

Leading the Locality: Icelandic Local Government Leadership Dilemma

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ABSTRACTIn Iceland there is a growing scepticism towards mayors with executive powers (Kristinsson 2014). At the same time there is also a substantial demand of a responsive, community orientated local leader with strong direct access into central government level. In Iceland, mayors are recruited largely through two processes: through hiring following nationwide job postings (manager-mayors) and through political appointment from within the municipal council (political mayors). This paper explores the dilemma these different role expectations create for local leaders and local leadership on the whole and how democratic renewal may both contributes to the creation as well as solving of this dilemma. Firstly, the paper discusses the foundation for growing criticism towards executive mayors and the counteractions that have been undertaken. Secondly it delves into the foundation of local leadership and looks into what local leaders believe is expected or even demanded of them by citizens, central government or local agencies in the context of democratic renewal. The findings suggest that professional management plays a vital role in democratic renewal at the local level. However, manager-mayors are expected by citizens, central government and to some part the media to behave in similar ways as political mayors. This creates a dilemma as they are expected to be neutral professionals and community oriented “political” leaders at the same time. Finally, the strong emphasis on community role and direct access of local politicians into central government makes the Icelandic mayoral system more compatible to more southern typologies than the northern typology it is usually assigned to?

KEYWORDS: • mayor • executive mayors • local government leadership • local government • Iceland

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1 Introduction

International reform on local government systems have in the past few decades mainly involved rearrangements of the power relations between the the three main elements of local government; the council (and political leadership), the executive and the administration. Therefore, reforming has often involved the centrality of political leadership or the position of the mayor as a political leader within the local government system. The Icelandic reform agenda has on the other hand mainly concentrated on functional decentralization and amalgamation processes (Eythórsson 2012). In recent years discussion on the importance of citizen participation as become more important in Iceland. As an example legal sanctions for local referendums and participation methods were included in the last version of the Local Government Act (no. 138/2011). The position of the council and local leaders has received less attention and the discussion has concentrated on their role in increasing functional responsibilities of local government. The development and challenges of local leadership roles within the local government democratic processes has however received very little attention. The purpose of this paper is to address this shortcoming and discuss the dilemma of the growing scepticism towards mayors with executive powers in Iceland (Kristinsson 2014) while at the same time there is a substantial demand of a responsive, community orientated local leader with strong direct access into central government level. This paper explores the dilemma these different role expectations create for local leaders and local leadership on the whole and how democratic renewal may both contributes to the creation as well as to solving of this dilemma.

To deal with these questions the paper discusses how Icelandic local leadership roles fit the Page and Goldsmith (1987) typology on central-local relations. The typology was based on the evaluation of three dimensions of local-central government relations; function, discretion and access (1987, 3). Furthermore, the paper discusses the typology in relation to different types of local government form, citizen expectations and the Icelandic mayors' role perception.

Linked to any discussion on the Icelandic mayor one must bear in mind that an Icelandic local entity is not merely another organisation that needs to be organised and managed. It is an essential service provider, most often the municipality's largest employer: a democratic unit with a democratically elected government as well as a community with strong social and cultural roots. Additionally, those who are chosen to manage or lead these authorities belong to a small group of local government elite. One way to define elite in political science is to look for indications of privileged positions held in society, as well as if the individual in question is likely to be more politically influential than the general public (Littig 2009; Odendahl and Shaw 2002). In the case of Iceland, these local government elites are typically made up of council members, leaders of the council, top administrative managers in addition to the Icelandic mayor. The position of the

Icelandic mayor is, therefore, not only an administrative position but a complex role affected by formal and informal rules. The structures and traditions of the Icelandic Local Government system provide Icelandic mayors with high status within the political system as well as within society itself. Regardless of whether the mayor is an elected member of the council (political mayor) or hired due to other merits (manager-mayor).

The paper starts with a discussion on the theoretical framework and moves on to a short introduction of methods and data. Section three discusses the background of the Icelandic mayor system and the foundation for growing scepticism towards political leaders. Section four then goes on and discusses how different types of mayors report their role in relation to interaction with citizens, central government and the media. Finally there is a discussion on the findings.

2 Theoretical framework

One of the issues of local government reforms has concentrated on if it was sensible to let an executive politician run the municipality rather than leaving it to a professional chief executive. The debate has also involved a larger debate on the issue of professionalism. Thus it is either possible to regard professional management of a local authority as a potential threat to democracy as elected representatives are pushed to the side. Another perspective is to see professional management as providing a set of internal standards or ethical guidelines, safeguarding the public from arbitrary political decision-making (Fox 1992; Demir and Reddick 2012).

