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A framework for analyzing organizational culture among politicians: Exploring implications for participatory governance schemes

Signy Irene Vabo[1] 🄳 | Marte Winsvold[2] 🄳

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

[2]Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway

Correspondence
Signy Irene Vabo, Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, PO Box 1097, Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway.
Email: s.i.vabo@stv.uio.no

Abstract

In this article, we develop a theoretical framework for investigating how organizational culture relates to the roles of elected representatives. Based on Douglas's grid and group logic, our framework evaluates two cultural dimensions, negotiability and conflictuality, upon which these roles depend. The negotiability dimension describes elected representatives' roles from a strictly hierarchical and bounded notion of how politics should be handled to a horizontal and inclusive notion. The conflictuality dimension considers politics as confrontation versus a deliberative consensus-oriented way of handling political issues. By investigating a participatory governance measure called "task committees", we examine how the framework functions empirically. Our analysis shows how different aspects of organizational culture are reflected in councilors' interpretations of and practices related to this interactive participatory governance scheme and illuminates the implications of organizational culture for the use of such schemes.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The importance of institutions in regulating political behavior is a well-established fact in the political science literature (e.g., Goodin, 1996; March & Olsen, 1989). Emphasizing the role of institutions in social and political life, institutionalism states that democracy and politics are shaped not only by economic and social conditions but also by the

design of political institutions (e.g., Dye, 1972/2017; Christensen & Lægreid, 2018). In this article, our point of departure is that organizational choices are institutionalized over time, become valuable, and are successively viewed as "appropriate" by the actors involved. Organizations develop genuine cultures through the processes of institutionalization, and new institutional solutions are interpreted using the already established cultural lenses (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; March & Olsen, 1989; Selznick, 1957). Thus, *culture* matters because it influences the functioning of formal institutions. In this article, we aim to develop *a theoretical framework for analyzing organizational culture among politicians*.

Cultural artifacts may be contested and challenged by organizational changes (e.g., DiMaggio, 1997). We argue that organizational culture, which is expressed through actors' interpretations and practices, becomes visible when new institutional schemes are introduced into an existing organizational culture. To demonstrate the relevance of our theoretical framework, we explore how politicians in two municipalities interpret and practice *participatory governance schemes*. By participatory governance schemes, we refer to government-initiated participation measures intended to involve citizens or other non-state actors in public decision-making processes (Palumbo, 2017). In the democratic innovation literature (e.g., Fung, 2012; Geissel & Joas, 2013; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Smith, 2009), particularly in the literature on participatory governance (e.g., Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, 2016; Heinelt, 2018; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018; Torfing et al., 2012), the formal organization of the relationship between politicians and citizens is regarded as crucial to the quality of democracy. The basic idea is that it is possible to design the relationship between citizens and local governments in a way that enhances their interactions and that such purposefully chosen institutional arrangements can shape the attitudes and behaviors of elected mayors and councilors.

Despite the well-documented relevance of culture for organizational behavior, the literature on participatory governance has not paid much attention to the relationship between elected representatives' organizational culture and how participatory measures work in practice (e.g., Danielsson et al., 2018; Fung, 2015; Klijn & Skelcher, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2016; Sønderskov, 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2016). We argue that investigations of cultural values may help us understand how elected representatives interpret and employ participatory measures. This article makes two contributions. First, we develop a framework for analyzing political culture among politicians. Second, the article demonstrates the relevance of our framework for understanding elected representatives' interpretations of and practices related to participatory measures in their respective organizations. When considering institutional designs for enhancing citizen participation, we need to focus on the fundamental issue of how citizen participation affects the roles of elected representatives. The dilemmas involved in introducing participatory governance schemes are fundamental because there are inherent tensions between the logic behind any participatory governance scheme and the norms associated with representative democracy (Danielsson et al., 2018; Rhodes, 2016; Stoker, 2006). We argue that such tensions can be better understood and handled using the suggested framework for analyzing organizational culture among politicians.

To develop our analytical framework, we use the grid-group logic introduced by Mary Douglas (1982, 1996) as a generic cultural map. This approach was applied by Hood (1998, 2013) to analyze the conditions of public administration and by Dean (2017) to understand how citizen participation is constructed as a means to influence policy decisions (1998, 2013). We introduce Douglas's cultural approach to the domain of elected representatives and use this approach to explore the relationship between ideas about appropriate political behavior and how elected representatives interpret and practice a specific participatory institutional design, namely *task committees*. Such committees include both elected politicians and citizens and are tasked with developing general policies, such as youth policy or participatory democracy policy, and specific policies, such as kindergartens' cooperation with parents or road safety in cities. As a participatory governance scheme, task committees imply certain expectations of how politicians should think and behave, whereby cultural traits among politicians are made visible and possible for us to identify empirically.

In the rest of this article, we first present our theoretical point of departure—that is, our perspective on organizational culture for understanding the attitudes and practices of elected representatives. Then, we describe our methodological design and data and present our explorative analysis. Finally, we discuss the relevance of Douglas's

cultural approach for analyzing elected representatives' behaviors and reflect on the implications of organizational culture for participatory governance schemes.

