans [37].

This demonstrates how, since Skeffington, the process of democratising planning has become increasingly complex and some might argue less effective. Scalar tensions are an inevitable part of the process and are sooner displaced than resolved through policy interventions. This tension will be further explored in relation to the implementation of neighbourhood planning.

4.4.2. The implementation of neighbourhood planning

In terms of the policy creation and implementation process behind neighbourhood planning, the first point to note was the attempt to disrupt the planning team within the Department for Communities and Local Government. A couple of interviewees described how a team, separate to the planning officials, was created. Mostly comprised of policy advisors (rather than trained planners), the team operated close to the Secretary of State in DCLG. As one of the directors recollected: “we built a team which had some planners in, but it was intended to be disruptive” [36]. This disruptiveness, it was argued, created the space to shift attitudes and change the culture within the department with regards to housing policy, where the traditional belief held that greater local control would entail less house building (NIMBYism). With this change, government sought to reimagine civil servants as “bureaucracy busters”: as enablers, tasked with supporting communities (Wills 2016a, 33-4; HM Government 2010b, 7). As the same interviewee argued:

If you asked the department – up until that government came in – if you’d asked the most senior folk, the way to get more housing built would’ve not been allowed- to allow communities to be able to set out what their own plans are, because we would’ve assumed that all of them would say less houses, thank you! ... that would’ve been the default culture amongst planners in the country, amongst planners in national government, and in the planning function, we were this renegade group of people who believed that actually if you asked people - gave them control over where / what kind of houses that might be built, what kinds of places they may actually put their hand up and say ‘yay’. So, early take up demonstrated that we were building more houses than were in local plans. So, so it felt very counterintuitive, but maybe the ministerial priority, they didn’t trust - inverted commas – “the planners” to just grab hold of that, they wanted some people slightly outside the planning system, but had planners advising them [36].

While this disruptive approach inevitably ran out of steam, with the neighbourhood planning team a couple years later becoming subsumed into the planning directorate within the Department, what is also notable is the continued interest in the policy and its implementation. This demonstrated the Conservative Party’s commitment to the idea, despite three changes of government and the near-continuous change of ministers in MHCLG.⁴⁷ From this perspective, neighbourhood planning has been, despite expectations, a slow-burner rather than a quick disruption and has taken years to mature. By December 2018, there were 700 plans which had progressed to the referendum stage (MHCLG 2018c, 5), which contrasted against the expected numbers put forward in the neighbourhood planning impact assessment from January 2011, which estimated that by 2018,⁴⁸ there would be 2,670 neighbourhood plans in total (DCLG 2011a). Neighbourhood planning’s slower than expected take-up (see also Parker and Salter 2017, 481), and the problems experienced by users which could explain this lag, has evidently been a concern of ministers in DCLG, which have overseen regular ‘tinkering’ of its legal and policy framework. Since the Localism Act 2011, which provided the statutory regime for

⁴⁷ Since May 2010, there has been four different Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government, and eight different Ministers of State for Housing and Local Government / Planning.

⁴⁸ The report states “Year 7”, which I take to be 2018, assuming that Year 1 is 2012.

neighbourhood planning, and the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 which made provisions for that regime, there have been eight regulations⁴⁹ amending and adding to the regulatory framework, as well as an entirely new statute, the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017.

In terms of significance, one interviewee, a planner and community consultation specialist, indicated “how neighbourhood planning, however successful it is, is really only small beer”, adding “we’re dealing with piffling little numbers about that, so it has made a difference at that level, and at the same time, developers are still challenging local plans, even neighbourhood plans at the moment, with larger scale development of the sort which accumulatively could have an impact on large numbers, whereas neighbourhood planning” [27]. They added, “it’s given people ... more control over things that matter less and less. So, they don’t bother themselves with the big issues” [27]. Further, legislatively, neighbourhood planning, despite the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017, was not being supported in a way which was deemed necessary. The conflict between communities and local government, as mentioned previously, had not been alleviated but rather had led to growing hindrance for neighbourhood planning forums. As one shadow minister argued: “for most people involved in neighbourhood planning the really critical question was ducked in the Housing and Planning Act, and is not in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, which is: what is the authority given to neighbourhood plans if there’s any question or conflict with a local plan?” [22]. Indeed, interviewees indicated a potentially growing problem, that communities would become increasingly dissatisfied with the neighbourhood planning process and the political implications of that. As they added; “the risk, if this isn’t resolved, is that a lot of people ... feel they’re developing neighbourhood plans under false pretences. If all the work they go into, it simply isn’t discounted or not fully counted in their local planning process” [22]. As another local government and community specialist observed:

... what happens either by design or by accident is that ordinary people off the street volunteer and want to get involved and then discover that they’re being asked to take part in these dark bureaucratic exercises. You know, planning and priority setting and paper writing and going through all these utterly tedious pointless meetings that go around, you know, with loads and loads of process and lots and lots of acronyms and they think, well, this is not what I wanted to do, what I wanted to do was to help make something in my place. And so they drop out [18].

This discussion of the insignificance of neighbourhood planning indicates the role of localism in addressing and reflecting a knee-jerk reaction amongst the electorate. Stakeholders have outlined how there is a demand for greater empowerment in principle when voters are asked

⁴⁹ The Neighbourhood Planning (Prescribed Dates) Regulations 2012; The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendums) Regulations 2012; The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendums) (Amendment) Regulations 2013; The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendums) (Amendment) Regulations 2014; The Neighbourhood Planning (General) (Amendment) Regulations 2015; The Neighbourhood Planning (General) and Development Management Procedure (Amendment) Regulations 2016; The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendums) (Amendment) Regulations 2016; The Neighbourhood Planning (General) and Development Management Procedure (Amendment) Regulations 2017.

outright, but there is less energy to actually act upon such empowerment. In this sense, there is a tendency to “underestimate the ambivalence in the electorate on the issue of decentralisation” (Mackintosh 1974, 118). Those who did participate in neighbourhood planning in the area studied (Elephant and Walworth, London) were sooner to ‘drop out’ than actively lead or join a protest movement to voice their grievances of having had their time wasted. If true for other neighbourhood forums, this makes localism an easy promise: it is populist in that it reflects a diffuse appetite for the principle of democracy, but the political consequences of such promises are low because of a common ambivalence amongst citizens to participate once being empowered to do so (Parvin 2018a; 2018b). At the same time, policy can be effective if it targets the sub-section of the population that might otherwise participate in an ‘unruly’ manner (e.g. protests, judicial review, FOI requests, illegal squatting, planning objections, etc.). This is one of the central theses of those researchers applying post-political theory in the study of neighbourhood planning. As Lord Beecham argued in the second reading of the Localism Bill:

The Government's approach seems in many respects to be driven by a belief in an apparently inexhaustible appetite on the part of citizens to vote – for elected mayors or police commissioners, or in referendums called by a fraction of the electorate, a neighbourhood forum, or a handful of councillors. This assumed insatiable thirst for Athenian-style democracy – and Mr Pickles is, after all, only two letters short of Pericles – is matched in ministerial minds by a demand on the part of the public directly to manage local services. Let me be clear. There is, and must always be, space in a mixed economy of provision for voluntary and community organisations as service providers. Their commitment and capacity to innovate enrich civil society. But most of those engaged in the sector acknowledge that they complement the statutory services and neither wish, nor expect, to replace them (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728, c152).

Indeed, this ambivalence has long been a challenge for the legitimacy of local democracy more generally, particularly given low local election turnouts. With regards to the Localism Act, the relatively small numbers of neighbourhood planning meant that there was certainly no flood of neighbourhood plans⁵⁰ to overwhelm the system and significantly impact on housebuilding. In fact, most of the community rights of the Act have been used sparingly across the country (CLG Committee 2015). Certainly, ambivalence in this case has been strengthened by the complexity of the right of neighbourhood planning, described in passing by a civil servant as the least inaccessible of the community rights available. However, while a relatively significant amount of central government funding to neighbourhood forums to hire planning consultants and cover other costs (£23m for 2018-2022) and additional funding for local authorities may have increased accessibility somewhat, it is not a solution for ambivalence. Given these issues outlined with regards to the implementation of neighbourhood planning, one is led to suggest that the policy failed. This would be to assume that the policy sought to democratise planning, which is not necessarily, or certainly solely, the case: arguably the biggest policy issue ministers and officials were seeking to solve was, as explored above, how promote housebuilding while

⁵⁰ This is certainly reflective of a bottleneck where the number of neighbourhood forums (the official community group responsible for drafting the plan) far outweigh neighbourhood plans (the formal end-stage of the neighbourhood planning process: the planning document that needs to be adopted formally by the local planning authority).

reducing conflict. From this view, the limited implementation of neighbourhood planning indicates potential success, particularly considering that in those few areas which *have* developed a plan have, in accordance with the 2011 Act, provided for more housing than would otherwise have been planned for within the neighbourhood planning boundary (Locality 2018, 30). The following section will explore this depoliticising effect of neighbourhood planning by comparing the Coin Street model with a local neighbourhood planning forum in Elephant and Castle.

4.4.3. 'Prescribed' versus 'genuine' localism? Neighbourhood planning in Southwark

The authenticity of intentions and the significance of localism and neighbourhood planning in relation to its implementation has been explored. Southwark, chosen due to its history of community activism that has more or less continuously existed there since the 1960s if not earlier, and the significance of Coin Street, offers a mini-case study on this: a contrast between what was perceived to be a 'prescribed' form of localism to what was a 'authentic' localism. Interviewees based there who have lived through the period of Coin Street were often hesitant to see neighbourhood planning (which had been undertaken in several nearby neighbourhood areas) as an empowering policy for the community:

... the neighbourhood plan has to conform with the local plan. So, what you can actually put in it, that's a whole battle in itself getting the planners to accept, you know, the demands that we might make for, whatever it is, the housing site or almost anything. They'll say; 'well it has to conform', so that's a whole battle in itself. Whereas the residents' plan that was drawn up in 1975 – we didn't care or give a stuff what the plan said. We said, 'we think it should be housing', and then got elected on the GLC, and when the site came on the market, we bought it. So, we didn't wait for the authority to designate it, we just got on with it. *And we used a different route, so to that extent that route is still available to people ...* I mean it's taken us three or nearly four years to get to where we are. So, it's a very, very long process; [Neighbourhood Planning has] sapped people's energy to, you know, 'are we ever going to get to the end of it?' [24].

Here, the interviewee describes 'using a different route', which, 'is still available to people'. This route is one of local politics rather than administrative process. Here, despite the GLC's status as a metropolitan/regional government (which some would argue is too remote to promote localism and local democracy), the conditions that led to Coin Street was a bottom-up process that was heavily dependent upon local activists joining the formal political process as councillors. Over the 1970s, the Labour Party in certain inner-city London councils had been influenced and radicalised by the election of local councillors who had entered politics through grassroots community activism (several of whom, including the interviewee quoted above, were directly involved in campaigning for Coin Street) and had been critical of their own local authorities. For some, the next step was to be elected onto the Greater London Council to influence government on a larger scale. This grassroots and activist presence came to influence GLC policy direction: as one of those councillors argued, "Coin Street simply wouldn't have happened without those Councillors in place" [15]. Following the Labour Party's election win in 1981 and the appointment of Ken Livingstone as leader, the GLC embarked on its

‘Community Areas Policy’. In 1984, after more than a decade of community-led challenges to office development on the South Bank, the GLC transferred its ownership of the area to the Coin Street Community Builders, enabling the community-based scheme to go ahead.

Given this history, it is perhaps unsurprising that neighbourhood planning or localism was generally viewed negatively amongst interviewees based in Southwark, who seemed generally agreed that it did not offer added value - certainly in relation to intended outcomes. The empirical data falls in line with the academic consensus, where researchers tend to see little direct or immediate benefits for communities participating in neighbourhood planning, who face difficulties in doing so (Parker and Salter 2017; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2013, 2015; Parker *et al.*, 2014, 2015, 2017). Numerous publications on neighbourhood planning do, however, indicate other key benefits, as outlined earlier in section 2.1.1 in the sense of bringing positive change, institution building, and improving community organising, often as an indirect result of neighbourhood planning (see also Locality 2018). These indirect benefits however have too been questioned: “whilst participants are attempting to use neighbourhood planning to exploit the spaces available to influence planning policy and local agendas more generally, there is mounting evidence that the final outcomes are being rescripted or re-rationalised” (Parker, Lynn and Wargent 2017, 461).

It is in this context, and perhaps similarly to the Coin Street case, where communities facing planning problems seem inclined to instead use other, either more formal (consultation on the Local Plan or legal challenge) or more political (protests and elections), channels of participation, indicating that the limitations of the policy is fairly clear to stakeholders. For example, the efforts of neighbourhood planning forums could easily – and had been – absorbed into the general processes of local planning policy and control. As described by a senior planner in Southwark Council: “you can just bypass localism. You don’t need it” [29]. Rather, existing local democratic and local government structures could be potentially used more quickly and effectively to achieve the same or similar ends. They described how, when a group wanted to pass a neighbourhood development order, the council suggested, “why don’t you just apply for planning permission and we’ll approve it?” [29]. Another anecdote was when a business-led neighbourhood forum wanted to make a neighbourhood plan:

... why don’t you actually canvas your members, prepare a manifesto, if you like, of what your members, the businesses large and small in this neighbourhood want to see achieved, and then you bring it to us and we see which bits of that we can adopt into our local plan anyway. We’re preparing a new local plan. We’ll be consulting you. Tell us what you want to see in the local plan and it’s highly likely that we’ll just agree with you and put it in our local plan, saving you all that trouble of preparing a plan yourself, going to an examination in public, us having to prepare a ballot, a complicated ballot that gives businesses and residents a vote, voting to have it agreed, when we can just shortcut that and put it in our plan. Why don’t you just do it like that? And they said, ‘yeah, we’ll do it like that’ [29].

Certainly, the Southwark experience shows the processes of activism and co-option in a nutshell (e.g. Brownill 2009; Brownill and Carpenter 2007; Geddes 2006; Olsson 2009; Taylor 2007). The evolution of certain non-state actors in the policy space of community planning further

provides an example of metagovernance, and the shifting nature of hierarchical governance (Bell and Hindmoor 2009). Table 4.5 shows the historic events leading up to when the charity Locality was contracted by DCLG/MHCLG (one of very many) to offer consultation services to neighbourhood forums and other community organisations. It seems in a place like Southwark, ‘localism’ has gone full circle in terms of its various manifestations: from the central-funding of the ‘Southwark Community Project’ (under the ‘Urban Aid’ programme set up by the Home Office) in the 1960s, to its evolution into a planning activist group in 1970s which eventually culminated in Coin Street. Following these bottom-up successes, as one interviewee described, the Coin Street experience led to the creation of Development Trust Associations which was developed across the UK, eventually being rebranded in 2011 as the charity and members-organisation ‘Locality’. Seen from this perspective, the old world of local activism, evolved into a modern form (a national-level charity) has converged in space – in Southwark Borough – with the new world of localism. Here, Locality has been active in advising neighbourhood forums in the area, not far from Coin Street, including the Elephant and Walworth Neighbourhood Forum I studied previously for my master’s research. There are some contrasts here. Coin Street had radical origins which, while kickstarted by state-sponsorship, combined activism and political process in metropolitan government to achieve community ownership. The origins of neighbourhood planning were in contrast top-down, emerging from an election manifesto drafted by Steve Hilton, and implemented through DCLG. It is perhaps an ironic turn of events where neighbourhood planning forums are being advised by an organisation which had originally evolved from Coin Street but now funded by central government. This is perhaps a far cry from the Coin Street model, which, as explored in the Introduction, is rare, and requires political insiders and sustained activism. Here, one might ungenerously argue that Locality’s role in supporting a centralist, charity-funnelled approach,⁵¹ as a charity commissioned by DCLG/MHCLG, encourages communities to spend inordinate amounts of time and effort into creating a development framework, and within the confines such legal documents offer, rather than participate in a more radical community-led development (like that of Coin Street itself).

This conclusion however ignores more recent policy developments, where funding of £163m from Homes England (Community Housing Fund) has been made available for community-led housing.⁵² This shift in emphasis – and funding – from neighbourhood planning to neighbourhood *development*, would be a positive move in favour of empowerment in the housing market, but the significance of this shift remains to be seen. This further opens up questions on the extent to which the planning system can be meaningfully democratised, particularly in an environment where the balance of power has increasingly shifted away from planning towards developers and landowners. Another, perhaps more fundamental reason, may be because, as a senior planner argued, “The planning system is just an administrative

⁵¹ The funding given to Locality, and other similar charities to promote neighbourhood planning and community rights in local areas, is not insignificant, but it is neither wholly transparent. Monthly data of DCLG/MHCLG expenditure over £250 is accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dclg-spending-over-250#2011>. After spending a rather inordinate amount of time adding up the (often several) monthly payments to Locality, from May 2011 to May 2015, I calculated that Locality had received £15.7m (£15,667,806) over this five-year period alone.

⁵² <https://locality.org.uk/services-tools/funding/#land>

framework. That's all it is; a planning system doesn't make any decisions or do anything. It just sets the rules within which you operate" [08].

Table 4.7. Southwark community activism - a circular evolution and convergence between the national and local

| Year | Key events: the history of 'Locality' |
|--------------|---|
| 1969 | Home Office sets up 'Urban Aid', which funds 12 Community Development Projects, including the Southwark Community Project. |
| 1970s | Influenced by the radical agenda of the time, the project evolves to focus on activism in planning, becoming the North Southwark Community Development Group (see Wills 2016a, 84). |
| 1980s | Councillors in Southwark, standing for election through their community activist work (including as activists in the North Southwark Community Development Group), eventually become councillors in the Greater London Council and lobby for the purchase and sale of the Coin Street area to the community, which evolves into the development trust 'Coin Street Community Builders'. |
| 1993 | The Development Trust Association (DTA) was formed by the community in Coin Street to help set up similar development trusts across the UK. |
| 2011 | The DTA merged with the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres, and adopted a new name, 'Locality'. |
| 2011 onwards | Locality has had a presence in the community as government contracted consultants (contracted by DCLG/MHCLG) to provide specialist advice for neighbourhood planning forums, including forums in Southwark such as the Elephant and Walworth Neighbourhood Forum, develop their neighbourhood plans. |

This brief case study of Southwark demonstrates the conceptual contradictions and longer-term dilution and formulisation of the principles that preceded localism and neighbourhood planning.

Conclusion

This chapter has elaborated on the question of how localism was concretised through the Localism Act, and how it has evolved since. Despite the seemingly practical materialisation of localism in the form of an Act of Parliament, it remained unclear whether the Act and the rights it created were tangible and practical in the sense of implementation and accessibility. As demonstrated by the extensive political debate on the Localism Bill, localism does not lend itself to a tangible straightforward policy agenda, and the practical experiences of the Coalition Government's policies has demonstrated how attempting to legislate and implement localism leads to contestation, heightened expectations, and institutional barriers. The main difficulties and conflicts of creating the Act as well as implementing it can be listed as follows:

- The consensus surrounding localism was shown to be skin-deep as very few stakeholders seemed agreed on what it meant.
- Institutional barriers and cultures prevented DCLG from taking a leadership role in implementing localism across central government.

- Neighbourhood Planning has become one of the few community rights provisions of the Act still actively in use, yet its take-up has been far lower than expected, and its significance has been questioned.
- As shown by the experience in Southwark, the authenticity of neighbourhood planning as a form of localism or community empowerment has come into question.

The chapter has explored how efforts to bring a manifesto commitment of decentralisation into law was far from straightforward, bringing to the fore the inherent contestations of the localist consensus itself. Localism was evidently a fraught concept that was, to an extent, created by ministers in DCLG at the time, and stakeholders were quick to insert onto it whatever intuitive or internal principles and opinions they already had on empowerment and local democracy. Here, historical approaches in policy, as I outline in section 4.1, influenced how the Coalition Government's Localism came to be formed. This word which provoked such idealistic associations amongst so many was in contrast being operationalised for the purposes of some highly specific reform. There were also institutional barriers with regards to implementing localism, given the position of DCLG relative to other, more powerful departments, and how the department was hit by extensive cuts while also expected to provide leadership on decentralisation through its ministerial post. Finally, with regards to neighbourhood planning specifically, this chapter explored more specifically the challenges of sustaining change in the face of changing priorities. Neighbourhood planning did not, despite what had been envisioned, oversee significant changes to either planning or housing.

The energy and consistency required over time to push these agendas forward is not one that the political system as it currently stands is capable of sustaining. Regular changes of governments and seen the regular shift in policy agendas and the civil service's priorities shift rapidly, even where the party in government remains the same. There is therefore a need to further explore why localism, despite these difficulties, was pushed forward. The policy has resulted in little political benefit to the government in power, nor, more importantly, the citizens it was intended to help and empower. From here, the thesis will delve more deeply in the question of 'why', despite these difficulties, we have seen localism emerging and re-emerging as a political promise and policy agenda. The following chapter will explore this perspective mainly from the viewpoint of governments and the enduring issue of economic policy and strategy, to which I argue localism is inextricably linked.

Chapter 5: Strategic localism and state intervention, 1964 to 2017

From the discussion so far, we have seen that localism was and is contested and difficult to put into policy and practice. Given this, it is natural to ask, why promise it in the first place? Localism, from this perspective, seemed to be a cause for a lot of unnecessary bother, in terms of opposition challenges and heightened expectations, where its fairly insignificant outcomes did not reflect the efforts and mobilisation within the civil service to develop and implement its policies. In other words, why would a government put itself in this position of being unfavourably viewed by overseeing a policy that was likely to be disappointing? These final two chapters take on an analytical approach to exploring localism, the first (the current chapter) follows on from section 2.4 to explore empirically current and historical motivations and pressures towards localism in policy from the viewpoint of government, and its need for legitimisation. The emphasis of this chapter is the concept of ‘centralisation’. Centralisation, or centralism, is an enduring feature of British politics, where localism has emerged periodically as a critique of such spatial imbalance of power. As mentioned previously, localism is difficult to define, and seems often to be simply used as a shorthand for ‘the opposite of centralism’. That being said, the critique of centralism does suggest that localist rhetoric is attacking something ‘real’ that can be empirically identified, described, and quantified. This ‘reality’ is the institutions – in the form of meaningful social constructs within which people act – that comprise central government and that, in their policy and decision-making, amount to a belief surrounding the spatial direction of power: ‘centralisation’ (see Parsons 2007, 81). This chapter outlines this empirical grounding while problematising the centralist-localist dichotomy (see Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley 2014).

By focusing on the relationship between the central state and localism, this chapter puts forward an alternative perspective on localism, using the concept of ‘strategic localism’. Strategic localism, as a communicative discourse in political rhetoric and policy, manifests itself in two forms. Firstly, as a *legitimising* strategy that governments may use to ‘appease’ opponents of centralisation, which is the focus of this chapter, and secondly as a *populist* strategy, where political parties – especially (but not confined to) opposition parties – may galvanise existing discontent and populist sentiments to make claims over the lack of people power (this will be further elaboration on in Chapter 6). This chapter therefore challenges the generally perceived dichotomy between centralism and localism by unpicking the relationship between state intervention, legitimisation, and localism. It addresses the research question “*does the promise and policy of localism legitimise centralisation*” by returning to the previous debate in section 2.4 and incorporating perspectives from political economy to explore further how the tensions between democracy, legitimacy and economy play out discursively.

In doing so, this chapter is exploring two phenomena. Firstly, a rhetorical divergence between localism and centralism. While localism has been described as a “policy silver-bullet” (Wills 2016, 31), the latter is practically taboo: few governments or politicians are openly centralist (Copus *et al.* 2018). It appears then that the word ‘centralism’ itself is loaded and symbolic, inhabiting overwhelmingly negative connotations. A linguistic antithesis to ‘local’, ‘central

versus local' has become a pervasive dichotomy, one which often maps onto the dichotomies of 'bad' versus 'good', or 'undemocratic' versus 'democratic'. This is what Bulpitt coins "the centralisation paradigm", where "the consequences of centralisation are assumed to be obvious, automatic, and bad" (Bulpitt 1983, 21). Indeed, here seems to be an indication in the literature and political discourse that centralisation can damage the credibility of the political party/parties in government. As Jenkins observed with regards to the 1979-1997 Conservative Governments: "Contempt for localism cost the Tories dear" (Jenkins 2004, 45). As a then Conservative MP, Douglas Carswell, surmised, "centralised government equals bad government – regardless of which party holds office" (Carswell 2008, 150). Seen from this perspective, localism is a way of problematising the central bureaucratic state (Tait and Inch 2016, 179).

Secondly, this chapter explores why localism is paradoxical, in the sense of it being top-down and steered by national economic priorities. As highlighted by a few researchers, there seems to be a political and rhetorical link between economic challenges, and interventions such as localism and decentralisation. For example, as observed by Tomaney, "... arguments [for devolution] carry greater weight in a context of weak national recovery from a severe recession, enduring public and private indebtedness and deep and lasting austerity" (2016, 547). Painter *et al.* similarly suggest that, to ease the impact of a recession, the local becomes a site of state intervention in the form of public spending cuts:

... [drives towards localism] find a renewed momentum in times when global financial systems are beset with an economic crisis as has been the case in the aftermath of the economic recession that followed the 2007 sub-prime mortgage crisis. ... It can be seen as being evident in the current UK coalition governments calls for 'building the big society' and in the proposals of the 'Decentralisation and the Localism Bill' or in the US where the 'Tea Party movement' calls for scaling down 'big government', all of which coincide with huge cuts in public services funding (Painter *et al.* 2011, 8).

This chapter takes these observations a step further, arguing that, in contrast to the common narrative, it is not useful to see localism as necessarily divorced or antithetical from centralisation or centralising pressures since it is itself inextricably part of central government agendas and policy programmes, particularly in relation to economic policy. For example, the Coalition Government's localism agenda was concretized as a way of approaching the growing housing supply crisis, as well as supporting local growth and encouraging communities to contribute to their own services in the context of austerity. As the concept of 'Localism' fizzled out and became repackaged as 'Devolution', as observed in Chapter 4, these fundamental economic objectives remained. This continuity can be seen by the more recent devolution reform and debate. For example, in the second reading of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Communities and Local Government Baroness Williams of Trafford argued the following:

Decentralisation is the key to achieving economic growth and unlocking the potential for economic success in our cities. It enables places to take greater control over and responsibility for the key things that make it work (HL Deb 8 June 2015, Vol. 762 cc.652-653).

The localism that materialized in the Localism Act 2011 was therefore highly context dependent and solutions-focused, with regards to perceived economic pressures, rather than normative or wide-ranging. Therefore, two parallel localisms emerge: one deeply normative localism which espouses local self-government, democratic renewal, and community empowerment, and one *strategic localism* which references and uses these normative beliefs of localism to implement or appease (already existing) economic policy. This chapter will begin by exploring centralisation as a spatial characteristic of the state, which is a result of, and has deepened, through state intervention. I then present historical and contemporary research, covering the period 1964 to 2017, exploring how localism has been operationalised discursively in response to state interventions. In particular, I look at changes to local governance and remit, focusing on a) regionalisation and sub-regionalisation, and b) funding and control. The chapter concludes that localism, rather than the ‘opposite’ of centralism, can be interpreted as an inherent part of state strategies, interventions, and regulation.

5.1. Defining centralisation

One of the weaknesses of the literature on localism is the lack of debate around ‘centralisation’. Few have sought to define, quantify, or problematise this concept, despite it being the main argument in favour of promoting localism. Often it is simply asserted. This section will explore ‘centralisation’ as a *spatial manifestation*, and consequence, of *state intervention* and bureaucratisation. Indeed, recognising the spatiality of state intervention is to recognise the inherent spatial framework of the state itself; “We are speaking of a space where centralised power sets itself above other power and eliminates it” (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 281; see also Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Centralism is a vague idea of a spatial, or territorial, concentration of power to the state⁵³, and with it hierarchical and vertical movement of power. In very general terms it is conceptualised in two, largely negative, ways. First, is the more populist perspective, which is also more widespread: if localism seeks to (re-)empower ‘the people’, then centralisation is perceived as entrenching and deepening the power held by the remote and detached (political) elite residing in some geographical centre (e.g. the capital city or administrative centre of a country). The second perspective is more specific to neoliberal ideology: here, centralisation is a form of bureaucratisation, the “over-extension of the state, and the dependency and inefficiency which that over-extension has caused” (Norman 2010, 201-2). Aside from the emotive and ideological response that perceived centralisation elicits, it has been argued to cause three negative outcomes. Firstly, and in line with the more popular view, it is considered to be undemocratic, due to the dominance of central government, or national, interests over local interests, and by harming the autonomy of elected local government (Bulpitt 1983, 21-2). Secondly, it is seen to lead to remote government, causing inefficient, impersonal, and unimaginative policy making, with implications for policy implementation. Thirdly, and more fundamentally, if one regards local government as part of the checks and balances of the British democratic system designed to check the power of the

⁵³ The central state of England and the UK can be understood in terms of the ‘core executive’, involving a “network of actors around the Cabinet Office ... and the Treasury setting strategic priorities, coordinating and directing the broader executive system”, as well as central government departments (James 2009, 354), all of which are *centrally located* in Westminster, London.

executive, as explored previously in Section 2.3, then the loss of the powers of local government can be seen as a significant loss of pluralism and liberalism in Western democracies. As the Redcliffe-Maud Commission report from 1969 stated:

Local government is the only representative political institution in the country outside Parliament; and being, by its nature, in closer touch than Parliament or Ministers can be with local conditions, local needs, local opinions, it is an essential part of the fabric of democratic government. Central government tends, by its nature, to be bureaucratic. It is only by the combination of local representative institutions with the central institutions of Parliament, Ministers and Departments, that a genuine national democracy can be sustained (Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, 11, para. 28).