Those supporting reforms of local leadership regard the traditional image of the local political leader as outdated. The traditional models expected local leaders to be “good managers of collective goods and (party) political activity was horizontally concentrated on the local bargaining process surrounding service production and distribution” (Steyvers et al. 2009,13). At the same time, the classical ideal of the amateur or layman local politician has come under increased scrutiny (Larsen 2005, 197). Guérin and Kerrouche (2008) argue that the foundation of the local government system has changed fundamentally in the past 20 years. Although decentralisation has amplified the control of local leadership over its local authority, decision-making has become more complex, making a direct political intervention into local government processes more difficult. The new state of government calls for a higher level of expertise and a greater distribution of power between different types of councillors, which makes the work of the layman councillors more difficult. As a result, they point out the increase in career politicians who pose a challenge to the traditional image of the amateur representative (p. 179-180). This is especially apparent in the case of directly elected mayors who, with their strong executive roles, have become central figures in local political life. Guérin and Kerrouche (ibid) point out that the

two primary aims of this practice were to reinforce local democratic processes by personalising the executive power as well as strengthening the modes of governance of local authority. This, they argued, could be done by consolidating the prerogatives and influence of the executive powers, making the mayor able to determine more precisely his/her aims and objectives (p.185-186). Various kinds of transformation in local political leadership have been identified more or less all over Europe (Borraz and John 2004). These are usually connected to the emergence of governance on the one hand and ideas related to New Public Management on the other. The NPM influence is evident in the reference to a UK mayor as he claimed to be “wresting control from the officers and giving it back to the politicians” (Fenwick, Elcock, and McMillan 2006, 432). These ideas emphasise that politicians should engage with “what” is to be done while the managers should concentrate on “how” things are to be done (Bergström, Gianoli, and Rao 2012). Thus, as our understanding of how political leaders should exercise leadership has moved away from the ideal of the layman rule to a “professional” political leadership, the position of the administrators has also been affected, changing how we define administrative leadership.

In the past three decades management reform, often called NPM or managerialism, has left a lasting impact on how things are executed within public administration. The Icelandic public administration is no exception to this rule (Kristmundsson 2003; Hlynisdóttir 2012). Approaches based on these ideas emphasise the strategic and visionary role of politicians at the expense of executive function (Berg 2006), or the old ‘steering rather than rowing’ (Osborne and Gaebler 1993) effect. These ideas have led to the conclusions that managers should handle the day-to-day management of the local authority and implementation of council decisions, thus diminishing the role of the politician in the implementation process. In fact, the main purpose was to change the role of the traditional bureaucrat from a “rule obeying” and “by the book” manager into a visionary and creative decision maker. This was intended to be a move from management to leadership (Kane 2007). These ideas have been criticised for being reductionist and for overlooking the complexity of public administration. Hood (1991), a long-time critic, has pointed out that the ‘one size fits all’ approach does not stand up to close examination. Traditionally, when thinking of governmental administrative arrangements, images come to mind of bureaucracy in Weberian terms as a system based on formal structures and rules. From that point of view, bureaucracy is also an abbreviation for a slow, old-fashioned system, resistant to any change or interference (Kane 2007). At least this was the perspective adopted by early advocates of public administrative reform in the 1990s (Osborne and Gaebler 1993). Recent publications have to some extent seen a revival of the concept (Meier and Hill 2005; Ejersbo and Svava 2012). Ejersbo and Svava reject the view associated with Osborne and Gaebler (1993) that a new organisational form has replaced bureaucracy. Furthermore, they point out that “any permanent administrative structure of government has been and continuous to be “bureaucracy”” (p. 153).

Hierarchy based on formal structure and rules is thus still important in local level government.

Local government hierarchy puts the local chief executive in a subordinate position in relation to the politicians, yet at the same time stresses the value of the expert knowledge of the manager. As pointed out by Mouritzen and Svava (2002), the question of neutrality of the administration or officials within the administration brings forward the complexity of the relationship between politicians and managers at the local level. The manager is torn between obedience on the one hand and expertise on the other. Based on earlier research Demir and Nyhan argue that administrators who like to keep a low political profile should highlight the following:

[...] (1) to minimize their identification with political positions, (2) to avoid undermining the political power of elected officials and by creating competition between elected officials and administrative officials regarding policy, (3) to keep the rough-and tumble of politics away from administration to ensure rational administrative decisions rather than bargaining-based decisions[...] (Demir and Nyhan 2008, 84).