2 | THE RELEVANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizations function in environments that simultaneously nurture and constrain their opportunities (Peters, 2013). Therefore, different organizations may implement the same institutional design in various ways. Institutions are generally understood as defining "the rules of the game", including legal arrangements, routines, procedures, and organizational forms, alongside conventions and norms (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Nørgaard, 1996, p. 39). To analyze the relevance of organizational culture, we need to distinguish between institutional schemes as formal structures or instruments and the organizational culture among politicians which consists of the informal conventions and values developed through the mutual adaptation of internal and external norms—that is, through the process of institutionalization (see Scott, 2014, p. 143; Christensen & Lægreid, 2018, pp. 1094–1098). In this context, the specific issue we address is the relationship between politicians' *cultural environment* and how institutional schemes are interpreted and employed in political-administrative organizations.

Culture involves socially established structures of meaning (Scott, 2014, p. 45). In organizational studies, the term refers to shared and usually implicit attitudes, beliefs, and ways of working and includes everything that we take for granted and see as normal and natural until we find ourselves in an alien culture (Hood, 2013, p. 119). Culture organizes and anchors patterns of action, providing a "toolkit" from which actors select different means for constructing lines of action (Swindler, 1986, pp. 277–278). According to institutional theory, culture consists of symbolic systems that are objective and external to individual actors (Scott, 2014). Hofstede (1991) argued that culture provides patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting while determining mental programs or the "software of the mind". In the literature, culture is understood as a *collective consciousness* that creates an informal structure for distributing costs and advantages (Douglas, 1982, pp. 189–190). The affective dimension of culture involves positive stances, such as certitude and confidence, or negative feelings, such as confusion or disorientation (Scott, 2014, p. 70). In the political domain, organizational culture is likely to influence elected representatives' role perceptions while shaping their implicit beliefs about politicians' roles and appropriate behaviors.

Following Douglas (1982), cultural theorists argue that possible ways of managing or regulating human organizations depend on two fundamental dimensions: grid and group. Variations in these two dimensions are connected to different attitudes and beliefs about social justice, blame, and guilt, the interaction between human beings and the natural environment, and the nature of good governance more generally (Hood, 1998, pp. 7, 8). The first dimension, the "grid", is a spectrum that describes the rules that individuals are subjected to while interacting with other individuals. At one end of the spectrum, rules are visible, but as we move toward the other end, formal classifications fade, and individuals interact with increasing freedom. What is at stake is the degree to which our lives are circumscribed by conventions or rules, thereby reducing the extent to which life is open to individual negotiations. The second dimension, the "group", describes the degree to which a group predominates over an individual—that is, the extent to which individual choice is constrained by group choice when an individual belongs to a collective body.

Douglas's (1982, 1986) parsimonious accounts of cultural variation have been applied to more limited societal spheres. Hood (1998), for example, used the model to classify styles of organizing public management. Similarly, Dean (2017) used Douglas's approach to cultural systems to outline the different ways in which public participation is described in the literature and how they are justified in terms of implicit normative standards. Dean (2017) outlined different modes of public participation in policy decisions along a continuum from agonistic to solidaristic "participatory spaces" and along a continuum from negotiated to prescribed "participatory spaces". While Dean showed that "participatory spaces" imply certain assumptions of what public participation should look like, we examine politicians' shared assumptions of what *doing politics* should look like.

We argue that two dimensions of organizational culture—*negotiability* and *conflictuality*—are essential for political actors' idea of how politics should be done and, consequently, for how democratic institutions are interpreted and employed. The two dimensions are inspired by Douglas's general theory of group and grid, which we adapted to the context of elected representatives. The negotiability dimension involves an axis that goes from the strictly hierarchical and bounded way of tackling political issues, inherent in the idea of *representative democracy*, to the horizontal and inclusive notion of how politics should be handled, inherent in the idea of *participatory democracy* (e.g., Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970). The conflictuality dimension considers the idea of *politics as confrontation* and regulation of irreconcilable interests (Mouffe, 1999) versus the idea of politics as a *deliberative and consensus-oriented* project (Habermas, 1989, 1996).

The vertical dimension of Figure 1, *negotiability*, represents the tension between a hierarchical culture, in which elected politicians' roles and behaviors follow an elitist approach to representative democracy, and an egalitarian culture, which gives councilors a high degree of freedom to negotiate and bargain with stakeholders and citizen groups to innovate solutions for societal problems. An organizational culture positioned at the hierarchical end of this spectrum is characterized by restrictions regarding who participates in decision-making. In a hierarchical culture, individuals are regarded as subject to the norms of representative democracy, and there is a tendency to believe that society and organizations need to be directed by an appropriate authority. In an egalitarian culture, the social environment supports the distribution of power. Political elites are restricted, and the inclusion of stakeholders and citizens in political processes is highly appreciated. Mutuality, the polar opposite of control via regulations and oversight from above, is important, and decisions are negotiated and brokered.