Aside from these procedural threats to democracy, concerns regarding centralism and its implications for democracy have strong parallels with the critical debate on what sort of model of democracy the public want more generally. In particular, they reflect the debate on representative/parliamentary models of democracy, versus the more popular ideas of deliberative or participative forms of democracy – which are often assumed to be best exercised at the local level. However, descriptions of centralisation are far from homogenous. Below in Table 5.1 I explore the different scales and characterisation of ‘centralisation’, as observed in the literature and political rhetoric, ordered according to rough indications of scale, and related to different forms of state intervention.

Table 5.1. Scales of centralisation and forms of intervention

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Executive power</i> | Growth of power and decision-making into the executive (the Prime Minister and/or Chancellor and/or Secretary of States) away from central government departments, parliament, and local government, associated with crisis-related interventions. |
| <i>Departmental / bureaucratic power</i> | Growth of power and decision-making from local government to central government departments and ministers (i.e. bureaucratisation) due to greater controls on local authority spending or policy making. These state interventions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial controls and reform (e.g. rate-capping in the 1980s, or austerity in the 2010s). • Non-financial controls (e.g. statutory services/duties, Ministerial statutory powers). • Soft controls (e.g. grant conditions, guidance). • Controls on internal administration and management. • Performance standards and targets. • Local government restructuring and abolition (e.g. the GLC). |
| <i>Regional power</i> | Introduction of regional systems of governance and decision-making, such as Regional Development Agencies, which set direction for local government. ⁵⁴ |

⁵⁴ Here, it is important to note that interpreting regionalisation as a form of centralisation (rather than an example of localism/devolution) is more heavily associated with Conservative Party rhetoric and policy. This is a reminder that identifying centralisation is itself highly political. Regardless, the interest here is how the public see this reform, whether it is empowering, or whether it is creating a sense of remoteness – the former was certainly the case following the Redcliffe-Maud Commission Report in 1969, as well as a result of New Labour policy to an extent.

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>Sub-regional power</i> | <p>Reorganisation and the creation of sub-regional systems of governance, through the following interventions and reform:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The widening of local authority boundaries, which may make local government more remote from its electorate and more answerable to central government (e.g. Unitary or Combined Authorities);⁵⁵ • Abolition of local authorities (e.g. the abolition of the GLC and Metropolitan Counties in 1986, which gave way to the first Unitary Authorities). • The creation of unelected public / semi-public bodies, not directly answerable to local government, with fuzzy territorial boundaries (soft spaces, as termed by Allmendinger 2016) to oversee growth strategies, such as Enterprise Zones and Local Enterprise Partnerships.⁵⁶ |
|---------------------------|--|

It is common to read in the literature that political governance in England – or the UK more widely – is becoming increasingly centralised. For example, certain governance theorists have suggested that governments have successfully increased their power to control and steer in hierarchical ways (Bell and Hindmoor 2009). Indeed, despite localism, and other decentralist and participatory forms of spatial governance reform and rhetoric, the general consensus is that England has become more, not less, centralised over the past few decades (Leach *et al.* 2018; Bogdanor 2009). According to Wills, the desire for national standards peaked during the latter half of the 20th century, and with it, increased levels of centralised interventions of local government (2016a, 44, 53-62). While ‘centralisation’ is a difficult assertion to unpack empirically, given its often partisan, normative, and subjective undertones, it is safe to say that the constitutional structure of British democracy encourages relatively centralised forms of governing, regardless of the trends or linearity of such governing (Lijphart 2012). Here, researchers tend to base their claims of centralisation on the policy and legislative agendas of governments and how this agenda might translate into institutional and fiscal changes that impact on the spatial movement and concentration of power.

For example, some have pointed out how political intervention and regulation of the economy, as is characteristic of democratic welfare states, has endured despite recent decades of neoliberal economic policy and political ideology that promoted smaller governments and deregulation. While the Thatcher government, for example, was officially monetarist, it is often noted that it remained fundamentally Keynesian in its policy stance (Gamble 2009, 15). From this viewpoint, we are reminded that even deregulation amounts to a form of intervention, understood as “a decisive change in life situations and market opportunities brought about by public policy” (Offe 1996, 75). In a more general sense, as observed by Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 136), “Markets are suffused with hierarchy. States not only create markets: they manage them. Privatisation, deregulation, contracting-out, PPPs and internal and external markets all require ongoing hierarchical intervention”. Intervention is motivated by the need to promote continuous economic growth, stabilise the economy in response to crises, and ensure effective

⁵⁵ Again, similar to the point made in the above footnote, this is also a political interpretation, where on the other side of the coin one might see this development as a form of devolution of powers, since larger local authorities may have more power to resist central directives (this tension can be illustrated by the Redcliffe-Maud Commission debates during the late 1960s/early 1970s).

⁵⁶ For further discussion on what constitutes centralisation, see Bulpitt (1983, 20-1).

wealth redistribution, and the creation of the welfare state in the mid 20th century led to a fundamental shift of control away from local government towards the centre to ensure income redistribution and uniformity in service provision (Travers and Esposito 2003, 30-1).

These different forms of ‘centralisation’ as outlined in Table 5.1 can therefore be compared to the debate on metagovernance. The growth of government and centralisation more generally has grown out of the need for unified and strategic steering, intervention, and regulation, “concern of all governments to keep the public service and public expenditure within appropriate limits” (Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 243). As a 1986 Green Paper argues, “Because Governments are responsible for the overall management of the economy, they have to be concerned with the amount of local authority expenditure, borrowing and taxation” (DoE 1986, 2). Further, and in relation to this point, one may argue that a certain level of centralisation can be seen as reasonable – even necessary (if not fundamental to the characteristics of a state). While dated, the Redcliffe-Maud report from 1969 outlines a few reasons why central government should intervene into local government: settle the policies to be followed in the provision of services; ask for minimum standards where some equality of standards is possible and there is a strong national interest in the quality of the service; determine the resources which can be devoted to local government services and the priorities within them; operate a check on the quality and cost of local projects; and act as an arbiter between two authorities or between an authority and private individuals where there is a dispute (Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, para. 101).

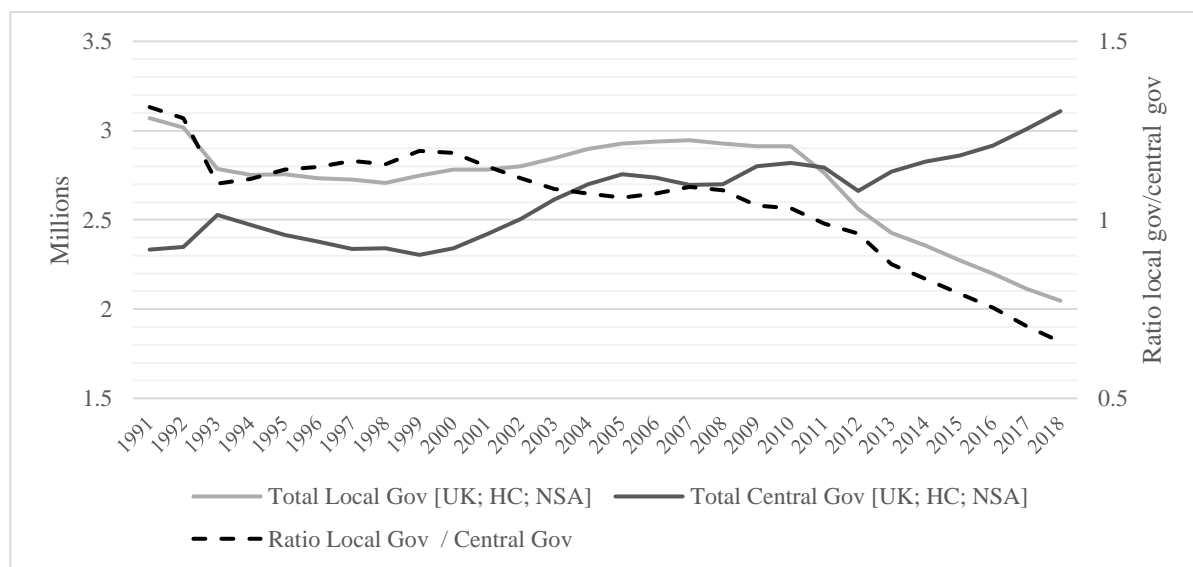
Other research has sought to measure centralisation quantitatively. Here, much of the arguments compare fiscal devolution in the UK with other countries. As an RSA report in 2014 observed, “The UK has the most centralised system of public finance of any major OECD country; sub-national taxation accounts for only 1.7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), compared to 5 per cent in France and 16 percent in Sweden” (RSA 2014, 18; see also IfG 2019). A scalar shift towards central government has also been quantified in relation to the costs associated with controlling and regulating local government, as summarised in the Lifting the Burdens Task Force (2008, 4). Decades previously, the Kilbrandon Commission report charted out the growth in ministerial appointments and the size of Departments,⁵⁷ growth in government expenditure and a move away from locally directed and sourced expenditure, as well as a growth in the scope and complexity of legislation (Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para 234-238, 241). To further this line of argument, and to explore quantitative and institutional indicators of centralisation, I include data comparing local government and central government employment numbers, where, according to data from the ONS (2018), employment in central government has been outstripping local government since 2011.

As is demonstrated in Figure 5.1 below, measured by the ratio (dashed line) of total number of local government employees against total number of central government employees, the size of local government has been consistently shrinking in both relative (2000-2010) and absolute

⁵⁷ The Report cites supporting data: up to the end of the 19th century, the size of the (non-industrial) civil service did not exceed 50,000 people, however, over the 20th century, this number increased tenfold, to around 500,000, far outpacing the general growth of the population (Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 234-236).

terms (1991-1993; 2010-2018) save for the seven year period 1993 through to 2000 where employment numbers were relatively stable. While there was a short-term drive to reduce numbers of civil servants between 2011 and 2012, employment of central government civil servants has, in a similar pattern to the years 1999-2005, increased rapidly since 2012, and particularly since 2016, no doubt in part due to the staffing demands of Brexit. The decline in the employment numbers in local government across the UK has been unprecedented, extensive, and consistent since 2010. The ratio shows how, while there were 32 per cent more local government than central government officials in 1991, in 2018, there were instead 52 per cent more central government officials, where the size of central government as measured by employees surpassed local government in 2011.

Fig. 5.1. UK Public sector employment in central and local government, seasonally adjusted, 1991-2018
Source: ONS (2018)



While just one empirical perspective on the institutional features of centralisation, it quite starkly demonstrates a shift in the balance between central and local, reflecting wider policy changes and challenges, including local government funding and the political crisis of Brexit demanding greater centralised and strategic control. This graph also makes explicit the link between centralisation and state intervention / bureaucratisation, by emphasising the spatial element of civil service employment numbers. The discourse around localism is arguably geared in relation to this institutional – and real – trend, further suggesting the importance of understanding the empirical links between the *ideational* and *material*.

Given this discussion of the spatial characteristics and spatial impacts of state intervention and bureaucratisation, we can draw both a causal and positive link between centralisation and state intervention, as states have been increasingly compelled to spatially intervene and centrally-orchestrate policy. This understanding of the spatial implications of state interventions is under-theorised but often implicit in many studies. There is no exact science behind striking the right balance as to the ‘ideal’ level of intervention and centralisation, as measured in relation to efficiency, accountability, or other concerns – indeed, one might argue that such an ideal does not exist but is rather a dynamic state determined by short-term political and economic contexts.

For either of these reasons, governments are under pressure to continually justify themselves (see Marquand 1988, 200). As one interviewee observed, “we’re a country that just doesn’t know what the optimal structure is” [05]. In so doing, state capacity is increased in order to control key issues on public spending and growth strategies, as well as, particularly as we see recently with the political challenges of Brexit, crisis-management.

5.2. The legitimacy of state intervention

This section returns to the previous discussion in section 2.4.1, which briefly explored how the state obtains legitimacy for its interventions. Understanding the causes of centralisation in relation to state intervention and its economic objectives (such as controlling public spending, and promoting growth), can in turn highlight the sources of political pressures towards localism. As mentioned previously, localism in public policy is most commonly centrally led, and this was a point also highlighted by Sharpe (1979, 20): “it seems likely that the decentralist tendencies in the politics of the West are, paradoxically, also a product of the centralisation of society and the state machine”. This section will explore how popular pressure and public opinion amounts as a source of tension inherent within centralisation: on the one hand, centralisation is a *response* to public opinion and a form of legitimisation, but public opinion can also be critical of centralisation. It is a tension that can explain policies that promote localism and its paradoxical emergence, and how a ‘strategic localism’ can emerge as part of a legitimising narrative that can justify top-down and centralising economic interventions. In other words, one might argue that the inconsistencies of localism reflect more the inconsistencies and diversity of public opinion, rather than (just) the exaggeration of political rhetoric per se. When tacking localism onto other policy areas which have greater priority and importance, such as economic policy, these inconsistencies become more diffuse. At the same time, the mention of localism in the context of policy making insinuates compromise and pluralism, making difficult policy decisions perhaps more acceptable, but eventually diluting and diffusing the concept further.

We have established that intervention and centralisation are inextricably linked, as state intervention has sought greater spatial centralisation of functions to increase its own capacity to undertake these functions. This shift towards greater central government control and responsibility did not occur without controversy. Neo-Marxists, particularly Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe of the Frankfurt School, have suggested that the welfare state’s role in steering and regulating an inherently crisis-prone capitalist system meant the political and regulatory system would eventually face a growing amount of complications and contradictions (Habermas 1988, Offe 1984). In other words, state intervention, and growing responsibilities⁵⁸ on issues like “employment, growth, exchange rate stability, an external trade balance, and comprehensive social security”, eventually expose the political system to its own steering problems (Offe 1996, 106, Habermas 1988). Put simply, state intervention, with the centralisation of responsibilities, is not a quick and easy fix for political or economic problems,

⁵⁸ Which might be driven by competition between national political parties (Offe 1996, 106), or capitalist crises and contradictions (Offe 1984).

as it itself eventually creates problems of administration and legitimacy (or, as Offe 1984 argues, ‘crisis of crisis-management’):

Because political parties, parliaments, and the separate state agencies are incapable of solving problems arising from the malfunctions of the system as a whole, more and different kinds of issues have to be dealt with at the uppermost levels of the state executive. This is thought to pose serious problems of administrative rationality (as well as of political legitimacy) (O’Connor 1987, 129).

In this sense, we are reminded that “[the state] can neither do everything, nor know everything, nor manage everything” (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 379). According to Offe, this accumulation and centralisation of responsibilities eventually reaches a breaking point when it is realised that public policy does not have the powers or resources required to successfully bear the responsibilities it has absorbed (Offe 1996, 106-7). In response, the state revises what can and should be the object of public policy and reduces its responsibilities (ibid.).

This break from the trend can be, at least partially, attributed to legitimisation challenges and crises. In other words, when intervening and steering the capitalist system, governments might act beyond what is considered legitimate in relation to the terms of its democratic mandate (legitimation crisis) (Habermas 1988; Beetham 1991). This notion of legitimacy emphasises the political characteristics of welfare state intervention. Welfare states are also liberal democracies, conceived as an “institutional response” to the problem of state authority threatening freedoms and liberty, creating “spheres of existence and activity exempt from state control” (Offe 1996, 147-8). Liberal democracy also entails that the state derives its ultimate source of legitimate authority from the “people”, the voice of which is “institutionally embodied in the rules and procedures of *democratic* government and representation” (ibid., 148). State intervention therefore can be said to be influenced by popular pressure and opinion (Boddy and Fudge 1984, 23). As Jones argues, “state actors walk a difficult line between ensuring the right environment for economic growth and development but at the same time guarding against a crisis of electoral support” (2019, 29; Jessop 1990, 46). This question of popular pressure and public opinion is a source of tension inherent within centralisation: on the one hand, centralisation is a *response* to public opinion and a form of legitimisation, particularly in relation to ensuring equality of opportunity and efficiency of service delivery and welfare distribution (as observed by Mackintosh 1974, 118; Lyons Inquiry 2007, 101; Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 244; Travers and Esposito 2003, 14). As argued in the Redcliffe-Maud Report:

... for all the clamour against increasing centralisation, there is constant pressure for this to be done. The centre has become more aware of local problems and more susceptible to local pressures, and so less willing to leave local problems to local solution. The individuals can nowadays more easily make his grievances heard at the centre, and so is more prone, failing local satisfaction, to appeal to the centre for redress (Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, 11-12, para. 32).

This was also an argument made in several interviews [32, 41, 43]. As one of the interviewees remarked:

... there's that kind of fundamental tension in the system at the moment that even if things are localised, there will be a demand at some stage when something goes wrong for the minister to do something. And I think that's why we often see things kind of flipping back the other way [41].

Notably, a survey on attitudes surrounding 'postcode lottery' was conducted in the Future of England Survey, which saw that on the whole, the majority favoured consistency in provision over local choice for services such as refuse collection, planning approvals, transport, housing and education (see Cox and Jeffrey 2014, 12). Wills (2016a, 45) attributes this public opinion to the move towards standardisation during the latter half of the 20th century, and how this has become an expectation amongst the electorate, coupled with little popular experience of local political capacity, has led to "an entrenched centralisation in the English geo-constitution".

On the other hand, public opinion can also be critical of centralisation – from this view, there is, as Jane Wills observes, an enduring tension between standardisation/efficiency and democracy/sentiment (Wills 2016a, 61). Perhaps paradoxically, the same survey cited above (Future of England) suggests that 39% want more power for their local authority, compared to 14% who disagree (Ibid.). These views see regulations as "potential encroachments on independence and decision-making capacities, and as sources of inefficiency, lack initiative, and inflexibility" (Offe 1996, 80). This perspective on encroachment reflects the earlier discussion in Chapter 2 with regards to the external legitimisation challenges facing the state, and the norms surrounding local government autonomy. Lefebvre similarly observed this tension:

The state's tendency to establish centres of decision armed with all the tools of power and subordinated to a single main centre, the capital, thus encounters stiff resistance. Local powers (municipalities, departments, regions) do not readily allow themselves to be absorbed. ... A certain 'pluralism' persists, therefore, but one which has no great significance so long as open conflict does not erupt among the forces in contention – that is to say, among the various groups, classes, or fractions of classes that have taken up defensive or offensive postures (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 378-9).

These debates indicate that localism cannot be studied in isolation to centralism, or, for the purposes of this chapter, state intervention. This 'confusion' amongst the public wanting some both spatial uniformity *and* independence, and the enduring tension between standardisation and democracy, suggests that we cannot see localism as the opposite to centralism. Rather, such an understanding is a misreading of both public opinion and the politics of policy making. From this viewpoint, one might argue that localism is a small cog in relation to other, more pressing, policy questions (in other words, a form of 'low politics', as argued by Bulpitt 1983). From this perspective, localism or localist concerns barely register on policy agendas. However, periodically, localist ideas are prioritised and operationalised discursively through renewed policy and regulatory regimes, as decisionmakers seek to create a legitimate framework *within which state interventions can play out*. Therefore, rather than opposites, centralism and localism are mutually supportive as they pertain to central government policy agendas. This observation is supported by state-centric governance theory, which argues against seeing government and governance as mutually exclusive alternatives, or even opposite endpoints. As Bell and Hindmoor argue: "Governments choose when to engage communities and what to engage them

about. Even when governing in partnership with communities, governments retain the authority to revise governance rules and abandon engagement processes” (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 160-1; see also Bevir 2013, 29). As they later add; “By seeing government as one point on a governance continuum, we lose sight of the integral role governments play in all governance relationships and the strength that governments potentially derive from their relationships with non-state actors” (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 191).

Here, it is important to recognise that, just as recurring as the interventions themselves, has been the criticisms and debate surrounding state intervention and centralisation, particularly its impact on the autonomy local authorities. As one Green Paper argued; “Central Government’s right to concern itself with the level of local authority revenue expenditure – current spending and capital spending financed by revenue – is not always so readily accepted” (DoE 1986, 2). At the same time, governments operate under “continuous fiscal stress” (Bell and Hindmoor 2009, 13). One might describe this periodic emergence as a dialectic between centralisation and localisation: between, on the one hand, “Whitehall retrenchment to the centre, oblivious to the consequences on the ground”, and on the other hand, “a resurgent localism, quite rightly resentful at being promised devolution that turns out to be largely centralisation at the expense of local autonomy” (ODPM Committee 2006, Ev 110).

Therefore, in order to understand localism and its paradoxical emergence, it is useful to outline empirically legitimating communicative discourses governments oversaw in conjunction with policies which resulted, or had the potential to result, in public debate and concern about ‘centralisation’. These discourses can be viewed in the narratives, rhetoric, policies, and reform governments oversee *in response to public debate and concern* and can be viewed through the paper trail of policy papers, statutes, and parliamentary debates. The question is whether economic justifications for state intervention/centralisation fall in line with public opinion and belief about local government: in which case, these interventions are widely considered *legitimate*. In other moments, however, these incursions are not widely seen as sufficiently justified – and the legitimacy of these interventions can be widely criticised and condemned.

As explored above, there is a difficulty facing central government in balancing the two overriding economic objectives of encouraging growth while also controlling public spending and debt. These strategies face heightened impetus during times of political and economic challenges. However, while the temptation has been repeatedly to intervene into local government in different ways, the unpopularity of doing so, and the political risks, are potentially high. This has created a historical pattern where interventions to uphold economic growth, or to avoid recessions, seem to, perhaps paradoxically, emerge in the context of empowerment and localist rhetoric. As one interviewee argued with regards to policy of the Coalition Government; “at the heart of that contradiction was, you know, a government that was espousing growth and localism. Because it was very clear that growth requires change and, you know, localism that if you like is opposed to change” [30]. Another argued, “I don't think localism is in any way strong enough to trump economic policies” [16]. As observed in a Select

Committee report in relation to the 1997-2010 Labour Government, while some of its policies⁵⁹ could be considered good progress in relation to greater local autonomy and discretion, its top-down approaches in relation to regional bodies created a dissonance, signalling that these examples of good progress simply amounted to “rhetorical lip service paid to decentralisation of power” (CLG Committee 2009, 12).

Here, I propose a concept of ‘strategic localism’, to better understand localism as a legitimising narrative in response to top-down economic interventions. In simple terms, both the localisation and centralisation of power are bids to gain legitimacy, for different reasons. Given the tradition and norms of local empowerment as explored in section 2.3, the incursion of central power can only be justified if it leads to positive economic benefits and effective redistribution, where state centralisation can be a positive force of “protecting the weak against the strong” (Mill 1977 [1862], 589). Here, as Bell and Hindmoor (2009, 15) suggest, the state retains political legitimacy because people still generally expect governments to solve policy problems and steer society. Similarly, as Scharpf (1994, 32) argues, “hierarchical coordination is normatively acceptable only to the extent that authority is exercised to further the common interest of the body politic”. However, if these policy interventions fail, or if they are insufficient justification for incursion, there is then a growing need to demonstrate commitment to re-localisation of power and the empowerment of citizens or risk a legitimisation challenge in the form of a shift in public opinion and withdrawal of popular support (Beetham 1991). In these circumstances, localism shifts from an ideology/belief-system (an “ends”), to a more short-term political strategy (a “means”). In other words, there is a difference between, on the one hand, *normative* localist discourse, and on the other, *strategic* localist discourse. This distinction falls in line with two of the four Weberian categories of social action: on the one hand, *value-rational action*, “determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success” (Weber 1978, 24-5), and on the other, *instrumentally rational action*, “determined by expectations of the behaviour of objects ... these expectations are used as ‘conditions’ or ‘means’ for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends” (1978, 24).

I argue that strategic localism manifests itself in *at least* two forms. These two forms I have identified over the course of my empirical research are, firstly, a *legitimizing* discursive strategy that governments may use to ‘appease’ opponents of centralisation, which is the focus of this chapter, and secondly a *populist* discursive strategy, where political parties galvanise existing discontent and populist sentiments to make claims over the lack of people power (this will be further elaboration on in Chapter 6). Regardless of these specific analytical labels, generally there needs to be a clearer distinction between, on the one hand, the *uses* and *means* of localism, and on the other, with its *values* and *ends*. From a more general perspective in democratic theory, Dewey argues the democratic means and ends should be understood as interdependent (see Dewey 1993 [1938]; 1993 [1939]; Medearis 2015, 71-2). As Dewey argues:

⁵⁹ Examples cited include general powers of well-being introduced in the Local Government Act 2000, greater local discretion through Local Area Agreements and Multi Area Agreements, as well as adoption of the ‘place-shaping’ concept developed in the Lyons Inquiry, brought in through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

The conflict between the methods of freedom and those of totalitarianism, insofar as we accept the democratic ideals to which our history commits us, is within our own institutions and attitudes. It can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, cooperative intelligence in the task of making our own politics, industry and education – our culture generally – a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas. ... If there is one conclusion to which human experience unmistakably points, it is that democratic ends demand democratic methods for their realisation (1993 [1939], 205).

While normative perspectives on localism seem to suggest that the means should reflect its ends (for example, a bottom-up process of empowerment), historical observation as well as more recent empirical evidence shows this is rarely the case: localism is often a promise made by the political centre (Bulpitt 1983, 173; Bogdanor 2009, 242-3; Cochrane 1989b, 110). This includes the recent Coalition Government's Localism agenda, which has been described as aloof to the needs and wants of local citizens and local government. As one interviewee pointed out, "[localism has] been a kind of top down and kind of ... carefully managed I guess- process by Whitehall. And the public has largely been absent from many conversations around devolution and localism" [41]. Localism and Devolution therefore "encode exactly the kind of power structure that they purport to undermine" [43]. The implication is that localism, and its 'ideal' form, remains a highly abstract and contested concept. While the means of localism, in its manifestation in government reform and rhetoric, seem to *signal* localism's values and ends, it is evident that the ultimate goal – and end – is *not* usually normative, but rather strategic, and usually concerns quite specific elements of central government economic policy. This is a method of overcoming the tension explored earlier which can be summarised as a tension between standardisation and (local) democracy. It is important, therefore, that studies on localism distinguish between these two forms of localism, which is the framework which will be applied to the historical analysis below. I elaborate on these two forms below.

Normative localism: values and ends

Following on from the previous discussion in section 2.3, normative localism is a diffuse belief-system, ideology, and tradition which borrows from multiple schools of thought that generally argues that localism, and empowering local people towards self-governance, is inherently good and democratic, while centralism is corrosive and undemocratic. Normative localism loosely imagines localism as a holistic *way of doing* – a way of life and a method of policy making that emphasises community empowerment, volunteering, and direct forms of democracy. This approach then sees localism's means as reflective of its ends: achieving grassroots empowerment through a process of grassroots *self*-empowerment. While there is a rich lineage of liberal thinkers developing an idea of localism, its idealistic and normative outlook has made it susceptible to populist uses. Steve Hilton, a Conservative advisor and 'positive' populist recently argued: "the goal of decentralization shouldn't be a specific outcome. It should be a sense of greater participation and ultimately greater democracy and people power" (Hilton 2018, 178). Particularly when operationalised in rhetoric as a solution to some kind of political problem, normative localism is not clear on the 'how's' in terms of achieving it in practice. It

is an idea which is claimed to be “grounded in British thought, culture and practice” (Norman 2010, 200), yet has little theoretical or practical anchoring (Mackenzie 1961, 5).

Strategic localism: implementation, justification, and assurance

While strategic localism invokes and references normative localism, it is far from the same. As rightly argued by Jane Wills, there is an enduring tension between efficiency and standardisation, on the one hand, and sentiment and local democracy on the other (2016a, 61). Strategic localism has been invoked as a way to overcome this tension during certain periods. Rather than a *way of doing* or a *principle* of policy- or decision-making, I use the concept ‘strategic localism’ to describe localist rhetoric and policy as used by those holding governmental power that is *strategic* and top-down, and therefore paradoxical, rather than normative and idealistic. This form of localism can explain the gap between rhetoric and reality: in other words, why it is that “localist rhetoric” has been observed to coincide with “centralist practice”, as one interviewee argued in relation to the Coalition Government [22]. Over time, there have been two major forms of this.

Firstly, and more recently associated with the Coalition/Conservative Governments since 2010, is a form of localism that is highly solutions-focused and targets local space as an (efficient) method of policy implementation.⁶⁰ This was indicated by several interviewees. Two local government specialists commented on its technocratic character [18, 35]: “there’s this sort of technocratic ‘we ought to involve the people because that would lead to better policy and better results and coproduction’ and all that sort of stuff” [18]. A previous senior civil servant similarly argued, “the idea of localism genuinely started to get traction in parts of Whitehall – not because it was a good thing to do and communities were lovely, and cuddly, and sort of stuff like that, but because actually it’s quite efficient” [21]. As succinctly argued by the Baroness Hanham, who was at the time Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, during one of the Localism Bill debates:

It was suggested that localism is ideological, but it is not – it is extremely practical. For a long time, we – certainly those who are in local government ... have inveighed against the centre and said that we should have much more powers in local government and be given much more responsibility. That is what the Bill does (HL Deb 20 June 2011 vol. 728, c1060).

