

# **Aggregative or Deliberative Urban Democracy?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A basic task of democratic institutions is to achieve collective action in the face of disagreement. Democratic theory offers two general solutions to this problem. One solution is to establish fair procedures to arbitrate between conflicting interests through voting or negotiations. The other solution is to pursue consensus by the use of public reason.

These alternatives are at the heart of the distinction between liberal/aggregative and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Cohen and Sabel have explicated these conceptions as distinct approaches to the principle of democratic equality (Cohen and Sabel 1997). Whereas procedures for aggregative decision-making are set up to ensure that all interests are given equal weight, for instance through voting arrangements, deliberative equality implies that decisions proceed “on the basis of free public reason among equals” (*Ibid*, 320). Aggregative institutions are set up to arbitrate between basically irreconcilable opinions and interests, deliberative institutions on the other hand are designed to accommodate the search for the common good.

The aim of this paper is to analyse developments in political participation in Norwegian urban politics as well as institutional changes introduced or debated in later years, with reference to this duality. Is the “deliberative turn” in democratic theory (Dryzek 2000) reflected in local politics, or is it really the other way around? My basic assumption is that recent developments seem to indicate a trend towards an increasing interest in liberal and adversarial institutions. This trend is especially noteworthy in urban politics – several indicators seem to suggest that increasing use of adversarial institutions in cities is increasing the difference between democratic politics in cities and in rural communes. I will try to substantiate these claims by examining a number of changes observable in the Norwegian local government – institutional change as well as changes in democratic practice. I am furthermore concerned with the implications of these developments. In the concluding discussion I will return to the basic points of divergence between the liberal and deliberative perspectives, and develop a few arguments concerning the effects of institutional change on the workings of local democratic self-rule.

**Key Words:** democracy, participation, local government