As politicians are elected to represent more people than just themselves, Douglas's original distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is not directly relevant when describing cultural traits among councilors (1982). However, elected representatives must also consider whether they should promote and defend particular political views or collaborate in solving common societal problems. Therefore, we modify the original concept and propose a distinction between conflict and consensus for analyzing elected representatives' roles in policy making. The horizontal dimension in our framework, *conflictuality*, describes the degree to which the political environment is characterized by conflict. This dimension consists of the following spectrum: on one end, a pragmatic, compromise-based style of tackling political issues and, on the other end, a conflictual, agonistic style. In the conflict-oriented agonistic approach, elected representatives are predominantly concerned with promoting and defending particular political views, and there is a low degree of cooperation between competing political groups due to a focus on defending specific interests, with politicians concentrating on the well-being of those they represent. According to the cooperation-oriented approach, elected representatives are interdependent members of a political community, the council, which is oriented toward shared ends and the common good (Hood, 1998, pp. 7–10, Hood, 2013, pp. 120, 121; Dean, 2017, pp. 5, 6). The focus is on finding solutions and making politically cohesive decisions.
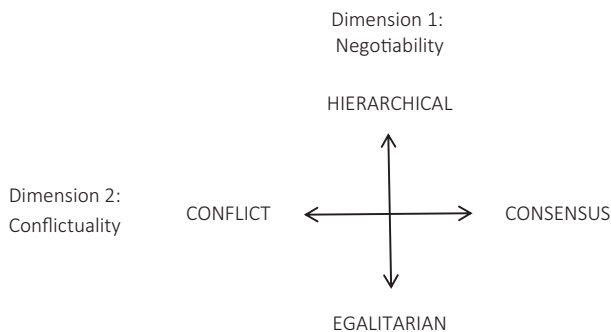

FIGURE 1 Possible modalities of elected representatives' cultural environments

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We expect that in any given political assembly, elements of both hierarchical and egalitarian cultures will be present, as will elements of both conflict and consensus. Describing the cultural environment as such, our analytical framework applies, in principle, to political behavior in general. We expect that institutional arrangements are likely to highlight differences in organizational culture along the two dimensions. Institutions contain inherent expectations of how actors should think and behave, thus forcing politicians to respond and actively relate to these expectations. In this article, by applying our analytical framework to formalized participatory governance schemes, we reveal and identify politicians' cultural traits.

In our explorative study, we applied the theoretical framework to two empirical cases. Our aim was to investigate whether the framework can help us understand what happens when a particular participatory governance scheme, with its inherent assumptions about what participation should look like, is introduced in an organizational context with its own particular cultural assumptions about what doing politics should look like. Our analysis allowed us to specify and nuance the framework to elaborate on the two dimensions. Below, we describe the context of the study along with our methods and data.

3 | CONTEXT, METHODS, AND DATA

To illustrate the relevance of organizational culture to the interpretations and applications of institutional designs, we studied the same participatory governance measure, namely task committees, in two municipalities in different countries. The so-called task committees were introduced in the Danish municipality of Gentofte in 2015 and were copied by the Norwegian municipality of Svelvik in 2017. The task committees involved groups of citizens and politicians who worked together to develop policies on given topics defined by the municipal councils. The committees submitted their policy proposals to the councils, which then voted on the policy suggested. After submitting their proposals to the councils, the task committees were dissolved, and new committees tasked with new issues were appointed. The councils developed lists of characteristics and competences that non-political participants should possess. These recruitment criteria served two purposes: to ensure some degree of representativeness among the participating citizens and to ensure that the participating citizens could contribute knowledge that was relevant to the topic.

Dean (2017, pp. 216, 217) classified participatory spaces according to the kind of contribution that public participation was expected to provide. Task committees clearly presume citizens to have a "solidaristic" attitude, meaning that citizens should see themselves as members of a social collective-oriented toward the common good. However, the degree to which task committees are "prescribed"—for example, in terms of who gets to participate and what is determined outside of the participatory space—is open to interpretation. Importantly, task committees are a negotiated kind of participatory measure, and the agenda and working methods are open to revision. This ambiguity is visible in task committees' mandate, which concurrently alludes to negotiated "co-creation of policies" and to the fact that the council "defines and delimits the mandate" and assesses "whether they should vote on the proposal" from the task committees (see Gentofte, 2021; Torfing et al., 2017).

We gathered our data from two municipalities in different countries to enhance the likelihood that both dimensions and all modalities in our theoretical framework would be covered in the analysis. Denmark and Norway are similar in terms of their overall political administrative systems, their electoral and party systems, and their well-developed welfare systems based on strong local governments (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ladner et al., 2016; Lægreid, 2018). However, the deliberative tradition is considered stronger in Denmark than in Norway (Aarts et al., 2014). Denmark also has a long tradition of user democracy and interactive governance schemes, such as task committees (e.g., Sørensen & Torfing, 2018), while democratic innovations in Norway have typically been geared toward fortifying or mending the institutions of the representative government (Bentzen et al., 2019). However, certain differences in *participatory practice* traditions are not necessarily reflected in local cultures, and there are significant variations between local governments within the two countries as well (Bentzen et al., 2019). Moreover,

contextual differences between the two municipalities may be relevant. First, in Gentofte (Denmark), task committees have been in operation since 2015 and have become part of the regular political structure, partly substituting for the council's regular permanent committees. Svelvik (Norway), copying the task committee template from Gentofte, ran task committees on a trial basis from 2017 to 2019. Furthermore, the sources of the initiative were different. In Gentofte, the politically elected mayor was central to initiating and developing the scheme, while in Svelvik, it was the non-elected chief officer who introduced task committees.