Localist policies, then, can give a certain level of discretion and responsibility for local areas to co-produce and/or implement central interventions, allowing local areas to feel a greater sense of ownership over such interventions. However, the extent of actual autonomy gained from this type of policy approach varies. As one senior civil servant observed; it gives local places the ability to shape *national policy* so that it is more tailored to their area [33]. In the context of centralising decision-making, decentralist forms of implementation may also serve to reduce responsibility for central government and increase accountability of local government. As argued by a special advisor in a written response, “devolving responsibility for an issue can

⁶⁰ Previous and more specific versions of this has been initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities and the Single Regeneration Budget.

help politically when opinions about that issue differ regionally (which is also a good argument for devolving them in the first place)” [42]. However, more negatively, given the context of widespread cuts to local government, one interviewee called this “risk transfer” [33] while another termed it “devolving blame” [20]. Labour politician David Blunkett suggested it to be “centralising the power and decentralising the pain” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, vol. 521 c569), and Conservative politician Kris Hopkins (during the same debate) commented; “it is quite easy to devolve powers when there is no money left in the kitty” (ibid. c609).

The second form of strategic localism is vaguer, and also more common when viewed historically. It has manifested itself as an *assurance* or *appeasement* in rhetoric which suggests localising power *alongside* centralising power and can be used during contentious local government restructuring. Widening boundaries seems to require assurances that, despite appearances, such reform is a *means to the end* of enhancing local democracy (assurance), or, an economic necessity which will be supplemented by *other reforms* to protect local democracy (appeasement/compromise). Often, such appeasement seems to involve some elaboration of the role of parish and neighbourhood councils and generally bringing decision-making closer to communities. A quote by Dewey seems particularly apt here: “In whatever form they offer themselves, they owe their seductive power to their *claim* to service ideal ends” (Dewey 1993 [1939], 206, *emphasis added*). The implication of a divergence between the means and ends of localism is felt in terms of the implementation and satisfaction of the policy itself. As Wills (2016a, 80) argues:

It is not enough to call for greater engagement without thinking about why people might decide to engage, and the institutional arrangements that facilitate that kind of engagement that is productive for them. All too often, calls for public engagement are made on the terms laid down by the central state, and they produce very mediocre effects.

This dynamic underlying ‘strategic’ localism will be further explored and situated historically in the remainder of this chapter, which will outline instances of strategic localism and the implications in terms of policy implementation, change, and public opinion.

5.3. An overview of public opinion and localist-rhetoric, 1964-2017

5.3.1. An introduction to the main historical patterns

This third and final section of the chapter explores the (negative) public opinion towards state intervention, and how localist-rhetoric has been mobilised in response to this opinion. First, I will briefly introduce the main historical observations and patterns, in relation to the pressures behind state interventions on local government and how these have been manifested over the past fifty years. The following sections will then discuss more specifically these interventions and localist promises in relation to particular time periods.

Generally, state interventions are responding either to long-term economic pressures or short-term contingent circumstances (Chisholm 2000, 7). On the one hand, the long-term pressures require supply-side interventions: these interventions have sought to revise and reform the structure of governance, where regional and sub-regional forms of governance are regularly revisited, in order to support greater state capacity and strategies for growth. On the other hand, short-term pressures mainly concern immediate challenges or financial crises, with responses tending to be monetarist. Here, interventions aim to reduce public expenditure, including local government spending (being one of the main service providers), as well as foster more efficient use of resources, which again may justify structural reform such as centrally governed controls and standards for local government to follow. This historical section will consider these two main (often overlapping) patterns of intervention into local government: (1) moves towards regionalisation and sub-regionalisation, as well as (2) changes to local government controls and funding, and the processes of legitimisation, which will be elaborated on each in turn.

Regionalisation and sub-regionalisation

The pressures towards regionalisation of governance in England, in the form of unitary local authorities, metropolitan counties, city-regions, as well as larger regional bodies, has been a recurring theme, emerging in the 1960s, 1990s, 2000s, and now currently manifests itself in the devolution agenda. These two interventions, of regional bodies, and local government restructuring, ultimately had similar objectives: an attempt to promote a ‘regional consensus’ (Cochrane 1989a, 52), to ensure a more strategic overview on economic and spatial planning, with a view on industrial, housing, and infrastructure development. The regular reappearance of regionalism was observed by the Local Government Commission, which argued there is “a strong regional dimension to many of the issues confronting both central and local government, particularly with respect to economic development, infrastructure and land use planning” (LGCE 1995, 15). These national-level priorities required greater central influence and control, to reflect the fact that, for better or for worse, central government was increasingly perceived as responsible for ensuring equitable outcomes for citizens locally as well as the steady running of the economy, where regionalisation could promote the capacity for unity, coordination, and strategy in the state apparatus required for such outcomes. An extract from a Times article from 1969 illustrates a particular perspective on this pressure for strategic capacity in the centre:

At a recent conference on local government reform, a senior civil servant was pressed as to why department after department recommended 30 to 40 local authorities in England ... Eventually, after much pressure, he put down his notes. ‘Don’t you see that 30 to 40 is the number of local authority officials you can conveniently get together in one room at the Ministry and then knock their heads together?’ (*The Times* 12 December 1969; quoted in Bogdanor 2009, 245)

Later, in the mid-2000s as the debate about city-regions developed, the concept of the elected mayor in many ways replicated this reasoning. As was argued by the Minister for Local Government and Community Cohesion at a Select Committee, “We see the hierarchy between powers being linked to accountability. You have to have clear strategic leadership if you are to devolve power, particularly over significant sums of public money” (CLG Committee 2007b, Q696). This understanding of mayors providing a point of accountability and communication

between the centre and the local was further indicated during debates on the Localism Bill, which stipulated that those local authorities which adopted a mayoral system would be ‘rewarded’ with greater devolution. As Eric Pickles, then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, argued during a Localism Bill debate: “I think it was Lord Adonis, when he was dealing with high-speed rail, who made it clear that it was easier to deal with mayors in London and other parts of the country than to deal with council leaders. Cities such as Birmingham ... are as important as Boston or Barcelona, and they have a part to play on the world stage. I believe that mayors can enhance that role” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol 521 c562). This was later in the debate questioned by Labour MP Clive Betts as not being ‘localist’: “why can a local authority with a committee system not have the same devolved powers as an elected mayor? Why does the devolution of those powers depend on which system of governance the local authority chooses? That is not a particularly localist measure” (ibid., c577). This was also a point made in interviews in relation to current policy in relation to Combined Authorities [04, 38], “Virtually nobody over the country wants an elected mayor, but George Osbourne has decided he wants a single person to speak to” [04].

This regionalisation has occurred in a context of a decline of what Bulpitt (1983) coins the ‘Dual Polity’. Before the 1960s, “the degree of *political* interpenetration between Centre and the periphery was low”, with national and local politics co-existing in two separate worlds (Bulpitt 1983, 134-5). This division reflected the division between ‘high politics’ of important policy areas like national economy, social welfare, security and law and order, while matters of ‘low politics’ were left to local government. However, this interpenetration began to increase in the early 1960s as the centre attempted to tackle economic stagnation through a programme of ‘modernisation’ which was aimed at local government; “First, the programme was associated with a sustained attack on the existing institutions, procedures and personnel of territorial politics, on the grounds that they were administratively inefficient, insufficiently democratic and over-centralised. A popular solution to these problems was to emphasise the need for a greater element of ‘regionalism’ in British politics” (Bulpitt 1983, 173). Governments then began to, in unprecedented ways, trespass on local government territory in an effort to reignite the economy; however, the results were mixed, and even where successful, these incursions “provided fierce opposition and a perceptible drain on legitimacy” (Marquand 1988, 204; see also O’Connor 1987, 129).

Geographically expanding local authorities has a similar effect to the creation of regional bodies by, on the one hand, making the democratic and electoral system more remote and insulated from its citizens, while on the other hand, bringing local government closer and more accountable to central government. Both these outcomes can conflict against deeply held local identities, threaten perceptions on what constitutes democracy, and contrast against growing demands for more participative forms of decision making. Building a narrative of ‘strategic localism’, of localising alongside centralising power, can reconcile this tension. A member of parliament, David Owen, argued in 1967 that larger (regional) and smaller (neighbourhood) units of local administration should be developed in parallel: “the large did not exclude, but rather made more essential the smaller unit” (HC Deb 7 April 1967, Vol. 744 c539). While a

rather offhand remark by a Labour backbencher⁶¹ in a debate over fifty years ago, one might argue that this thinking has been a largely implicit and recurring principle behind regionalisation and sub-regionalisation as an assurance and compromise to greater centralisation ('strategic localism'). Later, the 1992 Local Government Act considered this tension directly, where it required the Local Government Commission for England, which was instructed to explore options for creating unitary authorities in the shire counties, to have regard to the need (i) to reflect the identities and interests of local communities, and (ii) to secure effective and convenient local government (LGCE 1995, 25). As the Commission report observed, "for over a century, the pursuit of the ideal balance between these two objectives had been an aim of every local government reform in England" (ibid.).

Local government controls and funding

With regards to local government controls and funding, one can identify two diverging patterns over time with regards to central interventions and local autonomy, between on the one hand a focus on local choice, and on the other, the enabling state:

1. **Local Choice:** Increasing local discretion by reducing controls/standards, however with less funding (early 1980s, late 2000s/early 2010s).
2. **The Enabling State:** Reducing local discretion by increasing controls/standards, as well as increasing funding (1960s, 1970s and 2000s).

While there is significant overlap and inconsistencies, the former falls closer in line with Conservative Government policy, whose narrative tends to be around 'local choice', while the latter with Labour Government policy, whose narrative instead focuses on combatting a 'post-code lottery' [36]. On the one hand, fewer controls and regulations are offered as a way to both legitimise as well as enable austerity (giving local authorities greater say and flexibility in where to make cuts). As one interviewee argued, "the irony is that government since 2010 have really hurt local government in terms of funding, but they've probably done more in terms of- imperfect as it's been- have done more in terms of devolution than their predecessors over about 30 years" [43]. On the other hand, this pattern reflects the fact that with greater central government funding there is an increased impetus to control and standardise the use of these funds; "when Ministers are responsible for providing a high and growing proportion of the money, they naturally want to have a considerable say in how it is to be spent" (Layfield Committee 1976, 66). Similar patterns of divergence between Labour and Conservative have been identified in the literature. For example, Wills (2016a, 2, 21) sees Labour's approach to localism as *using the state* to enable the people and local empowerment, while Conservatives focus on creating space for citizens to act on their own terms and in their own way. Even earlier, commentators have emphasised the connection between the move to a new governance, with the decline of financial resources in the state and the need for spending cuts (Stoker 1998, 18; Pierre and Peters 2000, 52).

⁶¹ While a backbencher at the time, Owen would later become Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and later leader of the Social Democratic Party.

Both these approaches have similar goals, which is to insulate as far as possible central government responsibility, as well as retain/obtain public support for policies. This approach however, sooner or later, tends to devalue any decentralist/localist agenda as its role as a ‘means’ rather than an ‘ends’ – a form of ‘strategic localism’ – eventually is exposed by growing contradictions in the policy agenda. As the same interviewee commented with regards to the Big Society agenda; “I think they thought ‘we need to do cuts, we’re doing the big society, we’ll have to do both those things’ – well, actually, it turns out you can’t. Because one kills the other” [43]. As a Labour MP commented during the Localism Bill debate:

On the very day that the coalition announced the deepest cuts in local government history, which will result in an estimated 140,000 public sector job losses in one year alone, they also announced the Localism Bill. Forgive me, but the cynic in me finds a sad but strong link between the two (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 c613).

Further, regardless of any promises to reduce controls, the status quo tends to prevail, as observed by the Kilbrandon Commission, “It has long been the complaint of local authorities that, while successive governments proclaim that it is their policy to remove controls over local authorities, they do little to implement it and tend instead in their legislation to restrict even further the authorities’ freedom of action” (Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 855). Later, the Lyons Inquiry Report (2007, i) commented, “The history of the last 30 years is marked by a series of well-intentioned devolution initiatives, which have often evolved into subtle instruments of control”. Table 5.2 below charts out the main themes, economic pressures, reforms, and debates over the past few decades with regards to regional change and local control and funding, to be read alongside the main part of the text below, which focuses on public opinion and legitimisation in response to these changes. The section is divided according to four main themes of intervention over the past 50 years; Modernisation; Streamlining and Accountability; Second Phase of Modernisation; and finally, Austerity and Bottom-up Restructuring.

Table 5.1. Themes, economic pressures and central interventions in English local government, 1964 - 2017

| Time period, theme | Economic pressures? | Central interventions | |
|---|--|---|--|
| | | Regional and sub-regionalisation | Local government controls and funding |
| The Labour Governments of 1964-1970 and 1974-1979 | An outdated local government boundary structure, inadequate to cope with expansion of public services, and | The 1964-1970 Labour Government set up eight advisory ⁶³ Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) and Boards (REPBs), ⁶⁴ initially | Concerns about growing local government reliance on central government grants, began in the early and mid 1970s (DoE 1971b; Layfield |

⁶³ According to then Deputy Prime Minister, George Brown, the emphasis on ‘advisory status’ and ‘*economic planning*’ was “intended to reassure local government that the Councils and Boards would not encroach upon their physical planning responsibilities” (Lindley 1982, 173).

⁶⁴ While the Boards comprised of senior civil servants in the region, the Councils comprised of politicians and stakeholders from local government, industry and commerce, and the universities (Keating and Rhodes 1982, 68-9).

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| ‘Modernisation’ | preventing a cross-boundary, standardised, ⁶² balanced, and strategic approach to economic growth, development and regeneration (Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, 26-8; Redcliffe-Maud and Wood 1974, 2). Later, structural financial difficulties (Gamble 1985) meant periodic public spending cuts, first due to balance of payments crisis in 1966, and later, and more significantly, due to the economic shocks in 1973/5, culminating in the UK being forced to take out an IMF loan in 1976. | intended to implement the National Plan. Later, following recommendations from the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969), the 1970 White Paper (DoE 1970) recommended restructuring local government into 51 unitary authorities, which were seen as being more efficient at delivering services and better able to attract higher calibre councillors and officers. Incoming Conservative Government rejected this on the basis of ‘remoteness’ and retained the two-tier local authority structure in the Local Government Act 1972 (DoE 1971a). | Commission 1976). While governments were increasingly determining how money was to be spent on services, the financial crises in the 1970s entailed greater restraints on local government expenditure (ibid, p. 70). Further pressure from the IMF lead to significant reductions in local government current and capital expenditure in the mid to late 70s (DoE 1986, 2). |
| The Conservative Governments of 1979-1997 ‘Streamlining and accountability’ | The so-called “Winter of Discontent” in 1978/9 justified and legitimised intervention by central government as including controls and cuts to local government funding and streamlining local authorities to reduce bureaucracy, improve coordination, and reduce costs (DoE 1991a, para. 25). Problems began to emerge with the two-tier system of local government created by the 1972 Act, which was | Moves to ‘streamline’ local government began with the abolition of the GLC and metropolitan counties in the mid-80s, a by-product of which was the creation of unitary authorities (DoE 1983; DoE 1991a, para. 25) ⁶⁵ . The Major Government revisited the question of unitary councils (DoE 1991); setting up the Local Government Commission for England that would oversee consultation and research on restructuring (DoE 1991a; Local Government Act 1992). Further structural change with regards to | The beginning of the Thatcher Government originally moved to <i>reduce</i> central controls over local government (DoE 1979) while curtailing its funding (e.g. the block grant system, ⁶⁶ and progressive reduction in grants) (DoE 1986c, 3). This emphasis on local government spending was in part a way of addressing growing inflation and promoting “sustained economic growth”, as well as a political project to reduce the size of the public sector |

⁶² Despite attempts by the Labour Government (1964-1970) to create standardised regions (8 in total), Hogwood and Lindley (1982) observe how a high degree of variation in regional boundaries, as used by government departments and other public bodies, remained.

⁶⁵ Many saw the abolition as largely politically motivated, however, it had been justified on the basis of two-tiers being wasteful use of public money given the climate of austerity. The government had claimed that the abolition had resulted in an annual saving of £100 million (DoE 1991, 4) while academic research at the time argued this claim was implausible (Chisholm 2000, 19-20).

⁶⁶ This system meant that, if a local authority spent significantly more than “was needed to provide a standard level of service”, then the proportion of an authority’s overall expenditure met by central government grant would be less (DoE 1986c, 3).

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| | increasingly considered a source of confusion for local residents and tension in strategic policy areas, such as urban planning (DoE 1991a, 5). | internal management was put forward a few months later suggesting changes including directly elected mayors (DoE 1991b, 14, 25). While Regional Planning Councils were abolished in 1979, Regional Government Offices were retained. | and reduce taxes (DoE 1986c, 2). Indirect controls on current and capital expenditure were later reintroduced when some local authorities resisted spending cuts, which it did through expenditure targets with penalties for overspending (DoE 1983, the Rates Act 1984). This approach was discontinued in 1986/7 and replaced by an incentives system (DoE 1986, 3). Experimentation culminated in the politically disastrous community charge – the “poll tax” – which sought to increase local accountability ⁶⁷ . |
| The Labour Governments of 1997-2010 ‘Second phase of modernisation’ | Concerns about economic underperformance, regional disparities, and lack of competitiveness led to a renewed emphasis on ‘modernisation’ (Cabinet Office 1999) as well as streamlined, joined-up government. Later in the 2000s, concerns grew about the unaffordability of housing and how to increase its supply (Barker Review 2004). Later in the decade, the global financial crash in 2008, and a year later, the MPs expenses scandal in 2009, brought on what was generally perceived to be a crisis in public trust (HM Government 2009). | This period saw the creation of three pillars of regional structure; Government Offices, Regional Assemblies (1998) and Regional Development Agencies (RDA Act 1998). This regionalisation was promoted as a way to achieve effective and coordinated economic development and regeneration (HC Deb 14 January 1998 Vol 304, cc372-6). Through the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, Regional Spatial Strategies were created to allow Regional Assemblies to coordinate planning strategies including housing targets. Mid-2000s onwards government developed idea of ‘city-region’ (DCLG 2006, ch.4; HM Treasury 2006; CLG Committee 2007, ch.5), and, following economic and political crises in | Inefficient internal political and management structures (in particular, the committee system ⁶⁸) were seen as preventing accountability and consistent quality of service across local authorities (DETR 1998; 1999; DTLR 2001). Eventually the rhetoric hardened with the introduction of a national framework of standards and accountability through the introduction of performance targets (DTLR 2001). Later, efforts were made to relax these targets and introduce more ‘freedom and flexibility’, and local choice (DCLG 2006, 17; 2008), particularly since centralisation was seen as hindering innovation and |

⁶⁷ It sought to create “a more direct and fairer link between voting and paying, with more local voters contributing towards the cost of providing local authority services” (DoE 1986, 9).

⁶⁸ Alternatives suggested include a directly elected mayor with a cabinet; a cabinet with a leader; and a directly elected mayor and council manager (DETR 1999, 19).

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| | | the 2000s, decentralising efforts were renewed (HM Government 2009, DCLG 2009) which culminated in the Local Democracy Act 2009. | economic growth (Lifting the Burdens Task Force 2008). |
| The Coalition and Conservative Governments of 2010-2017 ‘Austerity and bottom-up restructuring’ | Economic policy during this recent period has been dominated by ‘austerity’, following the narrative of ‘deficit reduction’ in the context of the 2008 economic crash (HM Treasury 2010; HM Government 2010a). While Regional Spatial Strategies and other regional structures were swiftly abolished in favour of more local solutions to growth and housing targets, more recently from 2017 there has been renewed emphasis on the need greater central direction over housing development and growth. | The Coalition Government abolished the regional structures created by the previous Labour Government, and replaced these structures with Local Enterprise Partnerships, local authority cooperation, and city mayors. From 2014 onwards however there has been growing emphasis on city-regions in the form of Combined Authorities (with elected mayors) and unitary authorities. Further, there has been moves to create local industrial strategies support a national industrial strategy, indicating spatial economic planning. | While many controls on local government have been lifted, local government has endured extensive funding cuts and austerity (HM Treasury 2010). This situation has led many local authorities towards sub-regionalisation (i.e. either unitary or combined authority status) as a way of budgeting in this new funding environment, which I term ‘bottom-up restructuring’. |

5.3.2. Modernisation, 1964-1970

As indicated in table 5.2 above, this period can be mainly characterised by attempts to regionalise and restructure local government. However, these developments drew concern. Firstly, the purpose of regional planning councils, what their future functions would be, and what their relationship were with local government, was questioned, and a backlash to regions as inherently undemocratic governance structures began to emerge. Liberal Party MP John Pardoe argued in the House of Commons in response to Labour government’s regional economic policy “[democracy is] a cause which we all support with our words but constantly mock by our actions”. He went on to argue:

Nowhere is democracy more threatened in Britain today than in local government, which is fighting for its life. Local initiative is stifled; the trend to national uniformity is gaining ground; central government’s desire to control everything is rapacious. ... As local government loses more and more of its functions, it is replaced by ad hoc boards appointed by Whitehall. We have the Regional Economic Planning Councils, the Regional Road Construction Units, the Regional Transport Authorities and many others. These bodies do not derive their authority from the people whom their decisions will affect. Grass roots democracy

has become a “demockery” and in its place we have “ad hocracy” (HC Deb 13 February 1967, Vol.741 cc1-2).

The following year, a member of the House of Lords, Lord Illford, argued the following:

The first thing one has to recognise about these Councils – and this is vital to the whole of our understanding of what they are supposed to do – is that they are the instruments of central Government and are no part of local government (HL Deb 20 Feb 1968, vol. 289 c356).

This regional approach, particularly within the land use sector, was increasingly viewed as top-down and oppressive in the context of new towns and large regeneration projects. There was an unprecedented increase in the scale of redevelopment in urban areas, which led to an improvement in housing conditions for some – however, the social costs for many people brought dissatisfaction and protest, with “urban motorways breaking up communities, large profits for the building industry, and a high-rise and property boom” (Blunkett and Jackson 1987, 22; Sharpe 1979, 27). Regional bodies, then, were described as having a depoliticising purpose. By extracting key policy decisions away from the electoral arena of local government, they insulated popular demands; opening decision making instead to the “influence of central government, professional ‘experts’ and private sector interests” (Boddy and Fudge 1984, 35).

A shift in public opinion was widely observed and regularly debated in Parliament. This emerging discourse on the need to widen participation and protect local democracy was epitomised by a lengthy debate in the Commons concerning regional policy and local government reform in the spring of 1967 (HC Deb 7 April 1967, vol. 744 cc537-628). The debate was motioned by David Owen, a Labour backbencher, who was concerned over the “increasing tendency for control to pass to the bureaucratic machine”, where the “increasing complexity of life pushes us remorselessly towards the larger units and greater centralisation, and yet we do not wish to lose those elements of individual participation and identification which form the basis of democratic control” (cc537-8). This debate was called in the context of a changing public attitude:

Now, with television, wireless, newspapers and greater education, I suggest that people have an enhanced awareness and sharpened knowledge, and that with this has emerged the wish to participate, and a newly awakened political force. Nationalism and regional feeling can no longer be scoffed at ... Individual dissociation from, and disenchantment with, the democratic procedure could allow us to develop a mere façade of democratic government, whether at local or national level. It is apathy and disengagement which is democracy’s most insidious foe (ibid., c538).

This quote is a good example of how one can study public opinion indirectly through political discourse.⁶⁹ Such a feedback loop of communicative discourse has been similarly suggested by Schmidt (2008, 310-1; see also Goodin and Dryzek 2006). From this view, political discourse both *responds to* and *reinforces* public trust and resentment. The debate lasted four hours and

⁶⁹ In the absence of quantitative/survey data (see Clarke *et al.* 2018), this is a potentially useful empirical approach.

during this time several MPs argued in favour of ‘localism’ in its various forms, including the idea of community / neighbourhood councils, community participation, and greater pluralism in decision making. Such innovations were perceived as a way of addressing growing suspicion, discontent, protests, unruly antagonism and divisions amongst citizens. Not long after, the government would publish the Skeffington Report on participation in planning, which surmised:

It may be that the evolution of the structures of representative government which has concerned western nations for the last century and a half is now entering into a new phase. There is a growing demand by many groups for more opportunity to contribute and for more say in the working out of policies which affect people not merely at election time, but continuously as proposals are being hammered out and, certainly, as they are being implemented (Skeffington Committee 1969, 3; see also Kilbrandon Commission 1973, para. 310)

Given this context, perhaps it was unsurprising that the Redcliffe-Maud report’s recommendation for unitary authorities, as outlined in Table 5.2., was highly unpopular: “the backlash was immediate and powerful” (Chisholm 2000, 9). An anthology of quotes collected by local councillor Barry Rose from local- and national-level politicians and journalists illustrates widespread anger and concern amongst local councillors and other stakeholders upon the publication of the Redcliffe-Maud Report. Criticism of the 1969 Report argued that the proposals would undermine local democracy, although some commentators went so far as to make comparisons to Adolf Hitler, murder, suicide, death sentences, dictatorship, civil war, and revolution (Rose 1970, 31-33). As one local councillor argued; “The [Redcliffe-Maud] report shouted loudly about democracy and then proceeded to abolish it” (Rose 1970, 179). Its suggestions for protecting local democracy, such creating ‘local councils’, was viewed cynically as an illusory ‘pie in the sky’, and members of the Commission was accused of simply placating those boroughs and districts that were being written out of existence, with the offer of ‘participation’ a small gesture (Rose 1970, 94, 105). Here, we can see the first instances of strategic localism – of a legitimating communicative discourse focused on providing assurances and appeasement to concerned stakeholders and citizens. Yet, we also see the limits of such discourse, in the sense of the enduring scepticism towards the government’s rhetoric on localism. It seemed that many suspected that government evoked democracy and localism in rhetoric simply to ‘raise flattering images’ (Rose 1970, 107).

The Labour Government was well aware of these growing criticisms. As argued in the 1970 White Paper, “The organisation of local government must always be contentious” (HMSO 1970, 28). However, despite the public’s cynicism, it adopted similar arguments to the Commission Report. One approach of addressing public criticisms was conceptually repackaging of the idea of reorganisation, as well as expanding it to include more democratic elements. In other words, the government sought to argue that the reform of local government, would, despite appearances, serve to *increase* local democracy (see also Dearlove 1979). Specifically, the argument was that increasing the size of local authorities was a necessary step to enable local authorities to take back control and autonomy from central government (see earlier discussion in footnote 56). In other words, a certain level of “centralisation” was needed to actually counteract centralisation. Chiming in with arguments made in the Redcliffe Maud

report (e.g. Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1969, para. 36), the Labour Government White Paper argued "... no serious decentralisation is possible with the present mosaic pattern of authorities with populations varying from 1,500 to over a million" (DoE 1970, 19). The 1970 White Paper then promised to "reverse the trend towards centralisation" (ibid., 19), with the new structure of local government facilitating the process of reducing, and making more flexible, (i) financial controls, (ii) non-financial controls, (iii) controls over internal management, as well as introducing a "general power for new authorities to take action for the benefit of their areas" (DoE 1970, 19). In addition, the white paper argued that with fewer authorities, there would be fewer tasks for central government to oversee in relation to local government, therefore enabling central government to reduce civil service numbers (DoE 1970, 21). The White Paper concluded; "[only if] local government is organised in strong units with power to take major decisions, will present trends towards centralisation be reversed, and local democracy resume its place as a major part of our democratic system" (ibid., 28).

The government's discourse on restructuring was also compromising. Recognising that citizens were turning against the growing centralisation of power and decision-making, as well as the regional approach to urban regeneration that had previously been accepted in the post-war period, the government proposed innovations in local government policy which were implemented to varying degrees. These policy proposals suggested that central government was willing to compromise and offer a more local, more devolved, future for England, as well as encourage local authorities to allow citizens to participate more in the decision-making in their local communities. One proposal was a neighbourhood-level unit of local government, an idea proposed in the 1969 Report, the 1970 White Paper, and the 1971 White Paper (issued by the new Conservative Government). This promise was a reflection of the ongoing debate on neighbourhoods – a geographical location which local people identified as their "local community" and "home area", which could "reflect and articulate this growing strength of grass-roots opinion" (DoE 1970, 18). Later, the 1971 White Paper similarly argued that "there has been a substantial revival of interest in recent years in the part that very small bodies or authorities can play in allowing local people themselves to get things done and in focussing local opinion on matters affecting the neighbourhood" (DoE 1971a, 11). While the 1969 report and the 1970 White Paper used the term 'local councils' to describe this idea, the Conservative Government's 1971 White Paper preferred the (existing) concept of Parish Councils.

However, neither of the two White Papers were specific on how, exactly, this system would work, particularly the priority given to reorganisation on the regional and sub-regional scale: "It would be impossible to define new areas for local councils at the same time as carrying out a radical reorganisation of the main authorities. The Government believe, however, that new areas for local councils should be worked out as soon as possible after the main reorganisation, without waiting for five years as the Commission suggested" (DoE 1970, 17). This elusiveness deepened in the 1971 White Paper, which tentatively suggested expanding parish councils also to urban areas, "if local people wish it", but also arguing how small communities may be better represented by non-statutory bodies (DoE 1971a, 11).

Criticisms and scepticism of this pro-local, pro-pluralist rhetoric as being "ritualistic genuflections from time to time towards the value of local democracy" (Cochrane 1989, 98)

was readily at hand, particularly in the academic community, as well as amongst MPs and Councillors. As Arblaster (1972, 56-7) argued, “it is reasonable to assume that the slogan of participation has been taken up by established authorities as a device for taking some of the wind out of the sails of discontent, without there being any intention of making more than nominal concessions to the demands of the discontented”. Therefore, while localism was operationalised in the communicative discourse, it is unclear if it was successful in legitimising local government reform, in the sense of addressing the dissatisfaction and sense of powerlessness many felt with the machinery of government. The Labour Government’s White Paper struggled in its attempt to balance, on the one hand, the desire to rationalize government, with being seen to respect and protect the concept of local democracy. This element of public opinion was ultimately adopted and communicated by the Conservative Party, which promised in the 1970 election manifesto to retain the two-tier structure of local government:

We will bring forward a sensible measure of local government reform which will involve a genuine devolution of power from the central government and will provide for the existence of a two-tier structure. There will be full consultation about the pattern of boundaries and the effect of changes upon existing resources of local government (Conservative Party 2000a [1970], 194).