As one of the foundations of local government, professionalism is seen as the responsibility of the top managers within public administration who are expected to bring expertise and skills into the governmental process as well as safeguard the administration from arbitrary political decision making (Fox 1992).

Typologies are an important analytical tool in local leadership research, and they are mainly divided into two categories: Typologies of power relations between lower levels of government and the central government and typologies exploring horizontal power relations (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). The only typology to include Iceland is the one presented by Lidström (2003) in his work on local government systems in Europe. There he situates Iceland within the North European system along with the other Nordic countries. According to Lidström, the municipalities in this system are in a central position vis-à-vis the central government, highly autonomous and, apart from Iceland, rather large in population size. The definition of the Nordic country group in the Lidström typology is in line with previous typologies such as Page and Goldsmith (1987), Hesse and Sharpe (1991) and a more recent version of the POLLEADER typology (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). All of these typologies have a Nordic or Northern group of countries which is specified for example by high decentralisation, strong emphasis on service provision, strong constitutional position and financial independence (Page and Goldsmith 1987; Hesse and Sharpe 1991). Page and Goldsmith based their original typology on the evaluation of three dimensions of local-central government relations; function, discretion and access (1987, 3).

In relation to the first dimension, countries in the Nordic or Northern systems are usually seen as highly functional in the sense that they are responsible for a vast amount of welfare service provision (Rose and Ståhlberg 2005; Page and Goldsmith 1987). The Icelandic system, however, has strong centralised tendencies, and although the importance of local government in service provision has grown over the past two decades, it still lags behind its Nordic counterparts. Thus, the functional importance of the Icelandic local government system is not as well developed as in the other Nordic countries. The second dimension is discretion which relates to the ability of local government to decide on the scope and delivery of services (Page and Goldsmith 1987, 5). It is difficult to draw any conclusions on this issue mainly because of the lack of information on the Icelandic situation. Nevertheless, Icelandic local government has enjoyed high discretion in financial matters, and there were very limited fiscal constraints by the central government on local government finances until recent changes to the Local Government Act in 2011. These changes were mainly the result of the financial crisis in 2008. The third and final dimension is access, or more precisely, the nature of contact between actors at the local and central government levels (Page and Goldsmith 1987, 5). This is where the main deviation from the Nordic model is expected to be found in the Icelandic local government system. Page and Goldsmith argue that there are differences in direct and indirect forms of access. The former method of direct access is for example face to face contact of local leaders with central government actors. The latter method is accessing or influencing central government through indirect means such as local government associations. In all the above-mentioned typologies, the method of direct access is ascribed to Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain or France. There the local leader (usually the leading politician) plays a central role in guarding and lobbying the interests of a territorially define local community. The local identity is highly significant and so is the community role of the leading politician (Page and Goldsmith 1987; Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006; Lidström 2003).

The Napoleonic tradition is one of the main conditions most of the countries in the southern group have in common (Lidström 2003; Page and Goldsmith 1987). There are, however, other factors that may be more relevant to this discussion. Page and Goldsmith (1987) point out that southern Europe was largely agrarian until the 1970s and that the individual form of direct contact is a form of clientelism or favouritism often associated with agrarian culture. Kristinsson (2001; 2015) has developed a similar explanation in case of Iceland based on the work of Shefter (1977) indicating that where party politics is established before an effective administration there is a greater likelihood of favouritism influencing political behaviour. Overall, the tradition of a local government administration providing welfare services in an economical and efficient way is a relatively new phenomenon in Iceland. Unlike the Nordic countries where the primary function of the local government was to provide welfare services on behalf of the central

government (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004), Icelandic municipalities participated only to a very limited extent in the provision of welfare services until the late 20th century. Local authorities were thus able to concentrate on local and regional issues and provide strong internal and external leadership for their communities. At the same time, clientelism or favouritism was an integral part of Icelandic politics. Furthermore, suspicion of favouritism behaviour by local politicians have not altogether vanished (Kristinsson 2015). This stands in contrast to for example the English local government systems, where leadership by directly elected mayors is seen as a vital part of democratic renewal. Keeping both party interests and uninterested professionals at bay (Copus 2011; Bergström, Gianoli, and Rao 2012).