The established tradition of participatory approaches in Denmark and the long-standing experience with interactive task committees in Gentofte represent a context in which participatory governance schemes are commonplace and are initiated by the politicians themselves, unlike Svelvik, which represents a context with a weaker tradition of and less experience with participatory governance and in which the participatory measure has been initiated administratively. Second, Gentofte's larger municipality size (74,500 inhabitants vs. Svelvik's 6500 inhabitants) and its considerably more affluent and well-educated population meant that Gentofte, compared to Svelvik, could recruit participants from a wider citizen pool. Thus, by including the two cases in our analysis, we include both different national and local backgrounds for participatory governance and different citizen pools as contextual characteristics that are likely to influence the relationship between a cultural environment and how elected representatives interpret and engage with task committees.

The causal relationship between institutional design and culture may run both ways: political institutions may shape culture as much as culture may shape political institutions. However, rather than disentangling the causal relationships between context, culture, and the working of participatory measures, the two cases were included in our study to demonstrate the relevance of all aspects of the theoretical framework proposed. Thus, using two cases rather than a single case meant we could extract a broader range of findings (Gerring, 2007, p. 131; Tarrow, 2010, p. 244).

Our explorative analysis was based on 53 semi-structured interviews with 26 councilors and six administratively employed persons in Gentofte and Svelvik. In Gentofte, 14 (out of 19) councilors were interviewed, nine of whom were interviewed several times between 2015 and 2018. In Svelvik, 12 (out of 25) councilors were interviewed in 2017 and 2018, nine of them twice. The interview sample included politicians from the majority and minority constellations, from all political parties and with different formal positions in the councils. In both municipalities, the mayor and the committee leaders of the task committees and of the traditional political committees were interviewed. Approximately half of the interviewed councilors were ordinary council members with no formal positions in the council.

A team of Danish and Norwegian researchers conducted the interviews in both countries. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed. With the two theoretically derived cultural dimensions in mind, both authors read the interview material in its entirety and coded it according to these two dimensions. The interpretations of the interviews and their reduction into codes were subsequently discussed by the two authors. While the authors were starting with preconceived notions of the two cultural dimensions, these dimensions were further informed by the data on the studied participatory governance scheme. The interpretation of the data was, therefore, partly deductive and partly exploratory.

The interviewees were asked about their involvement in the task committees and how the task committees worked. They were not prompted to reflect on the organizational culture among politicians. We assumed that organizational culture provided the interpretative lens through which political actors understood the institutional setup of task committees and that councilors' statements on task committees, therefore, expressed their inherent cultural expectations of what doing politics should look like. These statements were interpreted as expressions of an organizational culture when they were shared by all politicians across party lines, age, and formal positions and when they were referred to as something "natural" and beyond question. The assumption that these expressions testify to a shared local culture can only be substantiated rather than proven, and such interpretations always depend on the authors' assumptions and expectations.

4 | EXPLORATIVE ANALYSIS

We now turn to the analysis of how this specific institutional design for participatory governance, namely the task committees, was interpreted and practiced by elected representatives and how these interpretations and practices reflected their cultural environment.

4.1 | Reflections on the negotiability dimension—Hierarchical versus egalitarian culture

The expectations inherent in the hierarchical and egalitarian culture were visible in the councilors' reflections on how the task committees worked, especially in how they talked about the *inclusion* of citizens in policymaking and the *ranking* of citizens and councilors.

Reflections on the *inclusion* aspect considered whether citizens should be included in policymaking at all and, if so, in which parts of the policymaking process. When the councilors were talking about inclusion, the value of "accountability" in representative democracy was pitted against the value of "innovation" associated with participatory and inclusive democratic values. The councilors described the inclusion of citizens in policy development processes as a practice that must be thoroughly monitored by the representative institutions to ensure that the "contract signed with the voters" (S15) on election day was upheld, with the necessity of delivering results according to this contract leaving little leeway for interactive processes involving citizens. The councilors also stressed that allowing citizens to participate in governance would lead to "better and more innovative policy development," as citizens were believed to "initiate good ideas and solutions, how to do things different" (G13), and the knowledge they offer was presumed to "increase the quality of political decisions" (G6). Although both perspectives on inclusion were present in each of the two municipalities, the analysis of how the politicians engaged with and spoke of the task committees showed that the councilors in the Danish municipality of Gentofte veered toward a more inclusive attitude, while councilors in the Norwegian municipality of Svelvik stressed accountability challenges. In Svelvik, the attitude of the administrative staff was markedly more inclusive than that of the politicians. The chief officer explicitly acknowledged that the task committees were introduced because "we acknowledged the importance of including our highly competent citizens […] in the dialogue of how to adjust to societal changes" (S14). In both municipalities, the councilors agreed that participation should preferably be limited to the development of specific policy solutions to issues already on the political agenda. The tasks of agenda-setting and decision-making were to be the prerogatives of the elected councilors.