Following the Conservative victory in 1970, the 1971 White Paper reiterated their manifesto commitment, in particular, ensuring “that the special interests of rural areas are not overshadowed” (DoE 1971a, 10). It further argued how “above all else, a genuine local democracy implies that decisions should be taken – and should be seen to be taken – as locally as possible” (DoE 1971a, 6). Despite this shift, there was consensus, too, particularly with regards to the Regional Economic Planning Councils, which was seen as necessary and positive for the country. Ultimately, the two-tier system of Local Government which had been so criticised by the Labour Government was retained in the Local Government Act 1972, which created two-tier metropolitan areas as well as non-metropolitan areas, both of which contained smaller districts. The unitary idea was scrapped, for now, although difficulties with the two-tier system did not take long to appear (DoE 1979a).

The conclusion from this period is that there is a tendency to use ideas of local democracy and localism in political communicative discourse, particularly in order to legitimise a policy seen as have centralising effects. However, this period also shows that this kind of communicative discourse is not necessarily effective, and that reform in local government becomes highly partisan to address changes in public opinion, with the result that fundamental issues in relation to local government structure remain unresolved.

5.3.3. Streamlining and accountability, 1979-1997

While the debate on the level of justifiable incursion of central government into local government continued, the context of on-going short-term economic shocks in 1973/5, the IMF loan in 1976, and the so-called ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1979, resulted in growing intervention by central government. Despite these economic challenges, a Committee of Inquiry led by Frank Layfield observed how public opinion in favour of local-level decision making remained and was even growing; “An increasing number of community action groups call for greater

involvement of local citizens in the affairs of government – central and local – at the very local level” (1976, 65). Yet, despite a “unanimity of professed intention” to decentralise and an appearance of a localist consensus, centralising forces outweighed pressures towards localism, where economic crisis and austerity in public spending saw an “acceleration of the trend to centralisation” (Layfield Committee 1976, 70; see also DoE 1970; DoE 1971a). The ability of local government to raise its own revenue was particularly a concern, given that increasing the proportion of central grants would “run contrary to the Government’s objective of devolving power from central to local government” (1971b, 3). The Layfield Committee report concluded that “a durable financial system can be established only if it is founded on a political choice about the direction in which the relationship between central and local government should move” (Layfield Committee 1976, xxvi).

The beginning of the Thatcher Government saw a continuation of this theme. Despite its ‘anti-local government’ reputation⁷⁰ over the course of its eleven years in power, its ‘professed intentions’ were originally to *reduce* central controls and well as oversee decentralisation (Stoker 2004a, 28). A White Paper published only a few months after winning the general election starts off with the following statement:

The Government has announced its determination to reduce substantially the number of bureaucratic controls over local government activities. This should give local authorities more choice and flexibility and allow them to become more efficient in their use of both money and manpower (DoE 1979b, para. 1).

The paper later adds; “Democratically elected local authorities are wholly responsible bodies who must be free to get on with the tasks entrusted to them by Parliament without constant interference in matters of detail by the Government of the day” (DoE 1979, para. 4). The White Paper outlined nearly 300 controls that the government intended to appeal (p. 1). Judging from the legacy of the Thatcher Government, it is evident that these, again, ‘professed intentions’ did not come to pass. The White Paper’s suggestions were brought into legislation through the Local Government, Planning and Land Bill, described in its first reading by Lord Bellwin: “a Bill to relax controls over local government” (HL Deb 29 November 1979, Vol. 403 c492). True to the pattern outlined above and by the Kilbrandon Commission and the Layfield Committee, the second reading in the Commons, introduced by The Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, was a bit more ambivalent: “the real thrust of our removal from detailed control comes in part VIII of the Bill, where we proposed capital ceilings for local authority expenditure” (HC Deb 5 February 1980, Vol. 978 cc244-5). Through the 1980 Act, the government brought in capital ceilings for local authority expenditure: this contentious central government intervention to control spending was justified on the basis of the ‘economic circumstances of today’ and the need to challenge ‘established habits and attitudes’ (ibid.).

⁷⁰ This is a well-known reputation gained from a series of public spending controls as well as legislative reform, including the Rates Act 1984, which introduced further local authority spending controls, the Housing Act 1980, which gave tenants of local authorities the right to buy their home, the Local Government Act 1985 which abolished the Greater London Council and the metropolitan county councils. This history has been widely commented on by many researchers and does not require lengthy re-iteration here (see, for example, Foster 2005; Gamble 2009; Cochrane 1989b; Blunkett and Jackson 1987; Stoker 2004a, 41-7)

Given the contradictory rhetoric emphasising reducing controls of local authorities, I argue that this, again, demonstrates the strategic and legitimising use of 'localism'. Here, reducing controls on local government was a means to a specific end, a compromise for the funding limits that were being brought in. As Michael Heseltine argued at a later date, "We have announced proposals to introduce ceilings on local government capital expenditure, but within those ceilings we have also announced changes that will give local government much greater flexibility as to how it uses its capital resources" (HC Deb 14 November 1979, Vol. 973 c1324). This form of strategic localism was described by Bulpitt (1989, 69):

What the Conservative leadership appeared to want from central-local relations in this initial period was a system of separate, reciprocal autonomies. Each level of government would look after its own as far as possible; but inevitably the centre had a wider responsibility (and mandate).

With this, the Thatcher government rejected the overly normative understanding of localism which pushed for greater autonomy without clearly articulating practical implementation. Indeed, as a White Paper later argued, while "local authorities make an essential contribution to the well-being of both private and public lives of the community", it dismissed any radical models of local autonomy by stating "we live in a unitary and not a federal state" (DoE 1983a, para 1.1-1.2).

Yet, much of the communicative discourse during this time focused on accountability rather than local control, focusing largely on the extent to which local government was (democratically) accountable to its local tax payers (rate payers), where it was suggested that "Only about 35% of those eligible to vote in local elections pay full rates" (DoE 1983a, para. 2.2-2.3). The Green Paper, *Paying for Local Government*, suggested that "... the main role of local government is to provide services in a way which properly reflects differences in local circumstances and local choice" (DoE 1986c, vii). While the Green Paper argued that "effective local accountability must be the cornerstone of successful local government", it argued that the present finance system was reducing this accountability, which was seen to be limiting the ability of the local electorate to make "sensible choices" on the "balance between local priorities" and the "overall level of spending" (ibid.). Government emphasised at the time that the only alternative to the path of increasing central control was improving local accountability, with accountability being the preferable option since greater central control would require more central and local manpower and *further* dilution of local accountability, as well as greater central-local conflict (DoE 1986, 9; Ridley 1988, 14). This thinking indicated that, rather than empowering local people *through devolving powers to local government*, the Thatcher Government took the rhetoric one step further: they offered to empower the people directly (see also Bulpitt 1989, 72). As the then Secretary of State, Nicholas Ridley, argued:

In changing the ways in which things have been done for decades, we are predictably accused of attacking local government. I emphatically reject that charge. Certainly local government's powers in certain respects will be limited, but they will be limited in practice not by the Government but by local people. The style of local government will have to become much more 'interactive' (Ridley 1988, 34)

This was however not a holistic form of empowerment. Empowerment was offered mainly towards two groups: as already indicated, empowering the local tax payer (rate payers),⁷¹ as well as empowering the council house tenant.⁷² This emphasis on empowering the individual was expanded under John Major with the White Paper ‘The Citizens Charter’ (Cabinet Office 1991) which promised minimum standards, transparency, choice, and complaints systems in the delivery of a wide range of services.

In parallel, moves to ‘streamline’ local government, which had started with the abolition of the GLC and metropolitan counties in the mid-80s (DoE 1983; DoE 1991a, para. 25), continued in the 1990s as elaborated on in Table 5.2 above. Many saw the abolition as largely politically motivated, however, it had been justified on the basis of two-tiers being wasteful use of public money given the climate of austerity.⁷³ These kinds of concerns and criticisms of the two-tier system was already voiced in by the 1974-1979 Labour Government, where it argued the sharing of powers led to “wasteful duplication, to confusion over responsibilities, and to friction between authorities” (DoE 1979a, 17). Seen from this perspective, the need for strategic, supply side interventions for growth was difficult to disentangle from more short-term fiscal concerns, particularly of public spending (this convergence is similar to the current climate of devolution). Using similar justifications to the Thatcher Government, the Major Government revisited the question of unitary authorities (DoE 1991a), a form of restructuring that was *still* as contentious and unpopular as it was in the 1960s, with most areas showing little support as demonstrated by data collected from Royal Mail leaflets and MORI polling at the time (Chisholm 2000, 79). There were also similarities in the legitimating rhetoric between the Wilson Government and the Major Government. As the 1991 Green Paper argued, unitary status would “offer the opportunity of relating the structure of local government more closely to communities with which people identify” (DoE 1991a, para. 26). The later Green Paper reiterated its commitment to local government as having an “important role to play not just in securing services but also in encouraging local participation in the political system” (DoE 1991b, 1). However, rather than repeat the mistakes of the earlier attempt at reorganisation, there were provisions for extensive consultation to ensure that local people were given a say in the structure appropriate for their area, with the intention of creating a sense of openness and ownership for the citizens affected (LGCE 1995, Ch. 7; Chisholm 2000, 27, 77). The presumption of any particular size was

⁷¹ This reasoning eventually lead to the politically disastrous ‘poll tax’ (community charge), with the government in the 1983 White Paper had originally rejected, on the basis of a flat-rate levy being inherently regressive, expensive to monitor (as a necessity to increase fairness), and democratically problematic – “a tax on the right to vote” (DoE 1983a, para. 2.9). Despite this, the idea was renewed in the 1986 Green Paper and was justified as a way of increasing local accountability (DoE 1986).

⁷² For example, since their 1964 election manifesto, the Conservatives ran a slogan focused on renewing democracy – not (just) in the form of a *participative* democracy or *local* democracy, but in terms of a ‘capital-owning’ / ‘home-owning’ / ‘property-owning’ democracy. This slogan spearheaded the policy of ‘right-to-buy’ which, in contrast to the poll tax, was hugely successful politically. Right to buy gave housing tenants the right, as well as financial incentives, to purchase their local authority-owned council home. The Conservative’s emphasis on empowering the individual through greater opportunities for economic prosperity and personal wealth (through property), greater accountability on taxes and public spending, was pertinent considering the economic situation. The challenge of stagflation which began in 1973 continued into the 1980s: in 1980, inflation rose again to over 20 per cent in the UK, with sharp rises in unemployment which reached 11 per cent of 3 million by 1982 where it remained until 1986 (Gamble 2009, 13).

⁷³ The government had claimed that the abolition had resulted in an annual saving of £100 million (DoE 1991, 4) and yet academic research at the time argued this claim was implausible (Chisholm 2000, 19-20).

removed, and reorganisation was targeted towards the shire counties, rather than all-encompassing (DoE 1991a). Yet, “the argument that removing one tier would improve accountability sat ill with the high degree of financial and other control over local authorities exercised by central government on the one hand, and the increased complexity of service provision that had come about in the years leading up to 1990 on the other” (Chisholm 2000, 32).

The localist rhetoric of the 1991 Green Paper and later the Local Government Commission that was set up to review the structural changes (taking over from the previous Local Government Boundary Commission) diverged little from that of the Redcliffe-Maud Report and the 1970 White Paper decades earlier: all four showed a consistently clear position on the need to expand the role and importance of town and parish councils (LGCE 1995, 85; Chisholm 2000, 76). As the earlier 1991 Green Paper argued; “operating at a very local level, parish and town councils play a useful role within communities in providing local facilities and representing local opinion. The Government believe that there may be a case for considering whether to enhance the role of parish councils, especially where a new unitary authority covers a wide area” (DoE 1991a, para. 32). The parallel review on the internal management of local authorities, composed of a joint Working Party of the three main local authority associations, the Audit Commission, and the Local Government Management Board, supported “decentralisation of the decision-making process to the lowest practical level” (Working Party 1993, 6-7). As the report later elaborates:

The community leadership role as well as the authority’s day to day operations could be further enhanced by some degree of devolution of powers to area or neighbourhood committees. In these circumstances there are opportunities for local people to determine their own priorities about the level and quality of services they receive (Working Party 1993, para. 5.39).

Again, there were similarities in the rhetoric of the 1960s in the reappearance of the concept of ‘participation in planning’, and parallel steps were also taken in several government Departments and organisations to widen the scope for greater community rights, including involvement in planning, where it was felt there was a “gulf between the support for involvement in principle and the commitment to it in specific cases” (DoE 1994, 29). For example, the Countryside Commission first piloted ‘Village Design Statements’ in 1993, which, in a similar vein to Neighbourhood Planning, were not to determine “whether development should take place”, but rather to set out “how planned development should be carried out” in order to “protect and enhance local identity” (Countryside Commission 1996, 6). The research report on ‘Community Involvement in Planning and Development Processes’ (DoE 1994), explored how such greater involvement in planning could complement the decentralist agenda of local government reform, exploring innovations such as ‘Neighbourhood Forum’ and ‘Area Committee’: “The intention to delegate power is a form of community involvement; important because it includes a structure which can apply over time and across any project which might proceed in that area” (DoE 1994, 69).⁷⁴ Similarly, the Rural England

⁷⁴ This debate was reflected in elements of the Conservative’s ‘Single Regeneration Budget’ which supported a bottom-up, partnership approach in urban regeneration, with the original guidance (DoE 1995) encouraging the

White Paper emphasised the importance of improving consultation and evolving powers to parish councils, and the creation of new town and parish councils (DoE/MAFF 1995, 23).

Perhaps this discourse and policy reform that emphasised local decision-making and empowerment reflected the fact that the popularity of the concept of localism did not subside. Powers to communities, and local government more broadly, demanded a shift in approach, and the Conservatives were “forced to re-think their attitudes to local government” (Chisholm 2000, 133). Already by the mid 1980s, doubts were emerging whether growing controls on local government was politically sustainable. Survey findings in the 1985 Report on British Social Attitudes suggested as much:

Few people of any political persuasion (even committed Conservatives) supported further inroads by central government into local government affairs, whether in general or in respect to rate controls ... such consistent support for local government autonomy may derive in part from the public’s general feeling that local authorities are rather more accessible than central government is (Young 1985, 149).

A shift in local government finance policy, described in the 1986 Green Paper, was propelled by the recognition that too much centralisation caused a lot of unproductive opposition. As a Government Green Paper observed at the time: “The modest success in holding back spending has been accompanied by a worsening of the relationship between central Government and even the moderate and responsible local authorities” (DoE 1986, 5). This shifting attitude in the government does indicate Young’s suggestion that “*localism* is an important and often overlooked component of Conservative ideology, one which a Conservative administration engaged in making inroads into local government autonomy ignores at its peril” (Young 1985, 156; see also Young 1975; Bulpitt 1989, 58). Miller’s (1988, 243-4) observation of contemporary public opinion on local government during this time is illuminating:

... the public were well informed about the limitations of local democracy in terms of both its scope and its freedom of action. At the same time, they wanted less central control and were totally opposed to appointed boards instead of elected councils. They knew that local democracy was limited, but they wanted more. Instead of rejecting local elections as a ‘sham and a fraud’ the public were firmly attached to the limited amount of local democracy that they enjoyed, aware of the limitations, but critical of central government and central control rather than alienated from local democracy. For the public, local democracy was defective rather than fraudulent; their expectations were not high and their disappointment was not intense.

Later, the Major Government admitted that the party had taken things too far during the 1980s, in response to the Select Committee Report ‘Rebuilding Trust’:

The Government shares the Committee’s belief in the importance both of local democracy and of local government itself ... The Government also shares the

involvement of the community in local area regeneration, however, the achievement of participation was varied (Rhodes, Tyler and Brennan 2007, Ch. 5).

view of the Committee that traditional relationships between central and local government broke down in the 1980s and that from that point there needed to be a rebuilding of trust between the two parties to that relationship (HM Government 1996, 3).

This sentiment eventually caught up with the party in the two elections during the 1990s. As forcefully argued by Simon Jenkins, “Contempt for localism cost the Tories dear”:

All over Britain the Tory Party’s “little platoons” packed their bags and went home. The Tories were devastated at two elections in a row. Yet they remained determinedly centralist throughout. They opposed Scottish and Welsh devolution. They opposed elected mayors. They protected rate capping and denied local discretion. They did not give an inch. Small wonder urban Britain – and rural Britain beyond the Home Counties – ceased to regard Conservatism as part of its political culture (Jenkins 2004, 45).

This section indicates emerging historical parallels and repetitions surrounding policy making on local government: it is a legitimating discourse used periodically. While it was largely absent from much of the Thatcher Government, localism re-emerged in the 1990s as both a legitimating discourse and a material policy change, indicating that if centralisation of power is taken too far, governments’ will eventually struggle to justify it in the face of public opinion. It also indicates differences in approach between opposition parties and newly elected governments, who seem to view decentralisation positively and are quick to offer promises to devolve power, versus established governments where this energy seems to subside.

5.3.4. Second phase of modernisation, 1997-2010

The Labour Government of 1997-2010 was marked by a confused approach to devolution. On the one hand, the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the communitarian language of Blair (Hale 2006), seemed to mark a radical approach that sought to empower decentralise power to the countries of the UK, as well as to individual neighbourhoods and communities within England. In terms of the latter, I have identified a ‘second phase of modernisation’ where the process of regionalisation was renewed, for similar reasons as before: RDAs were created as a way of addressing economic underperformance and competitiveness, by providing a more strategic and coordinated governance approach to economic development and regeneration. Further, the justifications for this were similar to previous governments’ approaches to regionalisation and sub-regionalisation, which tended to underplay the economic and strategic purposes for regional governance and emphasise instead democratic and decentralist motives (see also Kenny 2013, 186). As argued by the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, Richard Caborn:

Regional development agencies are an important first step in decentralising decision making to the English regions. ... The RDAs will be led by regional people; they will be influenced by and take account of regional interests. The Government are committed to directly elected regional government in the English regions where there is popular demand for it (HC Deb 14 January 1998, Vol. 304 cc374-5).

In parallel to regionalisation, the government moved to expand ‘local democracy’ through the revision of local political structures, including the introduction of elected mayors, depending on local popular support as indicated through a referendum (DETR 1998; 1999). Eventually the rhetoric hardened with the introduction of performance targets to measure service delivery across local authorities (DTLR 2001). As previously discussed, while Conservative party ‘localism’ has tended to be about ‘local choice’ in combination with financial cuts, Labour localism has tended to be about increasing and enabling financial support while also controlling the outcomes, a reflection of its political commitment to socio-spatial equality in the provision of services (Wills 2016a, 26).⁷⁵ However, these performance targets were extensive and unpopular (see Jenkins 2004, Clark and Mather 2003). This was also the point at which public opinion, once again, turned against state interventions. Despite the energy in 1997 that led to Scottish and Welsh devolution, and the moves towards elected Regional Assemblies (DTLR 2002), the government clearly struggled to legitimise either its regional or local government policies and was increasingly accused of overseeing centralisation. As the then chairman of the LGA, Jeremy Beecham, argued:

There is confusion at the heart of government policy. We hear talk of a ‘new localism’. There is a policy of devolution of central government’s powers to elected regional assemblies. But the end result of the bills currently going through parliament on planning and the regions will be that powers will be taken away from directly elected local authorities and given to new regional quangos set up by the government where no elected assembly has come into being (Beecham 2003, 1).

Conservative MP David Davis had described these proposed regional assemblies as “soulless regional bureaucracies; bleak outstations of Brussels” (Davis 2001; cited in Kenny 2014, 183). This sentiment was shared by a number of MPs within the Labour Party, which was at the time grappling with internal disagreements on what exactly ‘localism’ and ‘decentralisation’ meant from a geographical point of view. During this time, tensions surrounded the question on whether policy would focus on regional devolution or more localised forms of devolution, such as to local government or city-regions (Kenny 2014, 183-4).

The nail in the coffin on the regional project was the victory of the ‘no’ side on the North East Assembly referendum. The campaign ‘North East Says No’ led by Dominic Cummings was, similarly to the Vote Leave Campaign in 2016, anti-establishment and warned of an additional layer of politicians and bureaucrats with the slogan “politicians talk, we pay” (Cummings 2019; McDevitt 2019). The campaign largely ignoring the intricacies of the actual proposed changes, focusing instead on issues like resourcing for the NHS (Ibid.). These similarities between 2004 and 2016, between localism and populism, will be further explored in the next chapter. Ultimately, the win of the ‘no’ side meant that the legitimacy of regional governance was lost. Without democratic governance from the regional assembly, regional development agencies would now operate without direct democratic legitimacy. Perceptions of central government

⁷⁵ An interesting development of this in more recent years is Labour’s adopted language of ‘postcode *choice*’, an indication that the Labour Party might be moving closer to the local choice model of the Conservatives than its previous position on preventing postcode lotteries (Wills 2016a, 26).

incursions further deepened when planning powers were removed from county councils in relation to housing policy. Housing targets, based on demographic projections, were to be determined by Regional Offices through Treasury-approved Regional Spatial Strategies. Similar to the emotive language used in the 1960s, “It was likened to the Luftwaffe (by the Spectator), Soviet social engineering (by The Times) and the death of rural England (by the Green Party)” (Jenkins 2004, 67). As argued in the Democratic Audit in 2005, “Proposals for weak elected regional assemblies in England have been rejected. Local government is too remote from local communities and too much under tight central control. Overall, Britain compares very badly on both regional, and local government with similar European states” (Democratic Audit 2005, 4; for further critique, see Jenkins 2004).

Legitimacy for the regional governance structure was retrospectively sought through revising the unpopular targets and controls on local government that had garnered speed during the first term in government, culminating in a Treasury and Cabinet Office-led review on ‘Devolving decision making’, which was announced in July 2003 to review targets, funding, and guidance for local authorities and regional bodies (HM Treasury 2004a; 2004b; 2006). The foreword to the first report, written by Chancellor Gordon Brown, first *justifies* the initial stage of the modernisation agenda where ‘ambitious targets’ were necessary to provide the ‘focus and discipline’ to achieve objectives and end post code lotteries (2004a, i). Secondly, the text concedes a shift away from targets back towards the ‘long term objective’ which Gordon Brown claims had ‘always been’ to ‘match ambitious national standards with a vigorous local autonomy and flexibility’. Thirdly, ‘far more radical devolution of responsibilities’ is promised as part of the second stage of modernisation and reform (2004a, i).

This backtracking, much like the backtracking of the previous Conservative Government in the 1990s as outlined in the previous section, indicates the strategic importance of a communicative discourse of localism, indicating its uses in terms of legitimating policy agendas. The backtracking continued in the White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, “It is now time to show our confidence in local government, local communities and other local public service providers by giving them more freedom and powers to bring about the changes they want to see” (DCLG 2006, 4), and later in the 2008 White Paper *Communities in control: Real Power, Real People* (DCLG 2008). Even at this stage, targets were justified as a basis for devolution. As then Prime Minister Gordon Brown writes in the foreword, “Over the last ten years local councils have improved the quality of the services they offer local people, and as a result we have freed them up from central government control, with fewer targets and greater trust” (DCLG 2008, i). A similar pattern to previous governments, the 2008 White Paper marked a shift towards community engagement and participation, of localism aimed below the local government level: “Now with this White Paper we want to move to the next stage in that process – enhancing the power of communities and helping people up and down the country to set and meet their own priorities. In this way we strengthen local democracy by increasing participation” (Ibid.). However, as indicated in a Select Committee Report, stakeholders remained generally unimpressed, “There is clearly a wide division of opinion between the Government’s view of recent developments and the views of the majority of our witnesses, many of whom believe that central direction and control remain unchanged or even that they have increased” (CLG Committee 2009, 13). With the 2008 financial crisis, and the expenses

scandal in 2009, and the looming 2010 election, the question of legitimisation became ever more acute: “These twin crises represent a fundamental breach of trust” (HM Government 2009, 10). A White Paper, ‘Building Britain’s Future’, sought to address these concerns, to address a sense of anger, unfairness, anxiety, and distrust, by promising democratic and constitutional renewal. This renewal encompassed devolution and decentralisation of power, as the Prime Minister Gordon Brown argued in the foreword:

But we need to go further in responding to the crisis of trust in the political system, opening up our constitution and Britain’s political institutions to reconnect citizens with our representative democracy. The task of modernising the British constitutional settlement is not yet complete: we must be prepared to give power away, reforming Parliament and devolving and decentralising power even further throughout our country (HM Government 2009, 8).

This white paper put forward the idea of city-regions, while originally cause of internal Labour party disagreement (Kenny 2014), now emerging as the stronger idea following the failures of the regional project. However, despite these promises, the Labour Party did not manage to retain power in the 2010 election. Here, we seem similar narratives to the previous change in government in 1997. The newly appointed Conservative leader William Hague (then leader of the Opposition) argued in 1998: “... for too long we have treated local government, local government elections and local councillors as if they didn’t matter. We spent far too much time reorganising local government and not enough time campaigning for it” (Municipal Journal 27 Feb 1998, 7; cited in Chisholm 2000, 134). The similarities in context, timing, and sentiment of this statement to Ed Miliband’s speech as the leader of the Opposition at the 2011 Labour Party Conference are remarkable, “Yes we need more decisions to be made locally, with local democracy free of the constraints we have placed on it in the past and free of an attitude which has looked down its nose at local government” (The Independent 28 September 2011). Both leaders were openly critical of their own parties’ legacy with regards to local government, accepted responsibility, and signalled a shift in approach.⁷⁶ Both parties experienced similar political consequences to their agenda on local government.

This section again emphasises continuity, rather than change, in the policy failures and political difficulties facing governance reform. The patterns surrounding structural change in regions and boundaries, as well as local government finance, first explored in section 5.3.2, seem to re-emerge periodically, and in both scenarios, a communicative discourse of localism is operationalised particularly in moments when a government’s policy agenda becomes untenable (such as performance and housing targets). The cases listed thus far however demonstrate a pattern: that localism in government discourse is often used in a negative sense, retrospectively legitimise and justify, rather than to kickstart reform as an end in itself.

⁷⁶ This role of opposition parties will be further explored in Chapter 6.

5.3.5. Austerity and bottom-up restructuring, 2010-2017

While the reforms of the Coalition Government, as outlined in Chapter 4, emphasised the role of local communities from the outset, the challenges and requirements of economic intervention have been similar to previous governments. The austerity agenda as borne out of the 2008 financial crisis, which the Conservatives communicated as a crisis of public debt and deficit, and lack of economic competitiveness, and later, the devolution agenda advanced in the later years of the Coalition Government, demonstrate this.

The 2010 Treasury Spending Review demonstrates the link between localism and the change in services and spending. It describes itself as being “underpinned by a radical programme of public service reform, changing the way services are delivered by redistributing power away from central government and enabling sustainable, long term improvements in services” (HM Treasury 2010, 8). This is an example of strategic localist discourse: localism was presented as a way of implementing central government policy and aims, in this case, meeting the challenge of reducing the deficit. It is also a reflection of the association between reduced funding and (at least the discourse of) local control. While the spending review promised to ‘radically’ increase local authorities’ freedom to manage budgets, it demanded ‘tough choices’ on service delivery and allocation (ibid, p. 9). As Greg Clark argued during Select Committee evidence:

... if the cake is shrinking – as it undoubtedly is and, for reasons that we all understand, there is not the possibility of increasing local authorities’ resources in particular – then there is an additional imperative to give local people and local councils more control over what is actually there in the first place. That is why I think that the need for [decentralisation] is particularly great at the moment (CLG Committee 2013, Ev3).

The spending review similarly emphasises the importance of communities, citizens and volunteers in playing a bigger role in shaping and providing services (HM Treasury 2010, 9). For example, despite earlier references to the idyll of Swiss cantons, neighbourhood planning was not about a wholesale change in governance and participation: it was a specific policy fix to the housing problem, where it was perceived that resistance to development was causing delays, costs, and loss of housing supply. In this sense, as suggested by a civil servant who was part of the team developing neighbourhood planning in DCLG, the policy was as a way of reconciling a long running tension between the desire to have local control, which is what politically people want and like, and the desire in government to make economically rational decisions [21]. While the Localism Act replaced regionalism and its housing targets (overseeing the abolition of all regional institutions – the Regional Development Agencies, Regional Assemblies, Regional Offices, as well as the Regional Spatial Strategies – by 2012) with the Duty to Cooperate,⁷⁷ neighbourhood planning was presented as a way to humanise and democratise the planning system, by, similarly to Village Design Statements, involving communities at an earlier stage on the design, quality, and location of development (note: *not* quantity, unless the plan allocated *more* housing in relation to the Local Plan). Decentralisation

⁷⁷ A duty on local authorities sharing borders to cooperate in strategic planning matters.

in this sense then sought to *increase* housebuilding by reducing conflict. As was argued in the neighbourhood planning impact assessment:

One of the principal objectives of neighbourhood planning is to increase the rate of growth of housing and economic development in England. Coupled with a system of powerful financial incentives ... neighbourhood planning will achieve this by enabling neighbourhood communities to exercise real power in respect of the design and precise location of the development that takes place in the neighbourhood area (DCLG 2011a, 10).