3 Methods and data

This paper is based on data collected for a larger project on the role of the Icelandic mayor within the electoral term 2010-2014. Altogether 44 mayors (12 political mayors and 32 manager-mayors) in municipalities with more than 500 residents were interviewed in 2012. The interviews were coded and analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis. Qualitative content analysis initially draws on the work of Philipp Mayring (2000) but has enjoyed increased popularity in recent years (see e.g. Gläser and Laudel 2010; Schreier 2014; Schreier 2012) primarily on the European mainland. Kuckartz (2014) has argued that qualitative content analysis focuses more on understanding as well as on interpreting texts than does the classical content analysis. Human contact is thus imperative to qualitative content analysis. As a rule, practitioners of qualitative content analysis rely more on interpretation and understanding and less on counting. Moreover, the qualitative content analysis is different from traditional qualitative procedures in two ways (Gläser and Laudel 2010). Firstly it extracts information from the original text (in this case the interview) and works on it independently from the rest of the text (p. 46). Secondly, because the categories or themes have already been defined beforehand, the main structure of which type of information to look for has already been decided (p.47). The method is thus exceptionally good at retrieving and locating specific information within a given context.

The interviews in this project fall into the category of elite interviews. Overall, the definitions of elites are everything but precise (Odendahl and Shaw 2002; Littig 2009). The typical definition of elites indicates that elites have more money and more knowledge and in many cases a higher social position than the rest of the population (Odendahl and Shaw 2002). From the perspective of political science, the individual in question is likely to be more politically influential than the general public (Littig 2009). There is a growing body of literature in the German-speaking world (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009) concentrating on expert interviewing as an independent type of elite interviewing. In general, there has been an increase in literature on expert interviewing (Littig 2009; Gläser and

Laudel 2010). As an example, Littig provides a relatively narrow definition of experts as they “serve as informants and possess knowledge otherwise not accessible to researchers” (p. 100). Littig also points out that those experts are often top level managers with significant sources of power and responsibility. Therefore, as Icelandic mayors hold a distinctive and public position of considerable authority, they are considered members of the elite from the view of Odendahl and Shaw (2002). At the same time, they fall under Littig’s (2009) expert definition as they are a source of information and knowledge otherwise not attainable.

4 The foundation for growing criticism towards Icelandic executive mayors

The history of the Icelandic local government system is based within the traditional council-committee system where the council with its sub-committees is the most important legal body and all decision making is finalized by the council (Hlynsdóttir 2015). This system was established in the late 19th Century and centred on the elected council with a council leader (*Oddviti*) whose formal role was primarily thought to be *primus inter pares*. The council leader or *Oddviti* was the main contact person in the council and the role soon evolved into him being the most powerful member of the council although his leadership role was never formally integrated into the local government act. This form of government was however only used in the rural and small village municipalities while a different type of government was used for larger towns and cities. Thus a special law was created separately for each town, (at the beginning only Reykjavík). As in the *Oddviti* form the power was concentrated within the council and its sub-committees, however and additionally a position of a manager was established. This form of government became to be known as the mayoral form as in addition to the council there was a separate position of a so-called mayor (*borgarstjóri*, *bæjarstjóri*, *sveitarstjóri*) who presided over the administration. Almost from the beginning there was an interesting twist to the mayoral position as this individual could be council member (a political mayor) or not a council member (manager-mayor). These two forms of government were not only different in regard to leadership roles but in a political sense as well as in the towns a party system based on the national party system evolved. In municipalities using the *Oddviti* form there were no parties or local lists. Thus elections took place but were fully open so that each eligible citizen was a possible candidate for the council. Consequently, electors wrote in the name of their neighbours and the five people (three in the early days) who received the largest number of votes were legally obliged to take a seat on the local council for the next four years. This system is still in use in the very small municipalities and was used in 24% of the municipalities in 2012. After the middle of the 20th Century the mayoral system began to gain the upperhand nevertheless, in 1990 out of 202 municipalities

around 130 were still using the *Oddviti* form. This number had dropped down to 12 in 2012.

The development of local government forms has left us with two main types of mayoral forms of local government. In the political mayor model the key players are the council with the *council leader*, the executive board with the *executive board leader* and the *political mayor* who is chosen from among the council members. Although council leaders and executive board leaders play an important political role in this model, the undisputed political leader is almost always the political mayor. Also, it is rare for the same person to occupy more than one of the above-mentioned positions at the same time. The political mayor is also effectively the head of the local administration as well as a council member. The political mayor has no formal role when it comes to leading the council as that is the responsibility of the council leader. Thus, the political model is in many ways similar to the *strong-mayor form* identified by Mouritzen and Svava (2002) as the politician. In this case, the political mayor is legally and effectively in charge of the executive. Nevertheless, there is a major difference as the Icelandic political mayor is not directly elected and s/he does not hold a specific position within the council. Furthermore, there are limited legal restraints on the power or authority of the political mayor and a strong leader may be able to exercise power in very similar ways as is found within the *strong-mayor form*. There were 17 recorded cases of the political mayor model.