Concerning *ranking*, the councilors in both municipalities attributed a subordinate role to citizens in policymaking. In terms of rhetoric, the councilors in Gentofte were more favorably disposed toward equality than their colleagues in Svelvik. However, in both municipalities, the interactive ideals that prevailed in the organizational culture were stronger than the actual practices, and although the councilors in Gentofte explicitly placed citizens and politicians on an equal footing, referring to citizens as "partners" and "equals," they too provided examples of irresponsible citizen behavior, describing some citizens as lacking knowledge and perspective. Similarly, councilors in both municipalities described the relationship between politicians and citizens in the task committees as a relationship between a demanding, irresponsible child and a reasonable, responsible adult. A councilor in Svelvik, for example, described the situation as follows: "In the brainstorming phase, everybody in the committee overflows with ideas. Many strange ideas emerge. It is simply natural that we [the councilors], the ones that best know the processes, take the lead regarding how the ideas could be translated into something useful, and with the budget in mind" (S7). The same attitude was conveyed by a councilor in Gentofte: "Of course, some have been anxious about what will happen if the citizens propose something completely wild. Well, the same thing happens as when something wild is proposed in the newspaper: there is a discussion, but then it ends up in the council" (G3). The argument for considering the citizens to be a step below the politicians was based on the citizens' supposed lack of experience and policymaking skills, which disqualified them from taking responsibility for their actions. The combination of

feeling "accountable" and the idea that citizens were not entirely up to the task made the councilors reluctant to completely change the political system.

The degree of egalitarianism in the organizational culture was visible in how the councilors strove to reconcile the inclusivity inherent in the task committees with the more hierarchical idea of representative democracy. Although many councilors had internalized a certain "interactive" way of talking about policy development, the hierarchical ideal of representative democracy was evident in how they talked about inclusion and described the precautions they found necessary to avoid what they saw as the pitfalls of inclusion, such as irresponsibility and loss of accountability. The hierarchical cultural expectations were also visible in how the councilors endeavored to align the new practices of the task committees with the existing roles of the representative system. They did so partly by treating the committees as some kind of consultation instrument, a participatory concept with which they were already familiar, as expressed by one councilor: "[In the task committees] we should listen. Listen, comment on and then use the input when we [the councilors] formulate our policies" (G8). Thus, the committees were seen as positive add-ons that did not challenge the hierarchical representative system. However, regardless of how the committees were used, the inclusive and egalitarian nature of the task committees seemed to contribute to both councils' ambitions of being "modern" and "innovative", and the reluctance to introduce formal venues for citizen inclusion was pejoratively spoken of as "traditional" or "old-fashioned".

4.2 | Reflections on the conflictuality dimension—Consensus versus conflict culture

Acceptable conflict levels were revealed by the roles and tasks that the councilors attributed to the task committees. The councilors of the two municipalities had different views on how politics should be conducted. The Gentofte councilors primarily talked of political conflict as something negative that created obstacles and made innovation impossible. Their consensus orientation was visible in their fervent denouncements of those politicians who supported particular political principles at the expense of compromise. According to the councilors interviewed in Gentofte, the political parties were the archetypes of inappropriately particularistic and rigid principles, breeding conflict by encouraging their representatives to "hold on tight to their principles," generating "brawling and shouting" (G17) and preventing politicians from finding the common ground necessary for developing good solutions. As expressed by one of the Gentofte councilors, "There is a sharp rhetoric where I think, sometimes, our manners disappear. It just becomes mud" (G4). To avoid conflict, political parties should be checked, and the task committees were seen as tools for accomplishing this. When citizens were involved in developing policy in the task committees, politicians felt obliged to listen respectfully, which prevented them from descending into political trenches. The Gentofte councilors envisaged some sort of enlightened, deliberative process in which citizens and politicians would act as non-ideological experts. Preferably, all political issues should be relegated to the task committees and handled in an open-minded, consensual, and innovative environment created by the task committees' interactive infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the Svelvik councilors treated conflict as an essential part of politics and, therefore, had no ambition to eradicate conflict from politics. They also believed that being in the same room as citizens dampened the conflict level and created a space for open-minded discussion and innovation. While the officials in Gentofte saw political parties as generating unnecessary conflict, the Svelvik councilors tended to see political parties as necessary for regulating conflict. According to the officials interviewed in Svelvik, the lack of party discipline created "an unfortunate disorder" (S15) and was deemed unconstructive. When conflicts of interest were harsh, parties were seen as even more important than in politically calm situations.