This quote shows the general tendency in policy to ignore the inconsistency between, on the one hand, introducing ‘powerful financial incentives’, and on the other hand, promoting ‘real power’. Indeed, this strategic role of neighbourhood planning exposed the contradiction of Localism already in its infancy, since, regardless of whatever circumscribed version of localism was offered by the government, localism was a concept that tended to be interpreted intuitively and widely, and even radically, by communities. As one Liberal Democrat politician argued: “... the interpretation of [localism] was a lot of it informed by local campaigning against development, and that contradiction exists today, and it’s still there, and it’s still there in the way it’s debated”, adding; “the contradiction between ‘we want lots of homes’ and ‘we’ve empowered you to say no to them’, as it’s seen, has increased the political difficulty of delivering the housing numbers that they want” [23]. Similarly, a Labour politician during interview warned that the risk is that a lot of people will “feel they’re developing neighbourhood plans under false pretences” [22]. Here, I include three comments made during the Localism Bill debate that similarly demonstrate concern over the public’s wide interpretation, and the potential for disillusionment, of localism.

We are setting out for the worst of all possible worlds. We will raise expectations and then set people up to fail, thus setting this whole community empowerment agenda back years and years; I think there will be an awful lot of disappointed people (Hazel Blears, HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol 521 c607).

... the only thing worse than not giving people a voice is the pretence that we are giving them a voice. That is not only disempowering but sends a message that when it comes to the crunch the Government simply do not trust people to make decisions for themselves (Zac Goldsmith, *ibid.*, c648).

I consider the Bill to be poorly thought through and irresponsible, often reflecting only knee-jerk populism and being in danger of raising false hopes (Kate Green, *ibid.*, c632).

This accusation of populism, and the link between populism and localism, will be further explored empirically in the following chapter. What these statements show is a growing cynicism of the rhetoric surrounding localism, and the growing contractions that emerged between the interpretations of those on the receiving end of the policy change, and those overseeing reform. In other words, there seemed to be a growing conflict between *normative* and *strategic* localism.

Strategic localism, as both a communicative discourse and material policy effect, applied also to larger questions of local government restructuring, which entered the agenda as ‘localism’ evolved into ‘devolution’, as explored in the previous chapter. Bottom-up reorganisation, or, as one interviewee described, self-aggregation [37], describes the ability for a collective of bordering local authorities to move into partnership and form one bigger local authority (either unitary or combined authority). Self-aggregation is, one might argue, a useful strategy for achieving local government territorial reform. In theory, local authorities decide *for themselves* how they want to enter in partnerships, rather than face the prospect of central government deciding for them, as was the case in the late 1960s, with the Redcliffe-Maude report and the two White Papers that followed, and in the 1980s, when the Thatcher Government abolished the Greater London Council and Metropolitan Councils. To a certain extent, it emulated and extended the thinking of the creation of unitary authorities in the 1990s as explored earlier, where the then Minister of State for the Environment (Earl Ferrers) argued that “the government believe that local authorities, because they know the local area and because they represent local people, are often best able to respond to local needs” (HL Deb 7 November 1995, Vol. 566 c1654). Later, a member of the boundary review commented how “these proposals contained a dash of populism, in that local people were to have a say in the structure appropriate for their area” (Chisholm 2000, 27).

The idea of self-aggregation began when the Coalition Government abolished the regional development agencies, regional offices, and the regional spatial strategies, and replaced these with Local Enterprise Partnerships. As one of the junior ministers commented how the main opposition (Labour), civil servants, and Local Authorities found the idea of self-aggregation “pretty challenging”, where “for years and years and years it suited everybody to be told by Whitehall what they should do” [37]. Over time, local authority funding shifted to a more bottom-up approach, as central government grants were replaced by local-level funding (business and domestic rates), and a greater proportion of central grants were deal-based (e.g. devolution deals). However, local government was limited in terms of raising these rates. As the same interviewee commented:

... the system we now have is, you’re on your own folks, you’ll have to live off your own tax base, and by the way you can’t put your taxes up. So, I mean, that’s proving to be- actually, you look at social care or lots of other things, we’re getting to a crisis point. Now, to such an extent that this year councils have been permitted by the Tory government to put up council tax bill to cover additional social care cuts. *So, what, what in theory and ideology is right to let local councils to be free to raise and spend their own income, um, which was where - what the Localism Bill mechanism sets up, is now disrupted by councils’ ability to raise taxes.* So, it sort of throws in devolution where, sooner or later, something is going to snap [37].

Similarly, as a Councillor from Cambridge argued,

... they devolved the decisions on council tax benefit. They cut the council tax benefit bill by 10%, devolved it to us to decide how to achieve that 10%. Which is, in a way, really good because we as a Council would make decisions about where we want those cuts to fall or not fall ... But all the same, you can be quite

cynical about it. Devolve the cuts and decisions, you know, I mean, it's so far from being any respectful definition of local self-government, it's sort of laughable [03].

In turn, the combination of devolution and austerity set the stage for a new approach to local government restructuring under the policy agenda of 'Devolution', which upscaled the methods of the LEP in relation to financial incentives, in combination with structural self-aggregation, with the creation of the (Mayoral) Combined Authority. Seen from this angle, the Conservative Government's devolution agenda, as briefly explored in Chapter 4, was rhetorically concerned with a renewed approach to localism, and also strategic in the sense that it addressed a fundamental problem in local government restructuring. Boundary reform (in the sense of widening local authority boundaries), and the threat to councillors and local government officials' jobs, as well as the prospect of increasingly remote governing and its impact on local democracy, is evidently very unpopular, as we have repeatedly seen in the previous sections. Commenting in 1969, Labour MP John Mackintosh observed "... there are few votes to be won by promises to reconstruct local government" (*The Times* 12 Dec 1969, 10). Similarly, as one interviewee suggested, "local government re-organisation is something no government really wants to take on formally" [05].

This aversion to local government restructuring was confirmed by a senior civil servant working directly on devolution in MHCLG. The interviewee argued that the existing two-tier system was not constructive, but that governments since 2010 had been opposed to restructuring, pointing out how the last round of unitary councils in 2009 caused a huge amount of local and political conflict [38]. Further, they pointed out, Conservative governments have wanted to avoid causing a rift between local conservative councillors and the central government [38]. Self-determination through 'devolution deals' made between central government and local authorities (proposing to join together to form a Combined Authority), offered a way of avoiding these political difficulties and legitimisation challenges. As former head of the civil service, Lord Bob Kerslake, observed during Select Committee oral evidence: "You stop the problem that previously bedevilled devolution, which was unless everyone did it the same way, it was not going to happen" (CLG Committee 2016, 11, Q172). In turn, austerity, rather than top-down imposition, provided the (financial)⁷⁸ incentive for local authorities to self-aggregate in this way, which, while exposing the false pretence of it being a bottom-up process, still insulated central government from negative public opinion, where challenges focused mainly on austerity itself rather than its implications on governance and central-local relations. The civil servant admitted that, because of the financial pressures since 2010, restructuring has been able to move forward despite political conflict of doing so: "local government has accepted change under considerable pressure" [38]. There were also elements of *earned* autonomy where areas which ended up adopting a Combined Authority structure, particularly with a mayor at the helm (a so called Mayoral Combined Authority, or MCA), received more devolved powers.

⁷⁸ At times, this financial incentive is extreme, as is evident on the case of Northamptonshire. Local government (near) bankruptcies have provided central government with the powers to force local councils to restructure into either combined authorities or unitary authorities. Not all of the financial struggles of local councils in recent years can be attributed to mismanagement, but rather, to the longer-term impact of austerity, indicating a clear link between centrally-steer austerity and local government restructuring (see Butler 2018).

Therefore, a ‘bottom-up’, austerity-induced restructuring of an increasing number of local authorities has been a way of implementing the unpopular yet omnipresent ideas of Redcliffe-Maud seemingly ‘through the backdoor’. From the perspective of the previous periods outlined in sections 5.3.2 – 5.3.4, it seems we have come full circle, where recent policy has fairly successfully converged the questions of both structure and finance into one question of *governance*. Here, rather than being restructured in accordance with central direction, local authorities have increasingly applied for either combined authority status or unitary status to further address budget deficits or streamline their spending. The devolution debate, and the context of austerity, has therefore given way to a renewed strategy on unitary authorities.

While there is some insulation from public opinion, which is mostly focused on austerity on local government more broadly, there is extensive cynicism for this type of ‘strategic localism’ and it has been widely critiqued by stakeholders, commentators, and the wider public affected by local authority cuts. Several interviewees have indicated such sentiments, as indicated in the beginning of section 5.3. Further, as Copus *et al.* (2018, 15) comment:

... it is evident that what we are currently observing in English local government is not a genuine wave of the political devolution of power, but rather a fragmented and inconsistent pattern of the decentralisation (or limited devolution) of authority over specific projects and financial incentives aimed at both addressing economic growth, nationally and locally, and further streamlining of public service provision – both of which are for the benefit of political expediency at the centre.

This economic context of austerity has put a damper on the devolution process which many felt would have otherwise been a generally positive development. As an interviewee argued, “we are becoming more centralised, despite devolution” [05]. Further, economic policy seemed to supersede and dominate the agenda, with democratic legitimacy having to play ‘catch-up’, as one interviewee described:

... the combined authorities in places like Manchester are really playing catch up. You can see them very hard trying to establish legitimacy and kind of engagement because actually it was all conceived around growth. So, it's all about the economics, it's all about taxing, kind of financing and back mechanisms and investment [43].

This attitude towards devolution was reflected in an interview with a senior civil servant, who described the devolution process as one being fundamentally about what local areas could offer central government, giving further credence to the strategic localism thesis. As they explained;

... in return for that governance reform [mayoral combined authority] *we will give you-* we will devolve a series of powers down to you on an educative basis, on a negotiated basis *where you prove a case* for them, and in doing so we will create you know, both the institutional capability as well the right mix of policy leaders to actually be able to drive economic growth *for us* [33].

Further, and similar to the previous Labour government (1997-2010), the ‘radical’ rhetoric and wide promises of local empowerment has set future policy agendas and reforms up for

disappointment and comparison. These recent developments show once again how localism has been used strategically in government discourse as a way to confer legitimacy to policies which were more concerned with economic objectives and the strategic delivery of these objectives, than the question of democratic governance.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the rhetoric and policies espoused by governments to address the question of why and how *localism legitimises centralising interventions*. In other words, I have investigated whether localism, and other decentralist and participatory forms of spatial governance reform and rhetoric, have been introduced partially as a form of legitimating centrally-led economic and regional policy over the past fifty years, and how the rhetoric around democratic deficits and spatial governance has shifted in tune with contemporary economic challenges facing the British state. The impetus of this chapter was to theorise and explore empirically the tendency for localist rhetoric and policy to emerge in conjunction with reforms that might otherwise be considered to centralise power. This tendency has resulted in some contradictory uses of localism in policy. Most fundamentally, the contradiction between the role of localism in supposedly challenging centralism, and on the other hand, being itself “centrally orchestrated” (Jones 2019, 74), and supporting centrally led economic and constitutional reforms and interventions. Section 5.3 has charted out the empirical indications of public opinion and the discursive appearance of strategic localism in the context of central interventions relating to regionalisation and local government reform. The main contribution of the chapter has been to distinguish between what I label ‘normative’ and ‘strategic’ localism, and how this can be understood as a difference between the ends (the ideational) – and means (the material) of localism. This tendency of localism’s ‘means’ (centrally-led policy) being divorced from its ends (community empowerment) without fail seems to lead to disenchantment amongst intended beneficiaries, leaving governments vulnerable to extensive criticism from stakeholders and opposition party politicians. Therefore, while governments do attempt to legitimate economic policies and local government reforms through certain communicative discourses this is often sooner or later viewed cynically by stakeholders. While this chapter has focused on the concept of strategic localism from the perspective of *government* policy, the following chapter explores more closely the strategic element localism with regards to *opposition party* rhetoric, particularly during election campaigns. Chapter 6 will therefore take a similarly historical perspective to analyse the periodic emergence of localism, as well as its counterpart, centralism, in political discourse.

Chapter 6: The localist promise – populist strategies and party politics

In 2008, two years before the general election, David Cameron, the Conservative Party leader and leader of the Opposition, along with fellow MP Nick Herbert, penned an essay which argued that the political system was broken, and that faith in politicians and political institutions was “draining away” (Cameron and Herbert 2008, 115). The solution, to them, was a *new* kind of politics, which would require action on three key fronts: “devolving power to the people, strengthening our democratic institutions and changing the behaviour of politicians. We will restore engagement by returning power to people and communities, involving members of the public in decision-making and the delivery of public services to an unprecedented degree” (ibid.). The rest, as they say, is history. But history – as with localist rhetoric – tends to repeat itself.

In Chapter 5, I outlined how localism can be used strategically in government communicative discourse, which seeks to address public opinion and make certain policies concerning governance and local government finance more acceptable. Similarly, this chapter looks at instances of strategic localism, from a more (party) political perspective. While Chapter 5 explored the strategy of localism in relation to government authority, arguing that governments have mobilised localism in rhetoric and policy to justify and legitimise unpopular and criticised policies, this chapter will analyse the use of strategic localism as a form of *delegitimisation*. Opposition parties inhabit a particular role in the British adversarial political system in challenging governmental policy agendas, and they do so by using certain rhetoric, as well as electoral practices, as discussed previously in section 2.4.2. Accusations of ‘centralisation’, ‘top-down control’ and ‘bureaucracy’ constitute some of the most well-versed critiques of government and has been increasingly linked to populism in politics. However, few studies have explored theoretically and empirically the relationship between localism and populism specifically, and localism and party politics, more generally. Therefore, this chapter addresses the question, *how do political parties operationalise localism as part of their electoral strategy?* As argued previously in Chapter 2, legitimacy and populism complement each other as frameworks for understanding state challenges as they emerge from the democratic sphere. Populism can be seen to be intimately linked to a theoretical understanding of legitimacy, insofar as populist strategies strive to exploit or evoke a sense of legitimisation deficit in a government. Building on the concept of legitimisation, theoretical frameworks of populism offer a perspective on *why* government legitimacy may be challenged, as well as *who* communicates such narratives. This perspective places greater importance on the role and agency of opposition parties and politicians in processes of (de)legitimisation. This chapter explores two major links between party politics and localism/devolution, which are, on the one hand, discursive, and on the other, material:

1. Ideational and discursive: populist political rhetoric which presents localism as a form of ‘empowerment’ and challenges the legitimacy of government.

2. Material: Local government elections, which can be the location of protest votes and ideological polarisation, as well as populist *practices* (Eklundh 2019) such as community politics.

It is difficult to separate these two elements, which are iterative and causal (Tønder 2010). This chapter will first explore the theoretical and empirical link between localism and populism, looking at both its rhetorical uses in campaigning and other electoral strategies. It will then discuss the particular role of the opposition in renewing state commitments to localism, by outlining the discourse of, and comparing, campaign promises between the main opposition and the party in government. The following section, 6.2.2, will then discuss the sustainability of these promises when faced with the machinery of government. The chapter will then widen the perspective in relation to the material pressures arising from local politics and elections, hypothesising different material origins to localism.

6.1. Localism as a populist strategy

6.1.1. Is localism popular?

In an age of growing populism and distrust of politics and politicians (Hay 2007; Norris and Inglehart 2019), as well as deepening economic challenges of slipping productivity and continued austerity, localism and decentralisation is often hailed as the holy grail for reimagining a ‘better economy’ and a ‘better politics’, one that is more attuned to what people want and need (Esteve et al. 2019). As Clarke et al. (2018: 280-1) suggest:

More devolved decision-making and more localism could, if they connected power and control to local elected representatives closer to communities, provide the basis for a different form of politics. It is not automatically the case, but the early experiences of those mayoral offices where real power has been located – London or Greater Manchester, for example – provide hopeful signs.

Thus far, most of the literature that links localism with populism sees localism as the positive antidote to populism. As Wills (2016a, 80) suggests, “... localism potentially provides a stimulus for a new round of efforts – and institutional innovation – to engage the people in political life” (ibid.). However, parallel to this argument, there seems to be empirical evidence of localism itself being populist, particularly when viewed in relation to its discursive appearances in political rhetoric. Taking this angle, one is offered additional analytical and theoretical tools to understand the difficulties of implementing localism in policy, and why it regularly crops up in political rhetoric.

When exploring and interpreting the reasons, origins, and motivations underpinning a policy agenda of localism, it is perhaps not a far-fetched assumption that a major motivation for a government, a political party, or a politician to propose any policy is to win votes in the next election, either in a bid to obtain or retain power. Yet, localism is not necessarily popular in this way, at least from a national perspective. Despite its importance to the Conservatives 2010 general election campaign, a call for localism in the sense of constitutional and policy reform

to confer greater power and autonomy to local areas, as several interviewees have suggested, does not necessarily ignite much interest or, crucially, draw people out to the polls. In relation to the 2010 campaign specifically, “there is some evidence that the Big Society as a key political theme was introduced too late into the 2010 General Election campaign to have real impact with the electorate, and indeed it may even have confused voters” (Norman 2010, 200; see also Ganesh 2014, 235-6). A previous special advisor to Nick Clegg observed; “I think there were marginal benefits in terms of direct vote grabbing. I don’t think anyone voted Conservative because of a promise for locally elected Police and Crime Commissioners” [42]. Another interviewee agreed, “in electoral terms, [decentralisation is] very small fries” [32]. It seems that cynicism and dissatisfaction amongst the electorate does not necessarily translate into support for constitutional reform. Wright (2017, 194) has attributed this phenomenon to an undeveloped “culture of democratic citizenship” in Britain:

People will happily pour scorn on their politicians, but popular support for reform is another matter. Enthusiasts for a written constitution, a more proportional voting system or an elected second chamber have had to confront a wall of popular indifference (Wright 2017, 194).

This relative electoral insignificance of localism is reflected in general election manifestos, where, compared to issues such as social services or foreign affairs, the more constitutional and introspective questions of democracy, participation, and spatial governance, if mentioned at all, tend to warrant a shorter discussion and also are often introduced in the final pages of manifestos (see also Parry *et al.* 1992, 28; Budge *et al.* 1987). Some have suggested that voters are generally more concerned about economic policy that might affect them directly and personally, including their income, wealth, access to housing, and public services (Mackintosh 1974, 118). This was a point made by a senior executive of the LGA during interview: “I’m not sure if the general public really care [about localism], if I’m being brutally honest. ... People are bothered about services; they don’t bother about who’s delivering them. They just want stuff done when they want stuff done” [44]. As identified through documentary research, one stakeholder observed during select committee oral evidence: “People are not interested in *process*, they are interested in *outcome*” (Relations Between Central and Local Government Committee 1996b, Q740).

However, there are a couple of indirect links between localism and election results, which explains why localism still remains a recurring populist and party-political communicative strategy. First, it often forms part of a bundle of promises that concern giving people a voice and challenging the status quo and the establishment. Second, is its positive impact on the image of a party. Further, as I will explore later in the chapter, are the national-level pressures that arise through local elections. In relation to the first point, one might suggest that, once dissatisfaction amongst the electorate sets in, whether these are economic grievances or otherwise, the pitting of ‘democratic’ change against the status quo becomes undeniably attractive, despite doubts regarding whether such change can improve an individual’s economic situation or self-interests.⁷⁹ In this sense, localism, and the rhetoric of empowerment, *can be*

⁷⁹ This thesis is not inconceivable, given the outcome of Brexit, which can be described as a knee-jerk reaction against the status quo despite its threat to voters’ economic interests. According to data from the *Understanding*

populist insofar as it galvanises, and potentially exacerbates, widespread dissatisfaction in relation to the current political system. As Canovan argues, while “economic grievances are always important to populist movements, these are translated into political questions of democratic power” (Canovan 1999, 4-5). Negative attitudes towards the status quo exist in any society, particularly since, as we have established earlier in section 2.2.1, any kind of bureaucratic element of democracy can be a source of unpopularity and frustration. Given this, there may be something inherently appealing about a political actor who supports these sentiments and promises to challenge that status quo (see Laclau 2005, 123). Indeed, such challenges to political structures and pressures towards constitutional reform can elicit a generally positive, but perhaps a knee-jerk, reaction. While dated, Mackintosh’s comment on the survey evidence used in the Kilbrandon Commission on devolution (1973) highlighted how these positive responses to policy proposals on decentralisation and devolution can at times be little more than simply reactions to a general climate of dissatisfaction and powerlessness, rather than an innate desire for decentralisation itself:

If respondents are generally dissatisfied with ‘the way things are run’ and they are asked, in effect, ‘would it be better if people around here had more control of their affairs?’, it would be amazing if a majority said ‘No’. ... It is probable that if the ‘generally dissatisfied’ respondents had been asked a range of suitable questions, they would have given majority support to referenda, more power for MPs to control the government, a revitalised local system of democracy and greater self-government in the regions (Mackintosh 1974, 117).

Secondly, some have identified Localism and the Big Society as strategies to soften the image of the Conservative party (Higgins 2013, 583), and one may deduce from this a more general conclusion that a promise of localism can serve to revitalise a party’s image and signal a shift in direction. According to the chief strategist for David Cameron, Steve Hilton, the localism narrative that he promoted “... helped rebuild and modernize the Conservative Party in Britain after it had spent more than a decade in the political wilderness” (Hilton 2018, 5; see also Facey 2008, xxii).

For these reasons, even if localism as an electoral promise were to have no direct impact on votes, it remains politically important. As Bulpitt argued during the Thatcher Government, “In the 1980s the subject [of central-local relations] has been politicised, it has become an issue of (relatively) “high politics” and, in consequence, much of the comment has assumed a highly partisan or essentially contested character” (Bulpitt 1989, 57).⁸⁰ In the mid-2000s, Labour MP

Society household survey, UK citizens who felt their personal financial situation was “very difficult” were approximately 13% points more likely (than those who feel their finances are comfortable) to be in favour of leaving the European Union, despite the economic consequences of Brexit that were predicted – and already have – occurred (Liberini *et al.* 2017, 9). Further, those regions with the highest proportion of leave voters tended also to be the regions with greater economic dependence upon EU markets (Los *et al.* 2017). The promise offered by the EU referendum of reclaiming lost power “over our laws, over our rulers, over our borders” was eagerly taken, “despite the authoritative warnings about the dire economic consequences of doing so” (Wright 2017, 191).

⁸⁰ Seeing central-local relations, or territorial politics, as ‘relatively high politics’ is an interesting change in position. Only a few years prior, Bulpitt had considered this to be for the most part ‘low politics’: “The most important policy areas for governments today cover such matters as control of the national economy, the general provision of social welfare, security from external threats and internal law and order. Territorial management will be regarded as important only in so far as it becomes associated with the achievement of the Centre’s aims in these

Alan Milburn argued in a speech that “localism will be at the crux of the political debate not just in the lead up to the next general election but beyond”:

The new battleground is around the politics of localism. The Conservatives are desperate to claim this territory. The Liberals feel it is naturally theirs. Labour should make it our own (Milburn 2004).

Two years later, David Miliband, then Minister of Communities and Local Government, defined ‘empowerment’ as the “answer to a world of insecurity”, similarly seeing it as the “battleground on which politics will be fought in the years to come” (Miliband 2006). These sentiments all reflect what Hickson (2013) coins the ‘localist turn’, which describes how the influence of localism on the three major parties grew significantly over the last twenty years, particularly since the 2010-2015 Coalition government. Therefore, due to a generally held belief amongst political parties that a significant proportion of the electorate is hostile to the idea of a large central state (Hickson 2013, 418; Bogdanor 2009, 89) localism, devolution, and decentralisation have become accepted and valence issue topics (Wills 2016a, 10). As a Liberal Democrat peer argued, “[these concepts are] all about moving away from central imposition into local decision taking. And that is definitely, if you call it the zeitgeist, it’s the zeitgeist: all the parties feel obliged to be in that space” [23]. Yet, perhaps for this very reason, localism is often framed in partisan, antagonistic ways, most clearly from the perspective of regional governance.

Therefore, regardless of whether localism – as a more specific proposal for constitutional and democratic change – is *directly* electorally popular, it has the potential to resonate with the electorate through the symbolic challenge it mounts on the status quo, the ‘elite’ and centralised power. From this perspective, localism can be interpreted as an act of populist positioning, where a promise of localism can support politicians seeking to position themselves as for ‘the people’. This positioning then has more power than any concrete policies offered under the localism label. To elaborate on this phenomenon, I will in the following section explore the empirical indications, as given by interview data, on these populist elements of the concept of localism.

6.1.2. Populist elements of localism

To recap from section 2.4.2, the theoretical justifications for exploring an empirical link between populism and localism can be made on two levels. Firstly, I have explored the symbolic and semantic link between localism and a common theoretical definition of populism (Mudde 2004). Secondly, drawing on elements of Laclau’s theory on empty signifier, localism has potential political and populist *uses* (Laclau 2005). In relation to the first point, there are clear parallels between Mudde’s (2004) definition of populism being a polarisation of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and the empirical manifestations of localism. While the local is arguably shorthand for ‘the people’, the centre is the symbolic location of the bureaucratic, elitist, unaccountable ‘other’. Localism can therefore be interpreted as populism *expressed spatially*, or in spatial

policy areas. ... Hence the control of territory is not an end in itself (in times of normalcy) but an instrument to achieve objectives in major policy areas, in matters of ‘High Politics’ (Bulpitt 1983, 29).

terms. This conflation between ‘localism’ and ‘power to the people’ can be viewed in the following quote from the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, on the second reading of the Localism Bill:

[Localism] is a triumph for democracy over bureaucracy. It will fundamentally shake up the balance of power in this country, revitalising local democracy and putting power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people (HC Deb 17 Jan 2011, Vol. 521 c558).

This spatial expression of populism was first suggested by Beer (1982), who argued that the old British civic culture of deference to authority had given way to what he termed ‘the new populism’. This doctrine consisted of three dissenting themes: it was “antibureaucratic, participatory, and decentralising” (1982, 132). According to him, this populism emerged in the 1960s amongst socialists as part of the ‘New Left’ programme, and by the 1980s had reached a wider acceptance to become, while not a dominant belief, institutionalised as a new “orthodoxy of dissent” (Beer 1982, 150). However, while the New Left movement eventually faded from the political scene, the new populism continued to spread “in less extreme forms”, eventually becoming a mainstream political position (Beer 1982, 149).

Further, as indicated above and explored previously in Chapter 3, localism can be understood as populist, in so far as it is ‘purposeful’, as suggested by the theory of ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 2005). This loose consensus that underpins localism, explained by what appears to be a highly emotive and normative belief, has meant that it rarely extends beyond a generally positive ‘feeling’ or ‘intuition’ amongst politicians and citizens alike and thus was, and is, a difficult and contested policy to put into practice (see Kølvrå 2017, 103). These are all indications of an underlying purpose in its communicate uses. The difficulties of – or perhaps resistance to – narrowing it down, was evident even in certain government documents. For example, the document *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide* (HM Government 2010b, 2-3), which set out six essential actions for decentralisation (included below), was seen as exemplifying the government’s initial broad approach and perhaps opportunistic understanding of localism. The six actions were:

Lift the burden of bureaucracy – by removing the cost and control of unnecessary red tape and regulation, whose effect is to restrict local action; and

Empower communities to do things their way – by creating rights for people to get involved with, and direct the development of, their communities.

Increase local control of public finance – so that more of the decisions over how public money is spent and raised can be taken within communities; and

Diversify the supply of public services – by ending public sector monopolies, ensuring a level playing field for all suppliers, giving people more choice and a better standard of service.

Open up government to public scrutiny – by releasing government information into the public domain, so that people can know how their money is spent, how it is used and to what effect; and

Strengthen accountability to local people – by giving every citizen the power to change the services provided to them through participation, choice or the ballot box.

As a select committee report later noted, while some of these actions were traditionally associated with localism and decentralisation, others appeared more tangential: “increased transparency might well support localism, for example, but it is a policy aim in its own right whose effect should not only be felt at a local level. The case for diversification of the supply of public services being a policy of purely localist intent and effect is also uncertain” (CLG Committee 2011, 12). The report later returned to this theme, arguing how a lack of clarity on the nature of localism as defined by government may have two undesirable consequences:

One is that the Government’s intentions cannot be reliably interpreted by other stakeholders, who might have equally legitimate interpretations of localism, but find themselves running up against brick walls if their view does not accord with that of the Government. The risk is of substantial wasted effort as communities and councils pursue ‘the wrong kind’ of localism. The second is that an extraordinarily broad range of Governmental actions might be branded, perhaps carelessly, as ‘localist’, without any overall guiding philosophy to iron out contradictions, assess priorities, or challenge those government departments least inclined to relinquish meaningful power. At best this may result in creative confusion. At worst it could amount to obfuscation, preventing proper scrutiny of the Government’s performance against its own localist ideals (CLG Committee 2011, 81).

There were certainly other consequences in applying a concept like localism to policy. Aside from difficulties relating to implementation and its eventual fizzling out, as I outline in Chapter 4, as well in this Chapter in section 6.2.2, there were even allegations of corruption.⁸¹ In relation to these allegations, one interviewee argued how a ‘beautiful idea’ became colonised:

... you had a really quite interesting, philosophically rich- a beautiful idea that, because it wasn’t kind of perfectly formed before it entered the public domain, just got colonised by locusts [35].