In the manager-mayor model, the key players are the council with the *council leader*, the executive board with the *executive board leader* and the *manager-mayor*. Unlike the political mayor model, the manager-mayor has no formal political authority as s/he is not a member of the council. Political leadership is thus vested either in the council leader or the executive leader. Consequently, the most prominent politician is not always clearly visible to an outsider. There are strong resemblances between this model and Mouritzen and Svava's (2002) *council-manager form*. The manager-mayor controls all executive functions and his/her position as an expert within the administration is very strong. However, there is a much higher level of administrative involvement on behalf of the council than is usually found in the council-manager form. In 2012, there were 45 cases of the manager-mayor model.

Former studies on Icelandic local government indicate that there are differences in how local leadership is expressed in connection with the above-mentioned models (Kristinsson 2001; 2014). The local government act (no. 138/2011) does however not address these different types of government form in any way. Both types of mayor have exactly the same formal scope of responsibilities. The only difference lies within the fact that the political mayor is able to cast a vote as a member of the council and the manager-mayor is not. The number of political mayors rose sharply in the early 1990s when a trend of most of the larger municipalities using

the political mayor form of government was established. For the next two decades until the 2010 around 25% of the overall number of municipalities with a mayoral model hired a political mayor. The number peaked in 2006 when 39% were using the political form of government. The number of political mayors went below 30% in the 2010 election and has remained that way since then. In the years following the 2008 financial crisis, there was a general scepticism towards politically affiliated public appointments (Árnason, Nordal, and Ástgeirsdóttir 2010). This might have played a role in the fact that many of the larger municipalities hired a manager-mayor rather than a political mayor after the 2010 election and again in 2014.

Unlike the political mayor who is a member of the council the manager-mayor is clearly subordinate to the whole council. Nevertheless manager-mayors often enjoy a unique relationship with the council majority based on trust and loyalty. At the same time, the manager-mayor is an expert expected to show neutrality in his/her advice to members of the council. This is in itself contradictory as it is traditionally seen as a prerogative to the neutral competence of the administration that it should be situated as far away from politics as possible (Demir 2009). It appears that the intensity of public speech on the political neutrality through increased professionalism of local government management increased alongside the growing number of political mayors in the early 1990s. Ideas on the importance of administrative professionalism and choosing the most competent individual based on professional skills and not politics began to appear frequently in Icelandic newspaper articles ranging from the late 1990s through to the present-day. These findings suggest that there is a tendency to see the manager-mayor as identical to a neutral and impartial administrator. Kristinsson (2014; 2015) reports similar findings as he points out that there is a tendency to view the Icelandic political mayor as potentially corrupt or corruptible based mainly on his/her unchecked influence on the council. Thus individual local authorities response to growing criticism of political mayors as being “unprofessional” has been to hire a manager-mayor.

5 Local leadership in the light of citizens and system demands

In order to compare the local leadership role of different types of mayors, their interaction with citizens, central government and media visibility was assessed. Based on Iceland being a member of a Nordic country in the Page and Goldsmith (1987) typology, both types of mayors should express low level of direct access to central government. Furthermore, based on the fact that Icelandic citizens seem to regard political mayors as potentially corrupt, there should be a difference in how citizens interact with different types of mayors. Based on this political mayors should report a higher level of favourism behaviour on the behalf of citizens. Finally and based on the manager-mayor being a “professional” this type of mayor

should report a lower level of community involvement through citizen interaction and media visibility than the political mayors.

6 Interaction with citizens

One of the main arguments against large amalgamation at the Icelandic local level is that it would increase the distance between the citizens and the local leadership (Kristinsson 2014; Eythórsson 2014). In the light of that notion, the mayors' description of their interaction with their citizens is interesting. In general, the mayors of both types agreed upon the importance of being in regular contact with the public. All the mayors interviewed reported being in frequent contact with citizens on behalf of the local authority. Overall, the public seems to have good access to both types of mayors. The most common situation was a so-called "open house" rule in which mayors did not have defined visiting hours but were accessible when they were in their office. In the largest municipalities including the city of Reykjavík, visiting hours were more structured. Despite that, access was easy and waiting times were short. Although this might mean disturbances to their daily routine, most of the mayors agreed that it was necessary for the public to have access to the mayors and for the mayors to maintain good relationships with the public. Both types of mayors stressed the importance of "keeping the finger on the pulse" or "the ear to the ground", thus emphasising the importance of having a strong relationship with the public. It was seen as important for the politicians to know what the public was thinking as well as well for the administration to be alert to any dissatisfaction the citizens were feeling.