Despite differences in conflict orientation, a negative attitude toward political conflict was present in both cases, made visible by the councilors' descriptions of the task committees as a way of bypassing the party system and the trench warfare believed to rule the municipal councils. The task committees were regarded as an opportunity to develop policies in a sort of "apolitical" space. The councilors in Svelvik explicitly exemplified interactions in the task committees as neither related to party politics nor politics generally: "Here, the political, in fact, slips away. Because

TABLE 1 Councilors' expressions of organizational cultures

Cultural dimension 1: Negotiability		Cultural dimension 2: Conflictuality	
Hierarchical culture	Emphasis on accountability Citizens are seen as irresponsible Citizens are seen as lacking knowledge/experience	Conflict culture	Political conflict appreciated Parties essential to expressing political conflict
Egalitarian culture	Citizens are seen as partners Citizens are seen as equals Innovations are seen as depending on interaction	Consensus culture	Dialogue and open discussions appreciated Political conflicts are seen as inappropriate Parties are seen as causing unproductive conflict

here politics is not really the point. Here, it is some sort of cooperation or a model of collaboration that is the point" (S6). The councilors indirectly addressed an inherent tension between a conflict-prone, representative way of doing politics and a consensus-oriented, participatory way. In the task committees, the politicians were expected to be "open to citizens' views", while in the council, they were supposed to be "committed to their political party programs" (S3). Being open meant looking for consensus points, while pushing the party program involved looking for conflict points. Some councilors stated that they experienced their loyalty as being split between these two expectation types: "As an elected representative, the party programme delimits my room for manoeuvre. I brought the promises I made to the voters to the task committee" (S15). The expectation of sticking to the party's political program limited the councilors' possibilities for interactive collaborations with citizens to areas in which their parties had not taken a stance – that is, to "positive, uncontroversial issues". The mayor of Svelvik elaborated as follows: "It has been a conscious choice to select non-controversial issues. The vague statements in the party programs are about how things should be better without specifying how; the task committees can fill these with content" (S1). To keep the representative system intact, therefore, only topics regarded as apolitical or non-conflictual were entrusted to the committees. Consigning primarily apolitical issues to the task committees made it possible to keep the two roles of the party politician and the citizen collaborator separate, thereby keeping the representative system separate from the participatory logic.

5 | DISCUSSION

In the previous section, we explored how organizational culture was expressed by the councilors as reflections of cultural expectations regarding political practices. The analysis showed that the two theoretically developed dimensions describing organizational culture, negotiability and conflictuality, were mirrored in the councilors' interpretations of and practices related to a specific participatory governance measure, namely the task committees. Table 1 summarizes the different ways in which organizational culture was reflected by the councilors.

The egalitarian attitude, which is part of the negotiability dimension, was evident in the councilors' talk of the task committees but not so much in their actual practices related to this specific participatory governance measure. Citizens were described as equals and key partners in developing innovative local governance. However, a hierarchical culture predominated in discussions on accountability, the basic argument being that setting the agenda and making the decisions were the prerogatives of the elected representatives, processes for which the representatives were held accountable during elections. This interpretation of the task committees was also evident when the councilors strove to reconcile the new practices introduced by the task committees with their existing roles assigned by the representative democracy system. Consequently, the participatory measure was treated as a consultative

arrangement. The ambiguity in the institutional setup regarding the degree to which participatory measures are prescriptive allowed the councilors to treat the task committees merely as channels for citizens to provide input for the representative system.

The conflictuality dimension was primarily evident in the elected representatives' views on political parties' roles in the task committees. Expressions of the conflict culture included references to the "representative democratic way" of doing politics, according to which parties are necessary for regulating conflict. The councilors endorsed the consensus approach when they deemed conflict unnecessary, unproductive, or inappropriate for dialogue with citizens. The consensus culture was also visible in the councilors' appreciation of dialogue and "open-minded discussions." The councilors in both countries experienced an inherent tension between the party logic of political conflict and the consensus logic of the task committees. In the Norwegian case, the conflict was dealt with by assigning primarily positive and uncontroversial tasks to the committees. In the Danish case, conflictual issues were frequently assigned to the committees, partly to reduce conflict between councilors.