This grouping of policies, and the tangential understandings of localism, is of course interesting itself, as it is an empirical indication of the character of the concept being, as already suggested, highly normative and emotive. To present this phenomenon empirically, I include below the interpretations of those interviewees who took on the task of discussing localism on a conceptual level. Overall, interviewees sought to explain localism in four different but overlapping ways, and I have classed these interpretations as 1) intuitive, 2) negative, 3) proximate, and 4) diverse. Intuitive interpretations suggest that everyone roughly knows what it is, and thus, does not require much in the way of a clear definition or explanation. Secondly,

⁸¹ The example given in one interview was the co-option and misuse of public funds by the Big Society Network. A total of £2,527,760 of public funds from the Big Lottery Fund and the Cabinet Office were given to Steve Moore’s ‘Society Network Foundation’ and its trading subsidiary ‘The Big Society Network’ from August 2011 through to May 2013, despite these charities being neither established nor reporting any significant positive outcomes from these funds (NAO 2014). This led to an official investigation by the National Audit Office (NAO 2014).

localism, as mentioned already, is often defined negatively, in relation to what it is not (centralism). Thirdly, is a proximate understanding, which associates localism with other similar concepts (such as decentralisation and devolution). Fourthly, localism can be understood as a diversity of subjective beliefs, meaning different things to different people. I outline the main quotes in table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1. Interpretations and associations of localism

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Intuitive | I mean, it may not be in the dictionary, but you don't have to ask what it's about, I mean everybody knows the word "local", ok, that's fine, that will do [37]. |
| | I think we all think we have an understanding of it all and at a sort of general and fairly superficial level [34]. |
| | ... everyone in the world believes in [localism] [08]. |
| Negative | [decentralisation, devolution, localism and community participation] are all about moving away from central imposition into local decision taking [23]. |
| | In a sense, localism is the opposite to centralism in simplistic terms. That's how [most people] define it [34]. |
| Proximate | I think [localism and devolution] are one in the same. You are still "devolving" decision making powers and responsibility [42]. |
| | [Devolution and Localism] is the same agenda, it's just a different scale on a different job title. But it is the same thing. It's power not being exercised in London but being exercised more closely to the people that are going to be affected by it [44]. |
| | I think decentralisation was this kind of equivalent to subsidiarity - that sense in which things ought to happen at right levels - I think what we meant by localism is that we should focus on the things that happen at the local level. And they're similar, but, you know, the localism stuff was really just saying 'actually, we're just focusing on the stuff that ought to happen at the most local levels' [36]. |
| Diverse | It just meant so many different things for so many different people [35]. |
| | [Localism has become] a shorthand word. But as with quite a few shorthand words, they often mean different things to different people in different circumstances [34]. |
| | It's an easy word: Localism. And we all think we know what it means, but actually ... it means different things to different people [34]. |
| | There is a general and genuine commitment in all of the Councils around here, around Localism – maybe our interpretation of what it means is maybe a little different [04]. |
| | What's interesting about localism, it means different things to different people depending on who says it. I mean, even the Act is wonderfully ambivalent about what the different possibilities might be, you know? [10] |

These interpretations of localism, as being intuitive, negative, proximate, and diverse, does give credence to understanding localism as an empty signifier. Some interviewees indicated its

populist resonance in more direct ways. As one local Liberal Democrat Councillor argued, “[Localism] is a slogan” [09]. Many saw it as a rhetorical device [12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 32, 35, 39, 41]. Most directly to this current thesis, others suggested it was a popular, even populist, promise [13, 22, 23, 24, 34, 43].

The notion of an empty signifier also provides a theoretical perspective on why localism can be both politically important while not itself directly impacting on individual voters’ decision-making, as discussed above. The implication that it has an inherently loose and intuitive meaning that can be exploited and used for political ends, where it is used to symbolise, or signify, a bigger problem. In theoretical terms, it can be interpreted as a ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau 2005), absorbing a wide variety of demands which might be of an economic, social, or democratic nature. Its negative – centralisation – is used as a way to explain a host of problems in society. Localism is then presented as a solution to these problems and demands, and this political use can be observed empirically. For example, in the extract to the foreword in the Conservatives’ 2009 Green Paper ‘Control Shift’, David Cameron presented centralisation as a cause to a wide range of perceived problems, including the economic crisis, the crisis of confidence, growing regional divides, and a broken society, to which localism was framed as the solution:

We face the greatest test to our economy for a generation – but this is not an isolated emergency. Alongside the economic crisis we face the crisis of our broken society and a crisis of confidence in our political system. A common thread runs through these failures: an imbalance of responsibility and power.

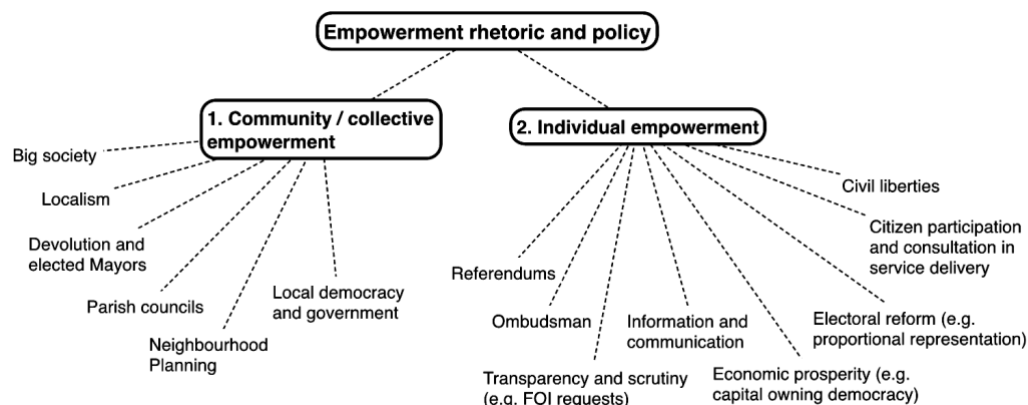
Our economy was particularly vulnerable to global shocks because it was unbalanced – concentrated in the South East and relying too heavily on financial services, housing, and government spending. Our society has been undermined by an over-centralised state that saps responsibility and initiative from people. Our political system has been imbalanced as more and more power and control has been sucked to the centre at Westminster, leaving voters with a yawning gap between the changes they want to see and those they can directly affect.

So an essential step towards tackling these great challenges of the day – rebuilding our battered economy, repairing our broken society and restoring hope in our political system – is decentralising responsibility and power (Conservative Party 2009, 1).

These observations together suggest that localism can be an inherently populist concept: a concept that seems to have wide intuitive understanding, but perhaps for this reason, few tangible definitions. Localism thus unifies, and acts as a medium for, various different democratic demands. To explore how can one better understand this tendency to schematically and intuitively link localism to such other tangential principles, philosophies, and policies, I hypothesise that localism can be situated in a wider collection of rhetoric, policy and debate that forms part of a wider discourse and rhetoric on ‘empowerment’ and democracy, which themselves can be considered ‘empty signifiers’ (see Kockelman 2005). Such bundling of (what might otherwise be) disparate ideas aim to capture the imagination of dissatisfied electorate. Populist rhetoric casts the solution to these complex problems as ‘giving power to the people’

through localism or other forms of constitutional changes that fit under the umbrella of ‘empowerment rhetoric’ (see Higgins 2013). I map out this point in a rough – and non-exhaustive – sketch of different policies and rhetoric in Fig 6.1. below.

Fig. 6.1. Community and individual empowerment in rhetoric and policy



With this rough sketch in Fig. 6.1, I argue that empowerment discourses emerge mainly in two forms: empowerment aimed towards communities or other (mainly spatial) groupings, and empowerment aimed towards individuals. Localism is an example of the former but is often bundled into debates concerning other types of empowerment which might otherwise be considered tangential, as has been seen in the Localism Act itself (and the ‘six essential actions’ listed above) but also in debates and writing on the subject. This map therefore illustrates why commentators might at first instance observe or feel a sense of familiarity or repetition between these concepts. For example, a Conservative member of the House of Lords, Lord Black of Brentwood, compared localism to right-to-buy on the basis that both promoted empowerment and democracy:

... this is an excellent Bill, which I believe has the potential to be as significant in handing real powers to local people and energising them in their local communities as the right to buy was in the 1980s in creating a property-owning democracy (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 c236).

Understood in these terms, localism is part of a wider collection of both discursive concepts and materialisations, including policies, practices, and ideas that, while meaning different things, reflect a general sentiment and vague yet electorally attractive aspiration of “empowerment” *beyond the centre*. Its overlapping and criss-crossing concepts include spatialised concepts such as decentralisation, devolution, neighbourhood, as well as less spatially specific concepts, such as community, participation, consultation and even democracy more widely. A general positive emotional response to, and understanding of, these concepts appears to have been durable. Overall, these concepts operationalise and communicate democracy, in the sense that they question the current extent of democracy and how to enhance it through empowering ‘the people’. The diagram furthers the empirical observation that localism is more often defined intuitively rather than tangibly: localism can be thus conceived as constituting a populist strategy. While semantically empty, it is highly emotive. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on this point, presenting empirical evidence outlining the

origins of localism as a populist slogan, and how localism's populist uses can be discerned through the differences in the narratives between governments and opposition parties.

6.2. Opposition parties and localism

6.2.1. Opposition party localism: an analysis of election manifestos

This section explores empirical evidence on the longer-term role of opposition parties in challenging the status quo and how this explains the strategic uses of localism. Indeed, it is difficult to speak of the history of localism without appreciating the adversarial nature of party politics in England, as previously discussed in Chapter 2. This adversarial relationship between governments and opposition parties result in an operationalisation of certain concepts that signal a (radical) departure from the Westminster model and its perceived democratic deficiencies. As argued by Wright (2017, 190), “‘democracy’ is now employed as a weapon against opponents”. Localism, I will argue in this chapter, is a reflection of this tendency to ‘weaponize’ democracy discursively. This dynamic, and the nature of the populist challenge of the status quo and representative democracy (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004), can explain the tendency of the political debate to veer towards introspection and constitutional questions. For example, all three of the main political parties in the past few decades have demonstrated and communicated awareness and concern for democratic deficits and have attempted to make political gains in challenging it. While localism has been a recurring commitment in this context, and a promise made both Labour and the Conservatives as recently as the 2019 general election (see also Wills 2016a, 22), there is a wider pattern to be explored here. In particular, the concerns regarding a ‘crisis in public confidence’ or a ‘crisis of trust’, as well as discourse on the public’s frustration, oppression, loss of expectation, and disempowerment, appear fairly regularly in election party manifestos which illustrate how elections and election manifestos (and likely election campaigns more broadly) provide an arena for both legitimising and delegitimising discourse. For the sake of consistency, I examined and coded the general election manifestos of the three main political parties in England – the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats (formerly the Liberal Party) – from 1966 through to 2017. This has formed part of a wider empirical effort to compare opposition party rhetoric with government rhetoric (the focus of section 6.2.2), however in doing so I observed other trends: the aforementioned ‘legitimation crisis discourse’ that I outline below in table 6.2, as well as the ‘anti-centralist’ discourse that I outline further down in table 6.3.

Table 6.2. Narratives of legitimisation crisis in general election manifestos

| Manifesto | Key quote |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Liberal Party, 1974 (Feb) | The crisis of inconsistent government has led to a crisis of public confidence (2000b, 149). |
| Conservative Party, 1974 (Oct) | People feel increasingly frustrated and even oppressed by the impact on their lives of remote bureaucracy, and of events which seem to be entirely beyond their control or that of our democratic institutions (2000b, 232). |
| Conservative Party, 1979 | We make no lavish promises. The repeated disappointment of rising expectations has led to a marked loss of faith in politicians’ promises (2000c, 282). |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Labour Party, 1997 | There is unquestionably a national crisis of confidence in our political system (2000d, 374) |
| Liberal Democrats, 1997 | People know that British politics isn't working. Their politicians have lied to them, their Parliament has become tainted by sleaze and their government is out of touch and doesn't listen (2000c, 344) |
| Conservative Party, 2001 | Restoring faith in politics: At a time when the Government has interfered as never before in everyone's lives, they have abandoned any pretence of accountability. No wonder the British people have become disillusioned with politicians (2001, 46) |
| Conservative Party, 2010 | Millions of people in this country are at best detached from democracy, at worst angry and disillusioned. ... MPs' expenses might have been the trigger for the public's anger, but this political crisis is driven by a deeper sense of frustration – that people have too little control over the decisions that affect their daily lives. The top-down model of power that exists in Britain today is completely out of date (2010, 63) |
| Labour Party, 2015 | There are some who believe there is nothing we can do to change things for the better. They feel powerless. They are losing faith that those with power will ever listen to them (2015, 11-12) |
| Labour Party, 2017 | It is a growing sense of anxiety and frustration. Faced with falling living standards, growing job insecurity and shrinking public services, people are under increasing strain (2017, 4) |

This analysis of election manifestos reflects in both a tangible and consistent way the narrative construction of legitimatisation and delegitimisation, often framed in relation to localism, and its reappearance over the last few decades. These quotes, located through a coding process (which I elaborate on in Chapter 3), further show growing frequency over time of a 'crisis discourse', and a growing political awareness and concern regarding (negative) public opinion and emotion (as indicated by the affectual concepts used: confidence, frustration, oppression, disappointment, expectation, faith, disillusionment, anger, trust, powerlessness, and anxiety). This further empirically confirms the point made earlier in section 2.2.2 with regards to a shift from a deferential model of democratic legitimacy to a pluralistic one, in response to growing demands and discontent.

In addition to this more general observation of electoral discourse, there appears to be a more specific, recurring style of rhetoric amongst opposition parties. These political actors will tend to accuse a government of centralisation as a way to challenge a government's policy agenda, regulatory reform, or style of governance, as insufficiently democratic, or responsive to the electorate or 'the people'. This strategy entails a rejection of a centralised approach, indeed, blaming centralism itself as the cause of a crisis of confidence in the political system. This is not an accident, rather, opposition parties and minority parties are *uniquely placed* to challenge the legitimacy of governments. Opposition parties do not themselves need or seek legitimacy (aside from respecting electoral law). Put differently, "It is not the job of the opposition to run the country" (Heseltine 2019, 12). Rather, opposition parties seek popularity, which can be obtained in two ways. Firstly, as mentioned, by delegitimising one's opponent. As one political advisor commented, "So the first one is all oppositions are sort of localists in rhetoric and in policy in opposition *because we don't lose any voters*. A really easy way to bash the government

whoever that is, you know, everyone's localist in opposition. It's just the way it is. ... Power to the people, you know. Great stuff' [35]. Secondly, as the quote suggests, popularity can be obtained regardless of the nature of promises and whether these are actually achievable policy-wise, without the threat to votes. As one Liberal Democrat peer suggested, the role was "to be the champion of those people against the forces of evil, *however you constitute those*" [37]. Promises are simply easier to make when a party is outside government. As one interviewee, a senior Conservative politician in local government, observed, "when you're in opposition, you're promising to give somebody else's power away. When you're in government, you're then expected to give your power away" [44]. One senior civil servant made a similar observation:

... what being in the civil service tells you is that most governments are very in favour of devolution and sharing power while they're in opposition and change their minds dramatically once they get into power [36]

Regardless of this potential strategic risk, mainstream opposition parties and new governments (i.e. opposition parties who have recently won a general election) have presented themselves as, firstly, critics of centralisation, as well as the instigators of (at times, radical) change to the status-quo. As mentioned, these ideas appear highly attractive and illustrate how institutional transformation is not always a matter of *governmental* power but rather the power of ideas, the communication of which is often an action taken up by opposition parties (see Hay 2002, 215). In relation to this first point, I again present key quotes from election manifestos, studied over the same period of 1966-2017 and presented in Table 6.3 below, which show how opposition parties have consistently accused governments of overseeing centralisation, top-down intervention, and big government.

Table 6.3. Key quotes from election manifestos: rejection of centralism by opposition parties

1970, Conservative

Under Labour, there has been too much government interference in the day-to-day workings of industry and local government. There has been too much government: there will be less. (Conservative Party 1999 [1970], 183)

1979, Conservative

No one who has lived in this country during the last five years can fail to be aware of how the balance of our society has been increasingly tilted in favour of the State at the expense of individual freedom. This election may be the last chance we have to reverse that process, to restore the balance of power in favour of the people (Conservative Party 1999 [1979], 265).

1987, Labour

The Tory government has undermined local democracy and plans to continue to diminish the importance of votes in local elections (Labour Party 2000 [1987], 304).

1997, Labour

The Conservatives seem opposed to the very idea of democracy. ... They are opposed to the development of decentralised government. ... Our system of government is centralised, inefficient and bureaucratic (Labour Party 2000 [1997], 374).

2005, Conservative

Under Mr Blair, the way we are governed has become less accountable, more complex and, ultimately, less democratic. ... Unprecedented powers have been given to new, unelected and remote bodies, including regional assemblies for which there is no popular support. (Conservative Party 2005, 21)

2010, Conservative

But we will not succeed in building the big Society, or in building a new economic model, unless we stop government trying to direct everything from the centre. We will get nowhere with yet more top-down state control. So, after thirteen years of Labour, we need radical political reform. We need to change the whole way this country is run. As Conservatives, we trust people. We believe that if people are given more responsibility, they will behave more responsibly. We believe that if you decentralise power, you get better results and better value for money. So the plans set out in this manifesto represent an unprecedented redistribution of power and control from the central to the local, from politicians and the bureaucracy to individuals, families and neighbourhoods (Conservative Party 2010, ix)

2015, Labour

Our over-centralised system of government has prevented our nations, cities, county regions and towns from being able *to take control* and change things for themselves. We will end a century of centralisation (Labour Party 2015, 82, emphasis added).

What these quotes illustrate is how recurring the anti-centralist argument is in an electoral context. These arguments have referenced centralisation in relation to negative outcomes and emotions, including interference, expense to individual freedom, the undermining of local democracy, the undermining of democracy *in general* (see discussion in section 2.3), inefficiency and bureaucracy, unaccountability and complexity, remoteness, lack of societal advancement, and lack of control (this final reference to the 2015 Labour Manifesto has clear similarities to the Brexit slogan ‘take back control’). While a snapshot, this language has demonstrated a consistent negative association of centralisation lasting decades, where opposition parties have more often than not operationalised this sentiment and rhetoric in election campaigns in an overt effort to delegitimise government policy.

Given this argument on the divergence in rhetoric between established governments and new governments/opposition parties, this remainder of this section will offer a more general overview of the observed differences. I return once again to election manifestos in order to actively compare the strategic uses of localism between government rhetoric (i.e. legitimating localism, which was the focus of Chapter 5), and opposition party rhetoric (populist localism). While governments are less likely to make grand promises or claims to restructure decision-making processes, opposition parties have an important role in keeping the agenda of democratic reform and localism alive. Although election manifestos *not* expressing fears of centralism or the benefits of localism are in a minority (six Conservative manifestos, three Labour manifestos, and zero Liberal Party/Liberal Democrat manifestos in the period 1964 - 1997, and none at all since 1997), the more positive, pro-localism narrative diverges between government and opposition party manifestos. While Governments will sooner *justify* their policy agenda in relation to local government (legitimation), opposition parties usually take a

stronger stance that rejects the government approach in favour of greater local democracy and devolution of powers (delegitimisation). However, while opposition parties tend to promise decentralisation (Mount 2012, 247-8), it is less common to see them define in election manifestos *why* localism is needed, aside from challenging centralism more generally.

Below, I include key election promises, in moments where local government and local communities were targeted for reform and rhetoric. I have identified these moments during the following periods (following the themes used in Chapter 5): late 1960s/early 1970s ‘modernisation’; 1980s ‘streamlining and accountability’; 2000s ‘second phase of modernisation; and 2010s ‘austerity and bottom-up restructuring’. Below in table 6.4, I explore the general narrative used in both the opposition party and government election manifestos, choosing those manifestos which offered clearly articulated positions on local government.⁸² Here, the main premise of the election promise was studied, looking at where the emphasis was and to what extent it was more rhetorical (focusing on norms / values of localism) or related to actual commitments in policy or more contextual, economic concerns (materialisations of localism). While opposition manifestos were more likely to promise more normative forms of localism accompanied by little *practical* discussion, governments were more likely to link their promises to previous efforts as well as to existing policies, often those related to economic planning and growth, reflecting my earlier point on ‘strategic localism’ in Chapter 5. In table 6.4. below, these two general themes – of practical versus normative localism – are explored and compared in the incumbents and opposition party’s manifestos by emphasising selected quotes.

Table 6.4. Comparing the localist promises of opposition parties with government

| Time period and theme | Opposition party | Incumbent |
|---|---|--|
| Late 1960s/early 1970s – ‘Modernisation’, Labour Government | Conservative Election Manifesto, 1970 | Labour Election Manifesto, 1970 |
| | <p>Devolve government power so that more decisions are made locally.</p> <p>Redress the distortion of the balance of power between central and local government by <i>increasing the independence</i> of local authorities.</p> <p>(Conservative Party 2000a [1970], 193)</p> | <p>Larger and stronger local authorities will mean <i>better planning, more efficiency</i>, stronger councils and improved quality in local democracy and local services</p> <p>The proposals will ensure a thorough-going reform of government machinery, together with an increase in democratic decision-taking in the community.</p> <p>(Labour 2000a [1970], 173)</p> |
| | Labour Election Manifesto, 1987 | Conservative Election Manifesto, 1983 |
| | | |

⁸² Specifically, Conservative election manifestos in the years 1970, 1983, 2010, and 2017, and Labour manifestos 1970, 1987, 2010 and 2017. There were more which discussed local government and local communities however due to overlapping points and narratives in the time periods used I decided to use only one manifesto per party / per time period to give a concise insight into the main arguments.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1980s and 1990s - ‘Streamlining and accountability’, Conservative government | Restore the right of councils to <i>decide their own policies and plans</i> , which will be subject to the decisions of local people at annual local elections. We will halt the cuts in rate support grant and end financial penalties. (Labour 2000c [1987], 304) | Legislate to curb <i>excessive and irresponsible rate increases</i> by high-spending councils, and to provide a general scheme for limitation of rate increases for all local authorities to be used if necessary. (Conservatives 2000d [1983], 304) |
| 2000s – ‘Second phase of modernisation’, Labour Government | Conservative Party Manifesto 2010 | Labour Party Manifesto 2010 |
| | New powers, rights, and grants to neighbourhood groups (the ‘little platoons’ of civil society) so that neighbourhood groups can play a leading role in the <i>rebuilding of civic society</i> . (Conservative Party 2010, 37-8, 73) | Give councils further <i>freedoms to deliver better local services</i> , subject to minimum national standards, with even greater freedoms for top-performing councils. (Labour Party 2010, Chapter 9). |
| 2010s – ‘Austerity and bottom-up restructuring’, Conservative Government (Coalition 2010-2015) | Labour Party Manifesto 2017 | Conservative Party Manifesto, 2017 |
| | Labour is the party of devolution and <i>we believe in handing back power to communities</i> . We will devolve powers over economic development, complete with the necessary funding. Resource and bolster planning authorities with fuller powers to put people and communities at the heart of planning. (Labour Party 2017, 86-8) | <i>Support local growth</i> through combined authorities, mayoralities and local enterprise partnerships, making each partnership and combined authority responsible for co-ordinating their own local industrial strategy in alignment with our national industrial strategy, bringing together local businesses, political and public sector leaders to drive growth and economic regeneration. (Conservative Party 2017, 24-5, 31-2) |

By analysing election manifestos, I hope to demonstrate as tangibly and clearly as possible fairly complex discourses, spread out over several decades. Four opposition party and four government election manifestos were selected on the basis of having taken a clear position on localism and local government. Their main point of difference, after several stages of coding, is including outlined in table 6.4 above. Generally, these eight manifestos, when compared, show a pattern whereby opposition parties tend to communicate *principles* of localism and democracy (emphasising ideas like local independence, local autonomy, neighbourhood rights and rebuilding civic society, and handing power to communities, as emphasised in the table above), while government narratives, in line with my previous argument in Chapter 5, are communicated as part of economic policy and challenges (better planning and more efficiency, irresponsible economic policy, freedom to deliver better services, and supporting local growth, see table 6.4). While this rhetoric and discourse certainly occurs in other moments in time than

elections, manifestos offer a condensed study of this phenomenon and promote a comparative study to drive home the point that there *is* a rhetorical difference between these two major political actors that is not (purely) ideological, but rather, strategic, populist, and opportunistic regardless of which party is in power. This then supports my general argument across this thesis of the political uses of localism.

However, what are the implications of localism having such populist characteristics and uses? The main one, as implied throughout this work, is that it is very difficult to put into policy and practice, and therefore, will often result in disappointment amongst stakeholders. The following section will explore empirically, based on interview data, how localism travels from this position of radical renewal as imagined by the opposition, to become subsumed into government machinery and competing priorities (which can be related to the previous discussion in section 4.3). Rather than a well-thought through or evidence-based policy approach, this opportunistic and populist aspect of localism partly explains the general consensus amongst politicians, interviewees, and the academic literature at large that localism results in contradictory outcomes when promises such as these are transformed from rhetoric to policy (assuming a change in government). This sort of strategic fallacy amongst opposition parties and new governments has been observed before, in different contexts. As Mair (2000, 21) observed of the 1997-2001 Labour government, “Political strategies often lead to unintended consequences, and new governments are particularly prone to misjudgement”. Therefore, as further evidence of the largely populist approach to localism in opposition party rhetoric, rather than the seemingly genuine and sustained effort for constitutional reform as promised in manifestos, the following section explores how these ideas sooner or later tend to dissipate and ‘fossilise’, and lead to the contradictory and disappointing form of ‘localism’ stakeholders are all too familiar with.

6.2.2. Radical renewal versus government machinery

In a centralist system of governance, an election promise of localism by an opposition party is an important political device. As previously discussed, it can signal radical change and renewal by contrasting to an established, perhaps unpopular, government. However, such populism and resistance to the status quo, certainly with regards to the localism agenda, appears to be fleeting, and from a short-term perspective gives the appearance of being a ‘blip’ [18, 32]. This section will explore this phenomenon, as further empirical indication of the political and strategic uses of localism.

There seems to be a pattern whereby new governments channel energy from being in opposition to oversee change. However, this energy is limited and dissipates eventually, regardless of whether “radical” change was actually achieved. As one of the junior ministers of the Coalition Government admitted, “everything fossilises after a bit” [37]. This also impacts on the importance of the party’s local councillors to its national agenda. While I will later argue in section 6.3.2 that local councillors are valuable in supporting and influencing the national party while in opposition, their position of influence tends to dissipate once the party enters government. As observed by Conservative MP Eric Ollerenshaw, who recollected previous advice given to him as a councillor: “an old Labour councillor who first taught me said, ‘Eric,

your party will need you when it is in opposition but watch out when it is in government because it tends to forget about local government” (HC Deb 17 January 2011, Vol. 521 c639). Many interviewees who spoke on the subject saw this shift in priority as a foregone conclusion:

... governments which have been in power for 10 years are no longer radical governments, they haven't got the capacity to be radical because- I mean, in their heads they think after 10 years 'we've fixed all the things that need to be fixed, now all we got to do is run it', and it may come much sooner than 10 years, but that's the risk [37].

There probably is a lot to be said for those first years of being in government. That's the time when governments tend to be pro transparency, they tend to be pro localism, and kind of giving power away, but then later on things start to- start to kind of centralise [41].

Usually the people who win in the run up to elections are the political ideologues and they get to write stuff into manifestos and become the political advisers. And so, they get a brief honeymoon period where they're allowed to write a paper that says, 'oh we want lots of localism'. And then as that party gets into government and settles down and the civil service machine takes over, all that stuff gets crushed against the more important stuff ... And the localism agenda is never important enough for anyone to push it through. So, it gets a little blip on the screen. ... And then it blips off the screen again. [18]

These seemingly empty promises of localism encourage cynicism and critique. Indeed, civil servants and politicians who developed the localism policy agenda in the early 2010s seemed particularly aware of the criticisms emerging from the academic community, the Labour party (the opposition party), as well as the media, which largely focused on whether localism marked a genuine devolution of power, a more conditional devolution, or simply a way of masking austerity and cuts to local government funding. As a senior civil servant remarked: “many people thought it was a smokescreen. National press coverage at the time was by and large that” [36]. Similarly, a then junior minister recollected how Labour articulated a strong opposition to the bill as being as “at the very best just a placebo or a trick, or a meaningless piece of something or other, you know, just some designed scenery behind which the real dirty work was going to be conducted” [37].

Both New Labour and the Coalition Government have been accused of ‘fossilisation’ and back-tracking on localist promises. As the Labour Party promised in the 1997 Manifesto, “We will be a radical government” (Labour Party 2000d [1997], 348). They commented how “Over-centralisation of government and lack of accountability was a problem in governments of both left and right” and committed themselves to “the democratic renewal of our country through decentralisation” (ibid.). As mentioned in Chapter 5, decentralisation was promised in three forms:

1. Most radically, was the devolution of power to Scotland and Wales on the basis of a simple majority referendum.

2. Regional devolution in England was also promised, initially in the form of unelected ‘regional development agencies’, which were envisaged as a way of achieving bottom-up yet coordinated economic development. The manifesto promised to, in time, bring forward legislation to allow each area to decide by referendum whether to introduce a directly elected regional government (and with it, unitary local government), which would be given certain devolved legislative powers.

3. Widening powers to local government in the form of a duty to promote economic, social and environmental well-being, the introduction of elected mayors and the removal of universal council tax capping.