All the mayors reported frequent visits from citizens on everything from child protection issues to financial difficulties. Many of the mayors reported having to tackle tough issues, and the presence of a box of tissues on the coffee table in almost all the mayoral offices speaks for itself. Overall, both types of mayors stated that they felt that many citizens believed that the mayor has much more authority and decision-making power than the mayors themselves believed they had. Thus, the primary reason for citizens to visit the mayor is that they are seeking some favours or help because they "feel they have somehow been wronged" (male manager-mayor). A political mayor pointed out that: Out of all visits, 95 per cent are related to some favouritism, people are trying to get something through and have already been rejected somewhere else and are trying to get the yes from me (political mayor).

This was not confined to the political mayors as both types of mayors had citizens visiting them in the hopes that they might get something through which had been rejected somewhere else. These tendencies are not surprising due to the deep-rooted tradition of clientelism at the Icelandic local level (and politics in general) (Kristinsson 2015). The traditionally small size and simple structure of local government administration have also enhanced this problem. Therefore, citizens

were in many cases trying to take a shortcut through the bureaucracy by going straight to the mayor. Several of the manager-mayors pointed out that this was a real problem and showed a lack of administrative professionalism.

I have tried to stress the importance of having a professional administration which attempts to reduce the number of citizens coming to the mayor and solving their problems through that channel. (manager-mayor)

Often, the mayors directly forwarded the issues to lower staff thus redirecting the citizens back into the system. What came as a surprise to many of the mayors was the high number of these visits.

In my first year, I think I must have spoken to several hundred people... moreover, I found it fascinating how interested people were in talking with the mayor and how much authority they think s/he has to be able to fix all things. (political mayor)

People were not always looking for favours in the above sense. In some cases, "people just need to blast of steam and then they are happy when they are finished" (female manager-mayor). The mayors saw it as crucial to be positive towards people. Many visit the mayor looking for help or guidance for ideas or new projects for the community. Several of the mayors pointed out that many useful projects had come out of these visits.

This close interaction between the mayor and the citizens reaches into society. Political mayors were inclined to believe that political mayors had more intimate interactions with the public than manager-mayors. A few of the political mayors claimed that the main difference was that the manager-mayors were able to shut out the public after 5 pm. The manager-mayors did not share this vision, and many had a very different story to tell.

It is this tendency for ownership, people just think they own the manager-mayor... they come to your house and call you at night (manager-mayor).

A few other manager-mayors pointed out that social life within the community was virtually impossible. Nevertheless, interest in the community is often named as one qualification for the position of manager-mayor in the job posting, and several manager-mayors asserted that they needed to be interested in the community.

If you are just in this to get your pay that is not the right approach, you must show interest and not be frustrated even though you get calls at all hours. I have never done that and never seen this as a burden, from the first day I have wanted to serve the citizens (manager-mayor).

Interestingly enough, this statement came from a manager-mayor, and several others made similar claims about the importance of being involved in society and close to the citizens. Many of them acted optimistically in the face of problems, i.e. trying to inspire people and give them courage and hope in difficult times. This community role was evident both for the manager-mayors and for the political mayors. Many of them expressed surprise at the intensity of this community role.

I was taken by surprise by the leadership role that I am expected to have, towards not only the council members but also concerning the citizens themselves (political mayor).

Both types of mayors reported a strong community role that comes with the position, a role that often has more in common with local leadership roles found in southern local government systems (Borraz and John 2004).

7 Interaction with local government

In relation to interaction with the central government contact seems to be mainly twofold: it is either project related or interest related. When there are ongoing projects, there is more contact with the appropriate institution or ministries. Building a home for the elderly or a new secondary school building are examples of such projects. Many of the local authorities are also involved in massive lobbying and interest guarding efforts for their municipality. When issues that need to be discussed are sensitive or difficult there is a tendency for block building. "If we are going into the ministry it is very good to have a representative connected to the minister's party or even members of the minority come with me if we are going to meet someone from their party" (Political mayor). In the case of sensitive issues, it is vital to have everybody's support, as pointed out by a political mayor. "In these matters, you cannot screw up, everybody has to back each other up on these significant issues, or they are doomed". The regional versus capital area is also a factor here, as the mayors of the municipalities around Reykjavík did not express the same need to be in close contact with the ministries except on very rare occasions whereas those further away from the capital area did tend to seek more contact. They also did not report the same level of communication with their local MPs as many of the rural municipalities. However, it is much easier for political mayors to visit the ministries and agencies on their own and sometimes they did that. The manager-mayors hardly ever reported such meetings.