The analysis of how the councilors interpreted and related to the task committees indicated differences in organizational cultures between the two municipalities. More specifically, we observed that traits of the hierarchical and conflict cultures were expressed more often in the Norwegian Svelvik case, while traits of the egalitarian and consensus cultures were more commonly expressed in Gentofte, the Danish case. Thus, by analyzing two cases representing somewhat different national and local contexts, we could demonstrate that both cultural dimensions outlined in our theoretical framework were reflected in the councilors' organizational environments. Although the aim of our study was not to explain differences in organizational cultures, the observed differences between the two municipalities invite us to speculate on possible causes for why the councilors related differently to the task committees. Regarding the traits of the *egalitarian and consensus culture* most commonly observed in Gentofte, the resourceful citizenry alongside the greater experience with and the longer tradition of participatory governance in Gentofte and in Denmark generally may have encouraged inclusiveness, appreciation of open-minded dialogue with citizens, and more equal ranking of citizens and politicians. The traits of the *hierarchical culture* most commonly observed in Svelvik may partly be explained by a less resourceful citizenry and the limited experience with and the short tradition of participatory governance schemes in Norway. Also, politicians' less egalitarian interpretations of and practices related to the task committees in Svelvik may have been caused by the fact that the scheme was *initiated* by the non-elected chief officer, who, alongside their administrative staff, appeared to have more egalitarian attitudes than the elected councilors. The situation was different in Gentofte, where the elected and non-elected officials expressed the same egalitarian attitudes. The appreciation of *political conflict*, as expressed in the party politics in Svelvik, may have been a result of the fact that democratic innovations in Norway still are geared toward fortifying or mending the institutions of the representative government, emphasizing accountability and the superiority of the elected representatives. These findings indicate that both national and local traditions of participation, the resource base in the citizen pool, and the initiators of a participatory governance scheme may all impact the relationship between elected representatives' cultural environments and how they interpret and engage with participatory governance schemes.

In addition to showing how the suggested cultural dimensions may be relevant to the attitudes and practices of politicians involved in participatory governance schemes, our analysis also indicates that the cultural environment interacted with how the task committees were interpreted and practiced. We found that *confidence in and sympathy for* the task committees were primarily expressed by councilors to appreciate the *egalitarianism and consensus* present in the relationship between elected representatives and citizens. Conversely, *confusion and skepticism* were typically evident in the councilors' descriptions of the *hierarchical role* that the elected representatives were required to play and of political parties' inevitable role in regulating *conflict* in a representative democratic system. Indeed, when examining the two cases, we found that the councilors redefined the task committees as participatory measures to overcome their reservations. Regarding the negotiability dimension, the confusion and skepticism that we observed between the hierarchical and egalitarian cultures were solved using the task committees as yet another channel for receiving input from citizens. To protect the leading role bestowed upon the councilors by the representative

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democratic system, citizens' influence had to be limited. Likewise, regarding the conflictuality dimension, the confusion and skepticism that had to do with the tension between the conflict and consensus cultures was handled by letting the task committees tackle only uncontroversial and non-conflictual issues. Despite the differences between the two cases discussed earlier, political conflict when dialoguing with citizens was seen as inappropriate in both countries.

Finally, what is the relevance of the suggested framework for governments aiming to innovate democratic practices? When handling the significant impact of culture on institutionalizing organizational structures, there are, in principle, two ways forward. The first is to adapt the existing organizational culture to a specific participatory governance measure. The second is to design participatory governance measures according to the cultural environment in which these measures are going to be introduced. According to the literature, new formal structures or instruments are likely to be interpreted and employed to fit the existing organizational culture. Simultaneously, resistance to new practices may fade with experience, and the formal institutions introduced may eventually change the culture. Therefore, in practice, the principal choice between adapting the participatory governance measure and changing the organization in which the measure is introduced may be fuzzy.

Departing from the principal choice of *adapting the existing organizational culture to a specific participatory governance measure*, the institutional design of task committees promotes and supports an egalitarian culture and a consensual way of doing politics rather than a hierarchical culture and a conflictual way of doing politics. To adapt to this kind of participatory governance scheme, hierarchical and conflictual cultural values must yield before egalitarian and consensual values. In other words, to accept such interactive participatory schemes, elected representatives must embrace partnership and open-minded dialogue. Politicians have to discard their ideas regarding accountability and the importance of the contract that they have made with their voters during regular elections. In our studied cases, we found traits of a relatively strong hierarchical and conflictual culture among the councilors. Logically, therefore, the formal structure represented by the egalitarian and consensus-oriented task committees was reframed to make the scheme digestible for the councilors. Such reframing is a well-known phenomenon in the literature on organizational change (Christensen & Lægreid, 2018). However, the literature has not offered a clear answer on whether organizational cultures can be adapted to specific participatory governance measures.

On the one hand, institutionalism in political science and organizational theory predicts inertia (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; March & Olsen, 1989; Selznick, 1957). Individual resistance is expected to occur in any change process (Foster, 2010; Lewin, 1951). Therefore, modifying organizational culture to change the workings of well-established institutions, such as municipal councils, is difficult. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that although citizen participation is deliberately introduced by local governments, citizen input is often decoupled from tangible policy developments and participatory efforts are separated from ordinary political processes (e.g., Hertting & Kugelberg, 2018; Ianniello et al., 2019; Radzik-Maruszak & Haveri, 2020; Røiseland & Vabo, 2016; Sønderskov, 2019). On the other hand, there are examples of participatory governance schemes working very effectively. The classical reference is Latin American experiments with participatory budgeting, which has been adopted as the best practice by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank (Hernández-Medina, 2010). The explanation for such successful participatory governance schemes may be that they are suitable for certain organizational cultures or that the culture may have been deliberately changed by the local governments that had adopted the participatory schemes. Further research on the organizational culture among politicians in municipalities that have successfully introduced different kinds of participatory endeavors is imperative. Particularly, we need more knowledge on how to change the cultural environment so that elected representatives welcome and accept challenging participatory governance schemes.