Scottish and Welsh devolution was carried out, and eight RDAs were created by the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998, with a ninth region in London (Greater London Authority) and greater powers granted in the following couple of years. However, while steps were made to legitimise these structures democratically through a referendum on an elected regional government, this lost steam when the second, and last, referendum for a North East Assembly in 2004, while a relatively low turnout (48%), resulted in 78% majority against devolution. This failure to legitimise the regional structures would come to further empower the narrative of the Conservative Party which saw regionalisation as quite the opposite to decentralisation: to them, regionalisation was a way of pushing more power upwards, rather than downwards, and regions were seen as a way of strengthening the central government machine rather than local government leadership and autonomy. Eventually, stakeholders increasingly saw Labour’s pro-localist rhetoric while in opposition as ‘political cynicism of a high order’, as described by political commentator Simon Jenkins:

In Opposition Mr Blair pledged to make local rule “less constrained by central government and more accountable to local people”. He would “end Tory rate-capping” and restore business rates to local authorities. He was to be a “communitarian”. Apart from the exceptions of Scottish and Welsh devolution, this promise was not fulfilled. The centralist drift continued ... Meanwhile the Tories in Opposition under William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard turned their coats and declared themselves against centralism after all. They were suddenly for local discretion (Jenkins 2004, 15-6).

Indeed, the debate on regions and housing targets demonstrates the contrast between populist strategy and government machinery. Regions were practically offensive to the Conservative Party in opposition – Eric Pickles would regularly refer to it as the “R-word”⁸³ [21]. In the three election manifestos during the 2000s, the Conservatives consistently attacked regions as arbitrary, undemocratic, and centralising, as given in the following quotes:

We will abolish centrally-driven national or regional housebuilding targets. Local councils accountable to local people should be responsible for meeting local housing needs. Where there is rapid population growth, central government

⁸³ This is similar to the Thatcher Government’s disdain of the words ‘economic’ and ‘planning’, following the government’s abolition of the Regional Economic Planning Councils in 1979 (Hogwood 1995, 289).

should work in partnership with local councils to invest in additional infrastructure (The Conservative Party 2001, 38)

Conservatives understand that people identify with their town, city or county, not with arbitrary “regions”. We will abolish Labour’s regional assemblies. Powers currently exercised at a regional level covering planning, housing, transport and the fire service will all be returned to local authorities (The Conservative Party 2005, 21)

We will abolish the entire bureaucratic and undemocratic tier of regional planning, including the regional Spatial Strategies and building targets (The Conservative Party 2010, 73-4).

Reminiscent of the Thatcher Government’s abolition of Regional Economic Planning Councils in 1979 (Hogwood 1995)⁸⁴, the Coalition Government oversaw immediate abolition of RDAs and RSSs in the aftermath of the 2010 election to promote ‘localism’. One interviewee argued this demonstrated clearly the populism inherent in the Conservatives’ electoral strategy:

... to me was a perfectly predictable political, visceral, reaction. Our people in our party living in the nice shires hate John Prescott and hate John Prescott’s houses, we’ll abolish the statutory framework for that work programme and we will gain political advantage by a rhetoric which says we will now let our people free to plot their own futures. So, there’s a short, cynical, political grab. Like Trumpism, yes? Just grab a popular mood and you slingshot yourself forward for political advantage for a short time [13].

However, as already indicated, the Conservatives in government were not immune to the same fossilisation, and the smoothing of radical edges, that the Labour government before them had experienced. Despite this decisive move, localism’s ‘fossilisation’ took only a couple of years. The departure of Steve Hilton was widely perceived as the nail in the coffin: “a profound setback for the government’s plan to remake and prune the state” (*The Economist* 10 March 2012, 36). A Liberal Democrat politician argued that both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives were responding to the widespread unpopularity of this “imposition from central government of development” [23]. However, they questioned whether abolishing regions was ultimately the best approach: “Now you may argue once you’re in government, that might have its downsides, but they very very quickly oversaw the abolition of regional targets and so on, which the Conservatives had seen as a central imposition” [23]. Indeed, while the strategy of opposition (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) during the 2000s was a concerted and consistent attack on the centralism of the Labour government (in particular, the regional system of governance, as well as perceived bureaucracy, red tape, and target-based approach to local government), several interviewees indicated that the role of the Conservatives in opposing centralist tendencies should have *remained* an opposition strategy, rather than a government policy, following their electoral success in 2010. Indeed, a few interviewees suggested that, after having been in opposition for thirteen years, the Conservatives had simply ‘forgotten’ what the role of a government was. As one Liberal Democrat peer argued:

⁸⁴ This indicates some ideological continuity between the Thatcher and Cameron Governments, and the antagonism of that ideology towards regional structures.

...if you look at the political background a bit more, the Conservatives had been in opposition for 13 years, which meant long enough for them to forget what a government does, which is to protect the status quo. Liberal Democrats hadn't been in government since a very very long time ago, and, so, we saw ourselves very much as the insurgents, as the people had an opportunity put things right ... and the Localism Act - or the Localism Bill - was a vehicle for doing quite a lot of that [37].

To sum up, then, the localism agenda came out of a unique conjunction of circumstances whereby the Conservatives had been in opposition for a number of terms, during which time it enjoyed growing support and electoral success in local councils (a point I will return to in section 6.3.2), as localities felt greater pressure from Labour regional housing targets. In particular, the Conservatives were responding to their core voter base in the southern shire counties which were resisting development [19]. However, this “conjunction of circumstances which made [localism] deliverable in a way that after three years of the Coalition it soon wasn't” [37]. This energy eventually disappeared as civil servants regained power and “worked out what they needed to do to cut the radical edges off” [37]. In relation to this, as several interviewees indicated, “[Government] then of course have spent the last six years reintroducing [regional targets] through the back door having recognised that actually, people wouldn't- what anybody could have told them which was that rural and nice areas wouldn't spontaneously build enough [houses]” [19]. Several interviewees agreed, seeing the government attempting to reintroduce targets and reinvent regional planning through the backdoor [01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 19, 44, 39]. As one former member of the Cambridge LEP observed:

My observation from being relatively close to it was simply, when the Coalition government came in 2010, for whatever reason, the seemingly first thing they did was get rid of regions – it wasn't tackle the health service, it wasn't tackle crime, or anything else. They just got rid of regions. ... And in effect, what's going on now around devolution is in some ways trying to rebuild part of that former machinery without calling it regions, because they realised they got rid of it too quickly [05]

An interviewee attributed the abolition of regions, and the eventual back-peddling, as a consequence of the adversarial system of politics:

... what they do is they, you know, spend time opposing what the other guys are doing, they therefore put into their manifestos that they're going to abolish all those awful things that the guy was doing – within five years they're having to come back to it because they realise they need it – and what a sad thing it is in a way. It's democracy, isn't it? I mean, democracy is the best that we've got, but it is terribly terribly flawed isn't it, in the sense of this short-termism that it seems to produce [03].

With the Housing White Paper in March 2017 and the revised National Planning Policy Framework (July 2018), there has been a symbolic shift in focus – symbolised in the change of department name from the Department of Communities and Local Government, to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in January 2018. As one senior civil servant in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local government argued, government has

accepted that there is a top-down role in calculating housing need, which in turn does not sit easily with localism. While it is not a conscious decision not to use localism anymore, the focus is now on housing delivery, with the need to build 300,000 homes a year: “Houses need to be built somewhere” [40]. These criticisms and observations ultimately reflect the fundamental tension of the localism agenda – promises are easier made than they are to actually implement, which is why established governments tend to avoid making or renewing such promises. Unsurprisingly, one can conclude that populist strategies are inherently unsustainable approaches to policy making, and can serve to create distraction, waste resources, and heighten expectations. Yet, avoiding these strategies is evidently not an option either, given the adversarial system of politics and its manifestation through local politics, as outlined and discussed earlier in this chapter. Either way, these implementation difficulties can offer further empirical evidence of the inherent populist uses of localism. To further query these underlying pressures and motivations, the following, and final, section of this chapter will discuss the *origins* of localism as a slogan amongst opposition parties from two perspectives: firstly, the discursive and material electoral strategies instigated by the Liberal Party, and secondly, as already alluded to, the pressures emerging from local elections. These will be discussed in turn.

6.3. The origins of localism as a political slogan

6.3.1. The Liberal Democrats, community politics, and campaign strategies

The 2010 election on the 6th May resulted in a hung parliament with no political majority. A few days later, on the 11th May, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a Coalition and released the Coalition Agreement. In the foreword, David Cameron and Nick Clegg promise to ‘disperse power more widely’:

As our parties have worked together it has become increasingly clear to us that, although there are differences, there is also common ground. We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure. We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better. In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government. That way, we can build the free, fair and responsible society we want to see (HM Government 2010a, 7).

This localist policy agenda in the Coalition government emerged out of a unique collaboration between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. As one Liberal Democrat politician argued: “the Liberal Democrats are absolutely superb at developing ideas that other people then implement, and the interesting thing about 2010 is that we actually implemented some of the ideas” [37]. Indeed, while the Liberal Democrats have ideologically been strongly associated with devolution and decentralisation for decades, the Conservatives had not. As one Conservative MP, Douglas Carswell, observed in relation to the party’s changing policy agenda, “To some, this new Conservative agenda is deeply unconservative. Some instinctive Tories may prefer managerialism to radicalism” (Carswell 2008, 159).

Therefore, while it is clear that the Conservatives were the dominant force in the Coalition government, understanding the longer-term election strategies of the Liberal Democrats is part of the puzzle as to the Localism policy agenda during the 2010-2015 Coalition. The role of the Liberal Democrats in perpetuating an agenda of localism in its various forms over the past fifty years is a claim made by several interviewees, as well as in the Liberal Democrat's 'Orange Book' published in 2004. Here, David Laws MP argued how the party has been at the forefront of campaigning for a more democratic and devolved political system:

The Liberal Democrats (and their predecessor the Liberal Party) have consistently been at the forefront of steps to liberalise the political system in the UK. We have been strong supporters of more democracy, freedom of information, accountability and transparency. Liberal Democrats have also been consistent in their commitment to decentralising power within the UK – making a strong case for the passing of more power down from Whitehall and Westminster to the nations, regions, and localities of the UK (Laws 2004, 26).

Therefore, when the recent Localism agenda was announced by the Conservatives, many Liberal Democrats perceived the Tories as borrowing from their ideas. As a senior Liberal Democrat politician, Lord Graham Tope, argued in the House of Lords on the second reading of the Localism Bill:

I was delighted when I first learnt that the coalition Government intended to introduce a Bill that would give effect to my party's long-held commitment to localism, or rather to local democracy. I must admit that the same commitment from our coalition partners does not have quite the same long pedigree, but blessed are the sinners who repent and we should welcome the zealotry of the converts (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 c156).

The Liberal Democrats, who have found themselves in a perpetual state of opposition in the post-war period save for the 2010-2015 Coalition Government, "have always wanted more power for local government because the councils they control are the nearest thing they have to a power base" (The Economist 3 May 2003, 42). However, what are the origins to this power base? Following a large election defeat in the 1970 election, the party was left with only six MPs in Parliament. Given this precarious position, one interviewee, a senior Liberal Democrat politician, explained how the younger party members (the Young Liberals), in alliance with a number of Liberal councillors, used this defeat to convince older members to bring in a resolution during the 1970 party assembly to adopt 'Community Politics' as a major strategy (see also Beer 1982, 196; Steed 1977, 15-6). The resolution stressed a dual approach to politics, one which saw the party continuing to work within established political institutions (such as Parliament and local government), while at the same time engaging and working directly with people to achieve change (Steed 1977, 16). Rather than enforcing change from above, taking a direct approach to communities was seen as a more genuine approach to democratic renewal and popular participation (ibid.). The resolution itself was as follows:

A primary strategic emphasis on community politics; our role as political activists is to help organise people in communities to take and use power, to use political

skills to redress grievances, and to represent people at all levels in the political structure (cited in Copus 2007, 128).

As one interviewee who had participated in this change explained:

... I remember trying to reassure some of the old Liberals, old in age, not in attitude, that actually community politics could be described as liberalism in practice. You know, in other words, instead of just fighting the elections on the traditional, you know, election address and, you know, put out one piece of paper and canvas a few people, what we were actually trying to do was to get involved in local communities in all sorts of ways and do it all year round, not just at election time with campaign slogans. And it was a whole different approach to the words we would use now, and I think what we used then was empowering communities [34].

The liberals therefore began to reconnect and revise their older ideas, where attacking the centralised bureaucratic state was “second nature and entirely effortless” for the party (Beer 1982, 196). This adoption of ‘new populism’ and radical democracy informed the liberal revival and the emergence of the Social Democratic Party (which entered into an alliance with the Liberal Party in the 1983 and 1987 general elections) (Beer 1982, 194).

The experience of community politics shows how empty signifiers, and the manifestation of populist strategies, extends beyond ‘language’ (e.g. the word *localism*), to incorporate *material practices* (see Eklundh 2019, 115). In relation to the previous discussion in section 5.2 which explored the divergence between the means and ends of localism, adopting localist *practices* can signal a convergence between means and ends, to indicate greater sense of authenticity and interest on the part of politicians to their localities. The Liberal Party was the first party to incorporate community politics into its local policy agenda and show interest in the daily concerns that many local councillors previously had regarded as too trivial or beneath their dignity (Seabrook 1984, 2). By focusing on immediate local grievances – from cracked paving stones, erratic services, delays in completing minor repairs, to local planning policies – the party gained a favourable political presence in local government and were seen to humanise the system by taking account the feelings of people in the neighbourhoods (Blunkett and Jackson 1987, 87; Seabrook 1984, 1-2). Eventually the Liberal Party experienced a revitalisation in local elections, reflecting perhaps the demand and popularity for pro-local politics amongst the electorate, where “the status of the everyday is important in populist rhetoric” (Higgins 2013, 66). This sentiment was reflected in interviews, where one Liberal Democrat politician observed the strategic importance of community politics for the Liberal Democrats, particularly given its status as a minority party. The strategy was a dual process of politicians developing greater understanding and empathy to their electorate, and in return, gaining their trust. Such local engagement enabled politicians to identify “the right course of action to take on behalf of local people” [37]. At the same time, there were populist elements of this practice and engagement. The interviewee admitted, “you don’t require a great deal of kind of intellectual coherence about what you’re saying because you’ll just be in favour of whatever the man in the pub’s in favour of” [37]. However, they insisted that this type of populism was of a different, more positive quality, to other parties (like UKIP): “if you like, playing to the better side of

people's natures, not just the ugly, loud side of people's nature" [37]. However, this populist aspect community politics came to be problematised and viewed opportunistically. During interview, a different Liberal Democrat peer recollected a by-election they won in the 1970s (in a constituency which had not previously been Liberal), where community politics came to be seen more cynically as an "election winning technique" and "community slick marketing" – rather than a genuine way of working *with* communities [34].

In purely electoral terms, community politics may have conferred some successes – even a revitalisation, as suggested by Beer (1982). While struggling in the local elections of the 1970s, local election data demonstrates that the party experienced a revitalisation in local government elections lasting almost three decades (Rallings and Thrasher 2011; Fig. 6.2). While it is difficult to causally link community politics with election results, the success of community politics certainly could be measured in relation to changing both electoral and representative conventions amongst all the mainstream political parties. For example, the Liberal Democrat politician recalled how they were one of the first MPs to hold a surgery; "I was the first MP in [constituency] ever to do surgeries. Amazingly, everybody does surgeries now. Nobody had ever done it; nobody knew what it was in [constituency] in 1973 by then and I started doing it. As an MP I did a Saturday surgery every week" [34]. It appeared that Liberal Democrat strategy had changed the election game for all parties, to a public engagement on a different level than politicians had been previously accustomed to and was now increasingly expected by the voting public. As observed by Burns *et al.* (1994, 3), "In the past political parties tended to neglect issues relating to local government and local service delivery. Indeed, some politicians looked down on what they saw as the 'low politics' of dropped street kerbs and refuse collection. Not anymore".

In relation to this competitive adoption of successful election strategies, community politics offers another, more recent, example of how the Conservative Party adopted Liberal Democrat practices and ideas. While in opposition, in the years 2007 through to 2010 in the run-up to the election, the Conservative Party's "Social Action Projects" comprised one of their longer-term election campaign strategies. A Conservative Special Advisor recounted how the Social Action Projects programme tasked all Conservative parliamentary candidates with running local projects, including street cleaning projects, youth groups, and sports groups. According to a Conservative advisor, this allowed the party, despite being in opposition, to create "meaningful change in places" [35]. However, much like the community politics of the Liberal Democrats being accused of 'slick marketing', the social action projects had a similarly transactional tone, and they were dismissed as gimmicks by opponents (Williams 2015, 103). As the same interviewee commented; "we want your vote, thanks so much. So very transactional" [35]. However, both strategies demonstrate the importance of creating a local "infrastructure", in sorts: where personal presence in local spaces is perceived as important groundwork for future electoral success. This importance of local infrastructure will be further explored in the following section in relation to local elections. Social Action Projects and community politics in general also played a part in *communicating* a principle of big society, localism, and decentralisation through (populist) material practices (Eklundh 2019) and 'setting an example', indicating an attempt to converge the means and ends of localism, between normative and strategic localism. Increasingly, mainstream parties have incorporated this commitment and

respect for localities as part of their electoral strategies – again, this point will be re-examined in section 6.3.2 with regards to local elections. Given this discussion on the role of the Liberal Democrats, and their discursive and material impact on wider election strategies amongst all major political parties, the following part of this chapter will more closely explore the importance of local elections more generally in relation to the emergence of localism. The evidence thus far however demonstrates once again, from a different perspective, the role of opposition parties in bringing forward localism, showing how strategies of localism, in electoral terms, are multi-layered, complex, and often highly practice orientated. It also shows how minority parties can set the bar to determine future agendas and future promises (even by Labour and the Conservative party), which would explain localism’s periodic emergence.

6.3.2. Local elections and decentralist national agendas

This section final will further query underlying political pressures of localism, and its relationship to opposition parties, by exploring how local elections and local councillors impact upon national politics and national-level discourses on localism. In other words, exploring the multi-directional relationship between the ‘material’ (e.g. elections and election results) and the ‘ideational’ (e.g. localism). This is to uncover further the strategic element of localism and explore how much of it might emerge from genuine local concerns.

My interest in local elections as a way to explain localism came about because of a widespread but under researched belief that opposition parties in the UK tend to do relatively well in local government elections, compared to the party in government (Bogdanor 2009, 238; Miller 1988, 237). Given my interest in the role of opposition parties in perpetuating a populist promise of localism, this seemed worthy of further investigation. Many describe local government elections as being a proxy for national elections, and as an ‘approval rating’ or ‘barometer’ for national government. The theoretical perspective on this is that local government elections – as well as European Parliament elections, by-elections, mid-term elections, regional elections, mayoral elections, second chamber elections and similar elections – are ‘second-order elections’ (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Such second-order elections, compared to national elections (or ‘first-order elections’) are, starkly put, “less important”,⁸⁵ the outcome being a) lower level of participation, b) greater opportunities for small and new political parties, and c) losses for government parties (Reif and Schmitt 1980, 9). As one political insider observed during interview; “basically the way this stuff works, when you’re in national government you get your ass kicked at a local level” [35], or, “when Labour’s in power, you get Tory councils, when Tories are in power you get Labour councils” [37].

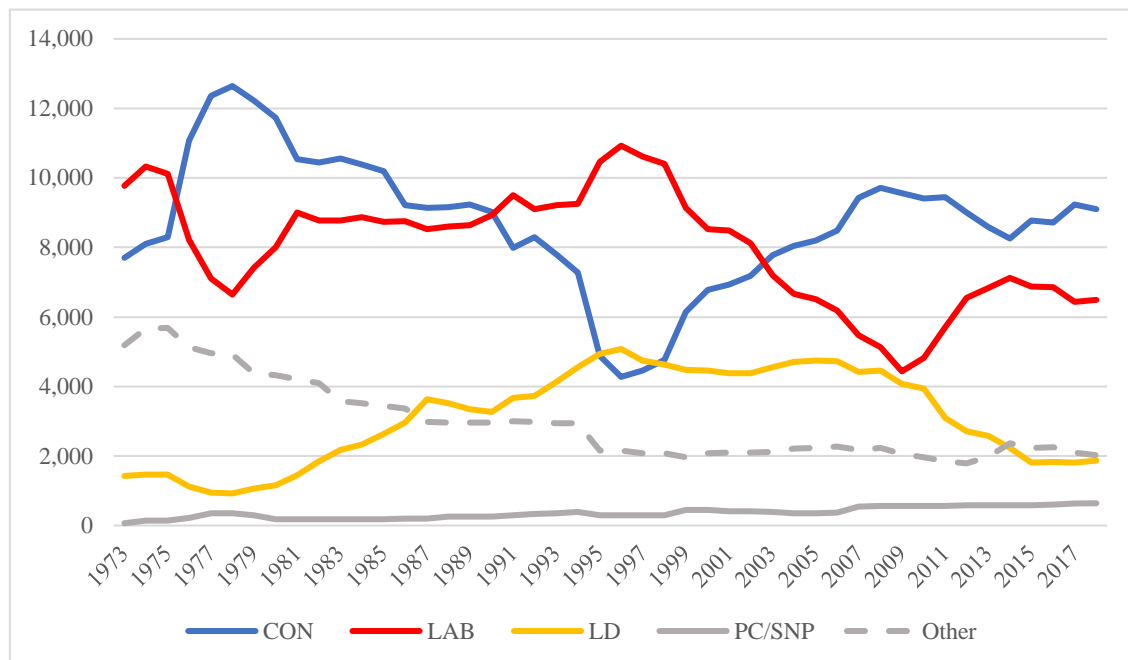
Can this phenomenon be measured? Comparing local government election results year-on-year is problematic because it compares the election results of different ‘kinds’ of councils⁸⁶ which hold elections at different intervals (which is why the House of Commons library recommends

⁸⁵ While dated, survey evidence has indicated a longer-term decline in the ‘belief that local elections determine local affairs’ (Rao and Young 1999, 51).

⁸⁶ District Council, Unitary Council, Metropolitan Borough Council, County Council and London Borough Council.

that comparative research be done using four-year, rather than one-year, intervals for comparative analysis⁸⁷). On the other hand, studying the total number of Councillors/Wards controlled by a party does offer some potential of comparison due to its *cumulative* changes, rather than sudden year-on-year changes, as given by Fig 6.2 below.

Fig. 6.2. Party Affiliation of Councillors, Great Britain, 1973-2018



Source: Audickas and Cracknell (2018)

Using absolutes, this chart goes some way towards supporting the hypothesis that the main opposition performs better in local elections than the incumbent. In particular, the years 1975-1981, where there was a surge in Conservative Councillors, and in the years 1994-2000, where there was a surge in Labour Councillors, and again, an increase in Conservative Councillors in the years 2005-2011. Michael Heseltine recently described the late 1970s surge as ‘a sea of blue’:

As Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment in the years up to the 1979 election, I was the titular spearhead for the Tory local government’s assault on the Wilson and then Callaghan governments. It was heady stuff. By the time of the election, local government was a sea of blue. We controlled all the local government associations and every county except Durham. Firm friendships had been built between council leaders and shadow ministers. The winter of discontent heralded the widely anticipated arrival of the Tory spring (Heseltine 2019, 12).

Interestingly, this pattern seems to have been broken in the mid 2010s where Labour in opposition have not managed to supersede Conservative Councillors, a point which will be explored later in this section. Of particular interest are the moments where the opposition has gained a large share of local councillors followed by a general election victory (1979, 1997 and 2010).

⁸⁷ see <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/parliament-and-elections/elections-elections/local-elections-2018-the-numbers/>

Given that both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that opposition parties do tend to fare better in local elections, this might have a couple of implications for national policy agendas and central-local relations. Firstly, a growth in opposition power, as measured for example by the number of opposition party councillors in local government, may cause or deepen political polarisation between local and central government. This was a point of criticism by Miller who saw the mid-term local electoral process as contributing towards “meaningless, useless, irrational chaos of adversary politics and mindless opposition” (1988, 237). Similarly, Professor Gerry Stoker attributed the dominance of opposition parties locally to the adversarial nature of British politics, spilling over into central- and local government relations (Relations Between Central and Local Government Committee 1996, 171). In turn, if there is growing dissonance and polarisation between central government policy agenda and ideology, and that of local government, then those local councils controlled by the opposition may lobby for greater self-government, particularly if it is perceived that central government is pushing an ideological agenda on local areas and overseeing ‘centralisation’.⁸⁸ This was one of the survey findings from the BSA 1985 report, where “Labour partisans favoured a reduction of central control by a greater margin than any other group” (Young 1985, 155)⁸⁹. The 1995 BSA report confirmed this pattern, which had since become increasingly polarised:

Almost half of Conservative identifiers are content with the *status quo*, while almost a quarter would like to see central control increased. In contrast, nearly half of Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers favour a reduction of central control – just over one in ten would like central control increased. Further, the partisan divide had widened since the 1980s. Conservatives have become more in favour of central control while Labour supporters have become increasingly hostile (Young and Roe 1995, 96).

Indeed, the polarisation between local councils controlled by opposition party and central government was described in the Widdicombe Report in stark terms, where those councils which had been abolished and ratecapped by the Conservative Government were all Labour controlled:

With a Conservative central government, it is not unnatural that this process of polarisation should be most felt by in Labour authorities. This has been marked in Scotland, where the great majority of the population have councils under Labour control. ... It has also been marked in England in those councils (all Labour controlled) that were abolished on 1 April 1986 and those (almost all Labour controlled) that have been ratecapped (Widdicombe Committee 1986, 34).

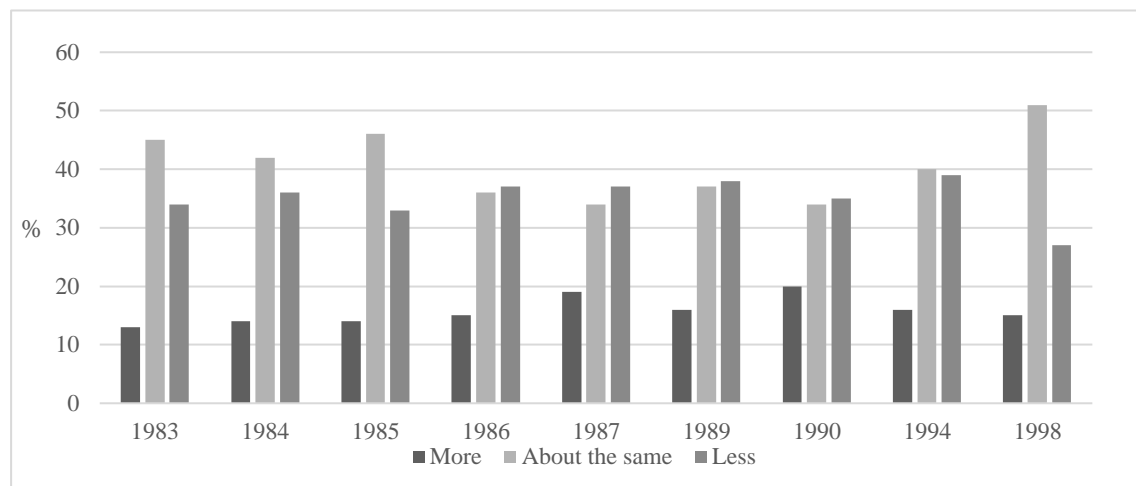
This pattern is illustrated in Figure 6.3, using data from the BSA. The years 1986 - 1994 all show lower consensus and greater polarisation of ideas between whether to support the status quo or have more or less central control. In contrast, 1983-1985 as well as 1998 show that support for the status quo is relatively high, and these years incidentally fall during a period of a new government. Unfortunately, the BSA discontinued this question after 1998, preventing

⁸⁸ See also discussion in the Select Committee Report ‘Rebuilding Trust’ (1996, 171).

⁸⁹ Comparing Conservative, Alliance (SPD-Liberal), and Labour partisans, the BSA survey showed that 27%, 39%, and 52% of respondents, respectively, wanted ‘less’ central control of local government (Young 1985, 156).

any wider conclusions. However, it does give further indication of the party-political aspects, heightened by local electoral processes, with regards to public opinion on centralisation and localism.

Fig. 6.3. “Local Councils should be controlled by central government”, % Respondents, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983-1998



Source: Young and Rao (1995, 96) and Rao and Young (1999, 52).

Secondly, and similarly to the first point, a growth in the number of local councillors may serve to increase local influence on an opposition party’s *national* policy agenda in favour of more local self-governance. Here, opposition parties enjoying ‘second order election’ successes (i.e. local government) might use this as a strategy for achieving ‘first order’ electoral wins (general elections). As one Liberal Democrat Special Advisor commented; “In a way, promising more power to local authorities and devolution of power energised our local parties which is a massive political benefit” [42]. As indicated, the infrastructure that an elected councillor could bring to the national party was viewed as very important for future electoral successes, as explained by a Conservative special advisor:

When you have an elected politician, what happens? It means that you have the capacity to build the infrastructure and supporters and relationships that will matter come the next election. So, when you have councillors that means you have council allowances. When you have allowances that means you have a stipend. And that means that money can then go back into the association. That means you can file leaflets, you know, it means that you are legitimised to go and talk to people as well. It’s, like, office. Holding office is a really powerful way of building infrastructure in a locality. Without that it becomes... Well, it’s not impossible, but it’s incredibly hard [35].