I never go alone, I always take someone with me, we have always taken someone from the minority and majority... at least three always go (manager-mayor).

The majority of the manager-mayors who reported going alone to such meetings belonged to a group of manager-mayors with a political affiliation to the council

majority. There is, of course, the issue of travel costs especially for the municipalities outside the capital area, which may also influence the number of people who go on such visits. Mayors from outside the capital area mentioned the high cost of travel on several occasions.

In relation to guarding the interests of the municipality, a political connection was deemed of great importance.

When you are fighting for the municipality on the regional or national level, then you realise how important it is to have political connections with the MPs in the *Alþingi*. This favouritism matters. It is not as clear-cut as I used to think (manager-mayor).

Many of the manager-mayors saw it as advantageous to be a politician when the municipality was fighting to get its way on a particular issue. One male manager-mayor who was working hard to balance the finances of his municipality pointed out.

I have constantly been at the ministry because of the financial situation, but I lack political weight. In fact, the political weight has been absent overall because there are different political parties in my council than in central government...Our problem is also the size of the municipality because our council members are...not heavyweights in *Valhöll*¹ (manager-mayor).

Judging from these last quotes, the symbolic importance of having a politician present in a meeting or having a political affiliation may be of great importance when difficult issues need to be pursued at a higher level of government. Consequently, as Leach and Wilson (2000) have pointed out, there is often pressure on politicians to take on tasks relating to interaction with external authorities. Building up connections and relationships with external actors is of great importance.

In their discussion on European mayors (Bäck, Magnier, and Heinelt 2006), Kübler and Michel identified three factors which characterised the European mayors in vertical power relations. In the context of the Icelandic mayor study their second factor, “vertical power realism”, is most relevant². The above discussion on the Icelandic mayors’ interaction with the central government reveals that Icelandic mayors of both types are in relatively frequent contact with higher levels of government. This contact, however, is closely related to the local situation such as financial situation, pressing local issues or other local interests. Thus, the mayors approach higher levels of government when and only when they need something. This fits the Kübler and Michel Kübler and Michel (2006) definition of “vertical power realism”. They argue that European mayors adhering to these sets of ideas believe that higher levels of government may influence local affairs, and, therefore, it is of importance to represent the municipality to the

outside world. Thus, they approach upper levels of government mainly to defend the position and interests of their municipality (p. 237). Kübler and Michel identify such an approach as pragmatic and point out that political leaders adhering to it are mostly found in the Franco, Central and Eastern European group of countries. As an example, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and the Czech Republic score high on “vertical power realism.” Icelandic mayors play a brokering role between the central and the local government which is more in line with local political leadership roles found in countries with a Napoleonic system (Borraz and John 2004). This puts the responsibilities for media and ceremonial duties for both types of mayor in a new perspective.

8 The media visibility

I am always the spokesperson, that is the main rule. It is just an agreement that I am the voice of the municipality if something needs to be faced in the media. If there are any formalities where someone needs to speak either I go or the council leader, or the executive board leader. It is custom that one of us does it. It depends on who has time (Political mayor).

Most of the political mayors are in the same position as the above mayor in that they are expected to attend various gatherings, and they are the face of the local authority to the outside world most of the time, although the council leader and the executive leader do participate as well. In larger municipalities, the more junior staff sometimes fronts issues concerning the media and the political mayor or other politicians usually cover ceremonial events. In many cases, these political mayors have become almost synonymous with their municipality to the extent that news about the municipality is accompanied by a picture of the political mayor. It is rare for the manager-mayor to have such prestige. Thus, the ceremonial role is of great importance as pointed out by the mayor of Reykjavík.

I would say that the other 40 per cent [of what he does] is participating in society. Going to public gatherings, meeting or so to speak honouring them with [my] presence. Going to openings, exhibitions, making speeches at all kinds of events like someone's hundredth birthday (Jón Gnarr mayor of Reykjavík).

This ceremonial role of the political mayor is traditionally understood as being part of the politician's role (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006; Mouritzen and Svava 2002; Leach and Lowndes 2007). Being part of media stories and making ceremonial appearances as the head of the administration is not as common (Mouritzen and Svava 2002). There are quite a substantial number of manager-mayors who presented themselves as the face of the municipality. No clear rule emerged as to where these individuals were located as they served both in small and large municipalities, rural and urban areas and were of both sexes.