Regarding the option of *designing participatory governance measures according to the cultural environment* in which these measures are going to be introduced, the resistance in the organizational culture may be accepted as limiting the kind of participatory schemes that can be successfully introduced. With reference to Table 1, concerning a culture in which *accountability is emphasized and political conflicts are considered necessary* for politics to work well, our study indicates that participatory governance schemes may not fare well. Given such an organizational culture

among politicians, perhaps more success could be achieved with schemes that bolster rather than challenge representative structures, such as different kinds of public conversations, mini-publics, digital town meetings, procedures for public hearings, and similar well-known ways for citizens to provide input for elected representatives. Regarding an organizational culture that *emphasizes accountability and open dialogue*, interactive participatory schemes are likely to fit better. As long as elected representatives are making final decisions, such schemes may be beneficial in organizing citizen participation in politics. The same is true when the culture is characterized by emphasizing *equal partnerships and open dialogue*. Here, participatory schemes that distribute decision-making power and give citizens the authority to make decisions on local priorities, such as participatory budgeting and the interactive task committees studied in this article, may be relatively easily accepted. Finally, in environments in which *political conflicts are appreciated and equal partnerships are emphasized*, it may be best to tailor participatory concepts to the existing organizational culture. Although contemporary political parties in Western democracies have few members (Heidar & Wauters, 2019), party organizations may still mobilize citizens using social media and physical platforms.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have presented an analytical framework for investigating elected representatives' organizational cultures. This analytical tool may be useful in examining how various political institutions work in relation to, for example, different committee systems, regulations of agenda-setting, or rules for decision-making. We demonstrated the relevance of the framework for analyzing how elected representatives interpret and engage with task committees, a specific participatory governance measure. We have offered a thorough analysis of how the two cultural dimensions proposed in the framework, negotiability and conflictuality, were reflected by politicians in local governments in which task committees were introduced.

In principle, our theoretical framework is applicable worldwide. However, the ways in which negotiability and conflictuality are reflected in the organizational cultures of politicians may vary between countries. By including a Danish and a Norwegian municipality in our analysis, we have demonstrated the relevance of both cultural dimensions proposed in the framework. The two countries have strong local governments responsible for most welfare state services, as well as national parties represented in local politics. In countries where local governments are of less significance in carrying out national politics and are less connected to national party politics, politicians may be more closely connected to the local civic community rather than to national government (Sellers et al., 2020). In such national contexts, in which political institutions have close relationships to civic society actors, the hierarchical culture may, for example, entail a lesser emphasis on the difference between elected representatives and citizens than in our two cases. Accordingly, the idea of citizens as partners might also be stronger than in the two cases.

Our exploratory study does not allow us to conclude whether a supportive organizational culture is needed as a basis for the successful introduction of participatory governance schemes or whether the introduction of such schemes may potentially change the organizational culture. However, by studying a Norwegian and a Danish municipality, we have discussed how the relationship between politicians' cultural environments and their interpretations of and engagements with participatory governance measures may be impacted by national and local traditions of participation, by the introducers of participatory measures and by the resource base of the citizen pool. In future analyses of the relationship between institutional design and organizational culture, and when analyzing cases from other countries, additional contextual variables may be of relevance.

Without denying the possible existence of egalitarian and consensus-oriented organizational cultures among politicians globally, the studied cases in Denmark and Norway revealed a relatively hierarchical and more or less conflict-oriented culture among local politicians. This culture was evident in the elected representatives' concerns regarding accountability and the expressed danger posed by irresponsible citizens lacking expert knowledge, alongside the importance given to political parties as a means for solving political conflicts in localities. These characteristics indicate an organizational culture that supports the hierarchical features of representative democracy and the

idea of politics as a regulation of conflicting interests. As pointed out in the theoretical discussion, different organizational cultures support contrasting views of what democracy should be. When introducing participatory governance schemes, innovators may insist that the organizational culture should be adapted according to the idea of participatory democracy and politics as a deliberative and consensus-oriented project. In other words, the argument may be that local governments need to change the established values that are essential for representative democracy and politics, which is understood to resolve societal conflicts. Alternatively, participatory governance schemes may be designed according to the cultural environment in which they are introduced. The argument may then be that participatory governance schemes should be introduced only in an egalitarian and consensus-oriented organizational culture.

The literature on democratic innovations and participatory governance is replete with arguments favoring citizen involvement, and the interaction between politicians and citizens is essential to effective public governance. Endorsing citizen interaction is an outspoken norm in political leadership (Lees-Marshment, 2015; Sørensen, 2020). While studies on democratic innovations have provided insights into the workings of various participatory measures, we lack knowledge of elected politicians' wants and needs regarding interactions with citizens (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2019). Focusing on the demand for citizen participation among elected representatives, future research should consider the relevance of organizational culture, as discussed in this article.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not available due to national ethical guidelines.

ORCID

Signy Irene Vabo 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6438-175X

Marte Winsvold 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6096-0594

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