Several interviewees, for example, emphasise the role of Conservative councillors in advocating spatial governance and planning reform in the run-up to, and following, the 2010 election, when the party was still in opposition [01, 02, 05, 13, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23, 37]. As one interviewee observed in the run-up to the 2010 election, “there were lots of Tory councillors who were fretting at how they were being treated by Labour” [37]. According to the interviewee, it was due to the influences of local Tory councillors that the Conservatives

developed an “absolute abhorrence” to regional structures and housing targets [37]. Similarly, a senior civil servant at the time observed:

Tories dominated local government at that point, you know, all of the tory local government hated housing targets, you know, ‘this is centralised bureaucracy imposing da da da da’, so, the rhetoric was all about localism. And so, the manifesto was ‘we’re going to abolish regional strategies, we’re going to abolish regional development agencies’ ... there was – there probably still is – a sort of vehement, slightly bonkers part of the Tory party which really hated regions [21]

The national party’s concern for the frustrations, ideas, and efforts of local councillors was directly reflected in the rhetoric of the Conservative Party. For example, as David Cameron argued in the foreword to the 2009 Green Paper ‘Control Shift’ in the run-up to the election:

In localities across Britain today there is immense untapped human capital. Conservative-led councils continue to be the font of powerful ideas, yet they are frustrated in their attempts to make local life better by a target-driven, topdown government which is trapped in the bureaucratic age and micro-manages all they do (The Conservatives 2009, 1).

To recap, I have identified two implications emerging from opposition party electoral successes in local elections (as measured relative to the party in government). Firstly, greater political polarisation between central and local government as the centre and the local become proxy for ‘government party’ and ‘opposition party’.⁹⁰ The second implication was greater local influences on national policy agendas. While these two patterns are not mutually exclusive, the former reflects more the experience of the 1980s/1990s (and the resistance of local Labour councils against the Thatcher Government), and the latter reflects more closely the experience of the 2000s (particularly the local lobbying to promote the Conservatives anti-regional stance). Either way, the existence of these two patterns suggest that there may be a natural cyclical tendency whereby the national opposition party agenda is influenced by localist ideas and pressures to empower local communities and local government. While a populist discourse, localism might therefore be rooted in material concerns as they arise from the inherent tensions within the political system itself.

With regards to the more recent local government electoral pattern (Fig 6.2), might ask why Labour has failed to break through in recent years despite the traditionally ‘favourable’ position inhabited by the main opposition. This failure of Labour to take on greater general dominance at the local level is seen as a success for the Conservatives, given their relatively long stint in power (if one includes the Coalition Government). As one Conservative special advisor observed:

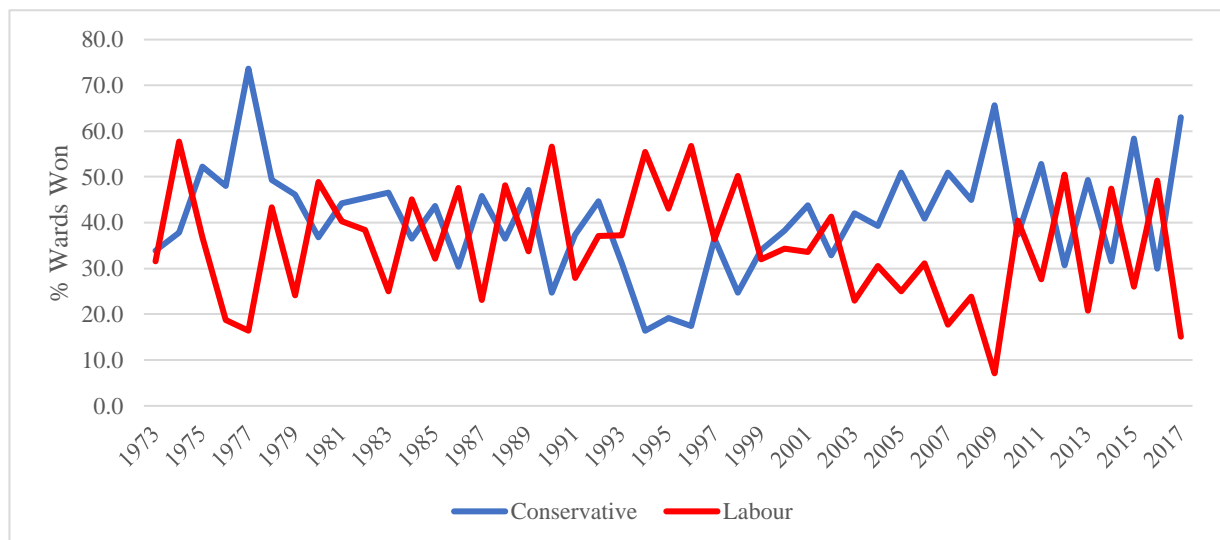
Tories are still winning, Tories keeps control- majority of control of the LGA, which is essentially the barometer for local government, during the entire time, they still control it now [March 2018] ... That’s unprecedented. I remember

⁹⁰ As Lord Graham Tope observed, “there were really only two parties – the central government party and the local government party” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728 c156).

watching kind of the results come in one night on the first round of local elections in 2011. I saw Eric Pickles smiling at the fact that the Tories just won. They got the highest proportion share of the vote [35].

A similar chart to Fig 6.2 which uses instead relative data (percentages) might offer a different perspective. A study which combines relative election results (as given by percentage of votes or wards) across the different councils and charts out changes over time might appear volatile, because, as mentioned, it is not comparing ‘like for like’. This methodological problem is further compounded by there being a political bias between town (metropolitan borough councils and London borough councils tend to favour Labour) and country (district councils and county councils which tend to favour Conservative). However, while these numbers generally are not comparable across time, this does not preclude identifying useful patterns in relation to comparing town and country divisions in local elections and exploring the ‘polarisation’ hypothesis I outlined above.

Fig. 6.4. Percentage of wards won, local election results England, 1973-2017



Source: Rallings and Thrasher (2011)

The above chart (Fig. 6.4) shows the percentage share of wards Labour and Conservative have won over the past few decades. Certain patterns stand out: the dominance of the Conservatives during the Labour Government in the mid to late 70s; growing polarisation during the 1980s (save for the 1990s election following the poll tax), Labour’s local revival and dominance from 1994 through to 1998 and its slump during the remainder of the 1997-2010 Labour Government. In recent years, we have returned to a growing polarisation between metropolitan areas and towns and country. Here, the Conservative Government has retained and increased its popularity amongst local voters in the *uneven* years 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017: in 2011 and 2015, most (194) District Councils had elections, and in 2013 and 2017, County Councils held elections. The main opposition, Labour, has retained its relative share of wards in the *even* years of 2012, 2014, and 2016 – years which had fewer District Council elections (74, 74, and 70, respectively), as illustrated in Table 6.5. This is suggesting that political polarisation between Conservative and Labour is growing between cities, on the one hand, and towns and rural areas on the other: a reflection confirmed by the recent general election result in December 2019 (for

further discussion, see Nandy 2020; Jennings and Stoker 2016). It indicates that the Conservative Party has bucked the trend in its localist communicative discourse, partly due to the continuous election campaigning, as described previously, with the platform of government policy providing an important method of embedding future election success. It is also partly due to internal changes to the party and the government which has it behaving more as a new government than an old, most recently with Boris Johnson (and his advisor, Dominic Cummings) at the helm. In this energised state, it has successfully weaponised localism in traditional Labour heartlands partly by embedding party campaigning infrastructures through its electoral gains in local council elections as well as combined authority mayoral elections, which I outline in a forthcoming article. The implications of this embedding, of using localised elections to slowly shift hearts and minds, is that there may not be another Labour Government for ten years or longer.

Table 6.5. Local elections according to political bias

| Year | Local Council Elections | Conservative Party result (% of wards) | Labour Party Result (% of wards) |
|------|---|--|----------------------------------|
| 2011 | District Council (194) ; Unitary Council (49); Metropolitan Borough Council (36) | 52.9 | |
| 2012 | District Council (74) ; Metropolitan Borough Council (36); Unitary Council (18) | | 50.6 |
| 2013 | County Council (27) ; Unitary Council (7) | 49.3 | |
| 2014 | District Council (74) ; Metropolitan Borough Council (36); London Borough Council (32); Unitary Council (19) | | 47.4 |
| 2015 | District Council (194) ; Unitary Council (49); Metropolitan Borough Council (36) | 58.4 | |
| 2016 | District Council (70) ; Metropolitan Borough Council (35); Unitary Council (19) | | 49.3 |
| 2017 | County Council (27) ; Unitary Council (6); Metropolitan Borough Council (1) | 63.0 | |

Source: Rallings and Thrasher (2011)

This polarisation could be causing changing political allegiances and ideologies in relation to communities and local government. One interviewee observed how local councillors periodically move from technocratic to radical: “they’re radical when there’s Thatcherism, they’re quiet when there’s Blairism”, arguing how “we’re at the beginning of a new era of activism which people don’t understand yet” [18]. This in turn could be impacting on the politics surrounding local elections and councillors particularly in metropolitan areas, and in turn, local and central relations:

... there is now the beginning of much more of an activist community movement restarting in London across the piece which was very quiet in the 90’s and has been generally building. So, you know, take back the city and London citizens

and there's all that sort of stuff going on at the slightly more radical end of community organising. And that will feed into what happens at local level [18].

As the years go by, austerity and the threat of Brexit is creating the economic and emotive conditions for a 'Big Society' and 'Localism' in a way that government policy never achieved. There seems to be growing anger, disillusionment, and despair amongst the public. In this context, a growing number of urban Labour councils are experimenting with new forms of "guerrilla localism" which are, reminiscent of the GLC and radical Labour Councils in the 1980s, challenging the traditional capitalist economic model. As Guardian columnist Charkraborty observes of Preston City Council, "It keeps its money as close to home as possible so that, amid historically drastic cuts, the amount spent locally has gone up. Where other authorities privatise, Preston grows its own businesses. It even creates worker-owned co-operatives" (Charkraborty 31 Jan 2018; see also Charkraborty 6 March 2019). The implications of this new municipalism with regards to localism are unclear but one hypothesis is that the relatively widespread local consent of the national government in its local electoral heartlands places has made populist promises of localism, as espoused by the main opposition, less likely. On the other hand, opposition party councils might be, similarly to the 1980s, rallying against the centralism of austerity and even Brexit, thus placing economic innovation, decentralisation, and even radical politics, as part of a local government agenda. Here, as with the experience of Coin Street, there might be renewed conditions for a new kind of 'authentic' localism of grassroots empowerment. As one interviewee observed, "there's a third sort of localism which in a sense is what authentically comes from the people which is just a sort of 'we're mad as hell and can't take it anymore' sort of localism" [18]. We might be on the cusp of two ways forward in relation to central-local relations: a new wave of radicalism, or, a deepening of populist discourses, or both. Either way, as this thesis would suggest, it is in the hands of the opposition. In other words, it depends on whether political parties choose to capture and address these sentiments in their policies.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the rhetorical, party political, electoral, and ultimately populist uses of localism, investigating the ways in which localism has and can be discursively and materially operationalised for political ends, while also exploring its political and local origins. Firstly, I discussed the relationship between localism and elections, observing that localism could be useful electorally despite empirical indications that it did not result in more votes. Secondly, and in relation to this point, exploring the characteristics of the concept itself indicated that academic debate over its definition may be futile since localism is not used for the purposes of clarity, but rather is used *politically* to unite popular demands which are wide and emotive (Laclau 2005). This premise led me to explore empirically how localism as a populist concept has been used by political parties to delegitimise governments, with a particular emphasis on opposition parties, and the tendency to a) engage in crisis discourse, indicating widespread perception of legitimisation challenges, b) critique government centralisation (opposition manifestos), and c) promote either normative (opposition manifestos) or strategic (government manifestos) forms of localism, as observed through a study of general election manifestos. The conclusion of this political use of localism however is that it is prone to fossilisation as

opposition party ‘radicalism’ gets subsumed into the governmental machinery upon winning an election.

The third part of this chapter explored more specifically electoral and practical origins of localism as a promise, by exploring the campaign practices of the Liberal Party (community politics), which served to *put into action* the localist ideology of the party itself, and which had the power of converging localism’s means with its ends and thus creating a sense of authenticity around localism. This strategy set the bar for the mainstream parties to meet, where eventually such engagement and concern with the local electorate on a practical and tangible level became a generally adopted political practice. This example further shows how localism, and populism more generally, is not always an abstract rhetoric or discourse, but a *practice* (Eklundh 2019). The role of local elections in the periodic emergence of localism has also been investigated. Here, I observed the claim that opposition parties tend to do well in local government elections. The implication of this is a potential political polarisation between central government and local government, which can explain some of the material origins and concerns about ‘centralisation’. Secondly, a growth in the number of local councillors from the main opposition party means that such councillors have greater potential to communicate their concerns and influence the opposition party’s policy agenda, in favour of more local self-governance. I conclude this section by observing recent trends of cross-council polarisation along party political lines, which might have the potential instead of creating new conditions for a more bottom-up approach to localism. In asking how political parties operationalise localism as part of their electoral strategy, it is evidently complex and multi-layered. Localism is very much a slogan and governments and opposition parties compete to use it to either embark on a discourse of delegitimization or legitimisation. However, localism is also a practice, and one which is harder to pin-point. Here, we can begin to understand why it is as normative and emotional as it is, and why it is therefore useful as a populist strategy. Investigating the electoral practices of localism further would be an area deserving future research. In particular, better understanding the polarisation between cities and towns/country, and how local identity shapes political rhetoric.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to answer the question of *what are the political motivations and pressures that result in decentralist / localist rhetoric and reform*. In doing so, it has brought together the many disparate elements of localism that are often left unelaborated, untheorised, and unconnected. Rather than defining localism per se, I have approached it as something that is largely devoid of precise semantic content. It is because of this lack of clear meaning that it is politically useful. Therefore, one of the first conclusions of this thesis is exactly that: localism is a normative idea that is used politically, and (therefore) strategically. In other words, localism is less about meaning, and more about value-laden messaging. Confusion arises because localism's messages – much like other political concepts – are multiple: protecting democracy; protecting local, even English, identity; protecting communities and giving them a 'voice'; and challenging centralised power and dominance, including notions of the elite and regulatory 'bureaucracy'. Given that such promises and messages of localism are often left unrealised and poorly implemented, localism can be best understood as part of the communicative discourses of governments and political parties. This thesis argues that in this capacity, localism can be, in part, explained as a *strategy* for legitimising or delegitimising central authority, rather than in-and-of-itself a serious effort to reform and revise central-local relations and renew the democratic process. This conclusion does not however preclude that a promise and policy reform of localism cannot be a force for meaningful progressive and democratic renewal, just that the political motivations for operationalising localist discourse are not solely or directly to achieve such material changes.

Through this research, I have sought to address a gap in the literature by questioning current approaches to studying localism. Here, it seems that local government and governance studies have a tendency to promote and advocate localism in a normative sense and as such do not sufficiently engage with a more conceptual discussion of the concept itself and its discursive uses. Further, by failing to do so, and by concentrating critique and scepticism on its implementation, theoretical and empirical efforts have overlooked the political and economic pressures that lead governments to invoke localism and are therefore insufficiently critical of its origins and strategic uses in politics. This approach has sought to provide a different perspective to the question of why localism has, in its practical appearance and uses, been so paradoxical and contradictory. My approach goes beyond post-political and neoliberal analyses as previously discussed in section 2.1.1. These theoretical approaches have tended to describe all policy contradictions as a reflection of governmental deception and underlying motives. In contrast, while this work is similarly sceptical of the promises of localism, by emphasising localism's strategic uses it is a bit more positive in its recognition of meaningful political differences and inherent political challenges, seeking therefore to add more nuance to the debate. Regarding such debates, I conclude that localism is *in itself* not necessarily contradictory, but rather, is *used* to address irreconcilable contradictions and demands: a common method in political communication.

While informed and influenced by the writings of more normative scholars of localism and local government, as outlined in Chapter 2, and ultimately seeking to explore the conditions for successful localist reform using Dewey and Weber to explore ‘means’ and ‘ends’, this thesis rejects the notion that top-down approaches to localism are *solely* normative – “a healthy, ‘top down’ recognition that the world cannot be run from Westminster and Whitehall” (Wills 2016a, 197). Rather, it has explored how localism, in such top-down forms, is often strategic, and how this understanding can better explain its characteristics in policy, its periodic appearances, and its often-disappointing implementation. The implication, and key conclusion of this thesis, is that studies of localism going forward should demonstrate more awareness that localism has *both* normative and strategic elements (see Scharpf 1997). To reach this point, I first sought to explore *how* localism can be understood and studied in relation to its political uses (Chapter 3). Here, I made use of discourse and linguistic theory to understand localism as *useful* (Schmidt 2008; Laclau 2005) and outlined the qualitative research I conducted to explore this, which was based on interviewees and (historical) documentary analysis. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 outline my main empirical findings and analysis. Chapter 4 examined the Localism Act 2011, which I approached as a tangible policy manifestation of localism, reflecting the numerous versions of localism that had been inserted and debated in the course of its implementation. Exploring the debate surrounding the Localism Bill indicated from the outset the conceptual and implementation challenges of localism; demonstrating the inevitable problems of concretising a normative principle into policy and legislation. While the Bill commanded sufficient support to become an Act, the localism concretised in the Act was not the same localism to which avid proponents of localism aspire. This chapter therefore laid the groundwork for later chapters by demonstrating how localism often fails to live up to its own promises. In Chapters 5 and 6, I then explored why governments and politicians would periodically promise localism in spite of its repeated failure to deliver a meaningful redistribution of power. These chapters constitute the main analytical part of the dissertation. In these two chapters, I sought to apply the theoretical framework I had developed in Chapters 2 and 3, in which I suggested that localism could be understood a fundamentally *strategic political communicative device* (which I refer to in the text as ‘strategic localism’), where it can both *placate* demands and *justify* reform through legitimisation (localism as signalling adherence to norms) (Chapter 5), and *unite* demands through populist rhetoric and practices (localism as an empty signifier) (Chapter 6). In other words, both perspectives approach the underlying political motivations and pressures of localism in relation to strategic and democratic demands.

Given the centrality of Chapter 5 and 6 as my main analytical contribution to the literature, I will briefly elaborate on both. In Chapter 5 I sought to understand how the promise and policy of localism related to, and in fact could legitimise, centralisation as caused by state interventions. Here, I put forward an understanding of ‘centralisation’ as a spatial metaphor for – and a consequence of – state intervention and bureaucratisation, which in turn is a reflection of challenges emanating from the economic or social sphere (e.g. financial/debt crises, employment, growth, and housing, as well as poverty, education, social disparities, and cultural change). The incompatibility of centralisation with normative and popular, even populist, beliefs requires then legitimisation of this development. I used the concept of ‘strategic localism’ to describe the use of localist rhetoric in legitimisation. I described how localism’s appearance in policy since the 1960s has been more a way to appease public opinion with the

rhetoric of decentralisation, rather than reshape central-local relations. In other words, localism has been operationalised by governments undertaking economic reforms to communicate discursive adherence to its normative values and the tradition of local decision-making, without necessarily overseeing fundamental and constitutional re-evaluation of centre-local relations and financial autonomy. Seen from this perspective, localism is not about innovation at the grassroots, but rather is imagined and implemented by central governments. The concept is therefore divorced from its own norms and symbolism (or ends). As argued by Dewey in relation to the concept of democracy more broadly, this contradiction is likely to guarantee localism's failure in achieving its own normative aims (Dewey 1993 [1938]).

The final chapter sought to explain the various ways political parties operationalise localism as part of their electoral strategy. Here localism is, similarly to Chapter 5, understood as strategic. However, it can be strategic in a fundamentally different way. Here, the theoretical frame was populism, where I approached localism as a *populist strategy*. This distinction reflects the structural differences between the two main parliamentary actors in the political system: government and opposition. These two actors are motivated by different pressures and aims and form together what is described as a highly adversarial model of democracy. Therefore, Chapter 6 focused on the role of *opposition parties* in mounting regular legitimisation challenges to government. It is within such challenge that the focus regularly turns to the accusation of centralisation, and the need for more localism. Exploiting this agitation for democracy at the grassroots for political gain, as is common in populism (e.g. 'power to the people'), is a major strategic use of localism. However, these populist ideas are inherently unsustainable and governments who might have been elected on such a promise rarely have the energy or ability to retain the agenda for long, particularly given institutional constraints and path dependency, as explored in Chapter 4.

In a more general sense, this thesis has put forward a spatialised understanding of both state intervention (centralism) and populism (localism). In so doing, these two concepts of centralism and localism no longer form a dichotomy but rather reflect how space can be used to symbolise the irreducible tension recognised between redemptive and pragmatic forms of democracy more widely. Localism's various contradictions arise from the fact that it is *fundamentally* contradictory because its political uses, while evoking its normative and symbolic foundations (of local democratic renewal and citizen participation), is fundamentally a means to an end – a way to enhance policy delivery and strategy. It is out of this tension and contradiction that calls for localism and other decentralist spatial governance reform arise: on the one hand, as 1) a legitimating strategy that governments may use to lessen the perception of centralisation; and 2) a populist strategy where opposition parties galvanise public discontent, distrust, and populist sentiments to make claims regarding a lack of people power. Problematically, this role of localism ensures that, as a policy, it will always eventually expose this contradiction.

This leads to a catch 22 in terms of governance reform promoting devolution of power. I have outlined how, both empirically but also theoretically, localism is defined by its strategic priorities. As such, from a theoretical perspective, such policy is more of a means than an end. This strategic element prevents therefore a more fundamental, ideological and idealistic change such as that proposed by Wills:

If [localism] is to be realised, it will demand a new form of statecraft and citizenship that undoes the centralism that has developed since the early 19th century, in order to replace it with a focus on subsidiarity, local democracy, a local civic offer, civic capacity and a stronger civic infrastructure (Wills 2016a, 19-20).

Fundamentally this seems to be the reason for why there is a divergence between rhetoric and reality. I have attributed this divergence to the normal process of politics (see section 2.1). While political rhetoric and policy formation is about ideals and blue sky thinking, implementation of any given policy needs to fit within and complement other competing, and perhaps more pressing, policy areas where governments are expected to perform and deliver (as Scharpf [1997] described as ‘input-oriented legitimacy’). The main tension being economic policy as I explored in Chapter 5, which specifically focused on regional economic planning and development and local government finance. To quote Wills again, “... talking about localism and making it happen are two very different things. Changing the deeply rooted culture of government and the expectations of the population will be very hard to achieve” (Wills 2016a, 39)

That being said, this thesis is limited, in a few different ways. Firstly, as a study on the discursive uses of localism, it potentially limits the scope by focusing on legitimating discourses, on the one hand, and delegitimising or populist discourses, on the other. Communicative discourses are not limited to either of these characteristics, and rhetoric and policy on localism is therefore not always, or certainly solely, seeking to legitimise government policy or whip up the crowd with populist sentiments. For example, government and political discourse on localism and local government is motivated by other reasons, including political ‘blame games’ and the continuous and shifting debate on the location of accountability. Another perspective is that policies are not just strategic in relation to the discourses and images they evoke, but due to the material changes they create (although something I did seek to portray in Chapter 6 in relation to the impact of local elections upon national policy agendas). An area of research needing more study is exactly this: the growing weaponization and politicisation of government policy in the form of the ‘permanent election campaign’. Elements of localism fit into this category, such as the Metro Mayor, a normative idea, yet potentially providing highly strategic and electoral advantages to the Conservative Party, something I explore in a forthcoming article. Another issue overlooked is that of individual political actors: several of the key politicians supporting localism over the years, such as Greg Clark and David Miliband, were, according to key informants, driven by personal beliefs and convictions, rather than any broadly defined ‘strategies’: this role of individual actors is absent from this thesis but is potentially key in either refuting or confirming the theoretical framework chosen. It is easier to ask a person ‘why’ than an institution.

Further, there are other key stakeholders on the localism discourse than just governments and political parties. In Chapter 2, for example, I briefly outline a feedback loop between academic research, think tanks and political parties. These discursive influences have been described elsewhere (e.g. Haughton and Allmendinger 2016), and prompts the question: does it make sense to delineate a study on discourse in the way I have, as presented in Table 3.1? Can one make the same charge to this approach as I have to theories of neoliberalism and post-politics,

of bending empirical data to fit the argument? On the contrary, having originally studied and planned to apply these theories, I was led down this path based on initial findings from my research. The comparison between government and opposition was not one made previously on this topic and I felt this contribution needed to be made. This structure is one that is designed to promote debate and discussion on what localism is from a very specific perspective: the development of policy.

In terms of generalisability, then, the comparison of opposition and government on any given policy idea remains highly useful and relevant, as is the continual interpretation and analysis of their actions and the reasons for certain policies. Indeed, this is why this work is important and the main contribution it offers. Rather than offering a clear-cut solution to a common policy problem (implementation), it seeks to outline the political causes to policy implementation problems, which arise when the policy process because too focused on the initial stages of messaging and policy creation, as opposed to its delivery and evaluation. The origins of many UK policies can be seen in this light, particularly as the British civil service is relatively policy heavy, rather than evenly distributed between policy, delivery/implementation, and evaluation.⁹¹ This thesis seeks therefore to widen understanding of the issue of implementation from a political perspective, rather than offer a solution to it (which, unless the nature of politics were to completely change, there is no such solution). This approach was described by Cairney and St Denny: “Theoretical and empirical policy analysis will not solve the prevention puzzle, but it will help policymakers make more informed choices” (2020, 5). As more researchers grow tired of the implementation argument, this area of research seeking to move beyond implementation as its analytical focus might grow in time.

I accuse the literature of seeing the state, or rather the government, in a cynical totality when exploring why it invested time and energy into localism. By arguing that localism is strategic, the same can be said of the theoretical framework of this thesis. However, a key difference is the effort made to separate out component part of the ‘government’ and the ‘state’, by comparing government and opposition (chapters 5 and 6) and by exploring the role of DCLG specifically (chapter 4). Further, a key distinction is between my use of the word ‘strategic’ in describing localist discourse. The intentions of localism are not simply a way of making cuts more acceptable through deception and smokescreen: there is too much transparency on the reasons for localism for this to be the case. Rather, it is more about creating buy-in and compromise: key characteristics of political communication. Seeing localism then as highly political (e.g. Lees 2014) then provides a counterpoint to some of the more cynical accounts which see it as shutting down politics. Put differently, this thesis explores the intentions of government seeking to achieve ‘localism’ by studying the discourses and institutions surrounding its origins, rather than extrapolating political intentions on the basis of poor or superficial implementation. As mentioned above, then, research on localism and other similar concepts in politics – i.e. empty signifiers which are operationalised by all or most of the mainstream political parties – need to consider both its normative and strategic elements to incorporate the realities of the political process which led to these ideas being formed and used.

⁹¹ As argued by David Cameron in a recent interview, the British civil service is “great at developing policy but not so good at implementing policy” (Dubner 2019).

Another limitation of this thesis is conceptual: if I suggest that localism as we view it in centrally-led public policy, and originating out of partisan politics, is a ‘means to an end’, the implication is therefore that there can no ‘true’ localism if it forms part of government policy or even political party campaign promise. This divergence between localism’s ‘means’ and ‘ends’ (Dewey 1993 [1938]) has ensured that the contestation between government-promoted forms of localism, and local interpretations of localism, are inevitable, and the strategic fallacy of the policy itself eventually made visible. Does this therefore encourage less ambitious and forward-thinking policy making? My suggestion is that the best policy approach in this area is one which enables grassroots to create their own localisms. One interviewee described this as the third ‘type’ of localism: self-empowerment, anger, and activism. As Baroness Bakewell observed in the Localism Bill’s second reading; “This is localism. It had no referendums and no structure. It had no top-down plans to organise us. We organised ourselves, which seems to me to be the essence of localism” (HL Deb 7 June 2011, Vol. 728, c177). As explored towards the end of Chapter 6, we might be on the cusp of greater active citizenship in response to growing top-down control and growing disillusionment, indicated by greater political polarisation between metropolitan areas and the rest of the country. In this context, grassroots and guerrilla localism is an area deserving more research. One of the limitations of my own work is the focus on centrally directed versions of localism in policy, rather than these grassroots forms of localism which evidently do exist, and which operate entirely separately to the theoretical framework proposed here. If grassroots localism is to be regarded as in some way more meaningful than localism and decentralisation promised by the political centre, then further research should seek to understand its strategies for implementation and normative content.

Indeed, more research could also be done to explore the normative dimension of localism, and why localism appears to resonate with the wider public. While the focus of this dissertation has been why *political* actors use localism strategically, I have assumed localism, in its normative sense, to be a widespread and internalised value and belief of what democratic governance *ought* to be, in the form of localised decision-making, and as such can resonate with the population (Section 2.3). This character of localism *is what makes it politically useful and strategic* in the first place. Future research could query what exactly this means from a theoretical and empirical perspective. In other words, why is it that localism causes an emotional and intuitive response and reaction amongst the public? Here, the study of local identity (see, for example, Kenny 2015a; Jennings and Stoker 2016), might be used to further an understanding of the spatial characteristics and origins of these norms in favour of localism, as well as those norms that see centralisation as inherently negative.

The point above regarding local identity brings us to a second, and related, area for further investigation. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, there are strong parallels between both localism and Brexit. Considering ‘Brexiters’ claims of ‘taking back control’ from Brussels, both Brexit and localism can be said to be in their own way demands for the localisation, decentralisation, and pluralisation of power, further supporting the notion that localism serves as an enduringly popular framework or metaphor, and is therefore, politically powerful. This similarly raises questions of changing norms and identities, particularly in England (Kenny

2015b). Further research could further explore this link discursively, asking how politicians and citizens deploy ideas and normative arguments that underpin both Brexit and Localism and what this means in terms of how democratic principles and democratisation, as a process, are perceived empirically. It is my hope that, by being able to distinguish between genuine democratic demands and the legitimising and delegitimising strategies of power-oriented interest groups, we might be better equipped to make informed democratic decisions, and to channel grassroots political energy more effectively. This dissertation, by examining these distinctions as they appear in demands for localism, is hopefully a useful starting point.

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