If there is something public, I go, and usually I take part in all media coverage. I have asked myself because I am not political, I have always asked myself if this is a chance for the politicians to introduce themselves and have an influence or if the issue is more management related. I have given the politicians and especially the council leader the opportunity to go, especially if there are interviews and things like that but most of the time I end up alone (manager-mayor).

This manager-mayor points out an absolute disinterest of the leading politicians to introduce themselves and be visible. There were few other cases of such disinterest on behalf of the local council or the manager-mayor having been given instructions that media coverage was his/her role. Usually these manager-mayors always gave the politicians a chance to participate and most tried to push the more political issues over to the politicians. However, all of the manager-mayors with political connections to the council majority reported themselves as being either the only face of the municipality or at least being very well known. These manager-mayors also reported being active in ceremonial procedures like ribbon cutting and making speeches on national holidays.

Another group of manager-mayors (no political mayors fell into this category) took a more passive role when it came to representing the municipality. These manager-mayors only rarely participated in ceremonial events, and many of them had clear boundaries about what kind of issues they should tackle and the kind the politicians fronted. Often the manager-mayors answered more technical problems, particularly those related to how the municipality was being managed, but left the most political issues to the politicians.

9 Discussion

It is in many ways problematic the Icelandic local government system to a distinct local government typology. More specifically, this refers to the relative importance mayors of all types place on community leadership or leadership in connection to central-local relations. Although leadership in local-central government relations is more important to the political mayors, it is also the task of the manager-mayors and many emphasise it heavily. Although only included on rare occasions (Lidström 2003), it is often assumed that apart from the large number of very small municipalities the Icelandic local leadership falls rather easily into the typology of Northern European or Scandinavian countries (Page and Goldsmith 1987; Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Mouritzen and Svava 2002; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). The findings in this paper support the claim that from a historical and to a certain degree functional perspective such an assumption is justifiable. However, the centrality of both types of the Icelandic mayor when it comes to both external and internal community roles leads to a different conclusion. Overall, the Icelandic mayors' community role is more similar to our traditional idea of political leadership in countries such as Italy and Spain. Similar

to more southern countries like France or Italy, there is a heavy emphasis on the symbolic figure as the Icelandic mayor plays a strong territorial and representative role. Icelandic municipalities have in general a strong social and cultural foundation, and Icelandic local leaders are able to exploit the community as an important power resource similar to Southern European mayors (Borraz and John 2004). This enhances their political capacity, and they are able to use that power source in their dealings with the central government. These results indicate that it is not possible to situate the Icelandic mayor directly within the available typologies of local government leadership. The first reason is that because the position of the Icelandic mayor is a combination of political and administrative roles, it is practically impossible to place it directly into one of the available, ideal type typologies such as the Mouritzen and Svava (2002) typology. The second reason is that the typologies based on local-central relations are also based on the notion that a certain historical path must lead to a particular type of local government system (Borraz and John 2004; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006). The history and cultural background of Icelandic local government are closely related to the Danish and Norwegian local government systems. On the other hand, the community role of Icelandic local leaders is better explained by for example the Franco type (Hesse and Sharpe 1991) of local government systems. This creates a conceptual dilemma when it comes to deciding where to place the Icelandic system within leadership typologies. It should be pointed out that there are exceptions to all rules and not all municipalities in any country fit into the given typology. The main difference between such situations and the Icelandic situation is that, in Iceland the exception becomes the rule. Furthermore, manager-mayors without a political affiliation repeatedly find themselves in this community role in their dealings with the citizens and the central government. This is in itself highly unusual as such community roles are usually reserved for politicians.

These findings suggest that Icelandic local authorities have chosen a different path in relation to democratic renewal and local leadership than countries that have emphasised political leadership as a mechanism of democratic renewal. The findings of this paper show that both types of the Icelandic mayor play a leading role in the municipality and both types of mayor repeatedly reported being asked to step into a community leadership role. This tendency to see the mayors (of both types) as community leaders is demonstrated in the fact that citizens in municipalities of all sizes attempt to bypass the administration by seeking help and solutions directly from the mayor. At the same time citizens seem to regard professional leadership as a remedy to favouritism. Furthermore, the mayors are expected to have direct access to central government both through formal and informal channels. Thus, those mayors who were not being backed up by political or social networks reported having problems doing their job properly. They were not able to represent the local community in their dealings with the central government in a satisfactory way. This is truly a local leadership dilemma.

Notes:

¹ Valhöll (e. Walhalla) is the name of the headquarters of the Independence Party.

² The other two are factor 1 "vertical power enthusiasm" and factor 3 "vertical power frustration."

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