

Democratic revival can come from devolved democracy

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The British state is being dramatically restructured by the ongoing wave of devolution deals but the focus so far has been on devolving economic powers and the delivery of public services. The next step should be to devolve decisions about how local democracy is organised to the cities, regions and local authorities, to help reinvigorate participation and renew local politics, writes **Mat Lawrence**.*



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Yesterday marked the end of [Parliament Week](#), which featured events across the country seeking to connect people to the workings of Westminster. In an election year when [electoral inequality](#) was once again starkly evident that is a laudable goal. Yet in many ways it misses the more interesting – and more positive – story about our democracy: democratic energy and political innovation is increasingly found not in Parliament but at a local, city and regional level. From [Citizens' Assemblies in Sheffield](#) and Southampton to the Scottish government expanding [community participatory budgeting](#) to 'flatpack democracy' in [Frome](#), efforts to make our politics more responsive and people-led are emerging across the country without much regard to Parliament. The challenge for public policy is how best it can support and accelerate such efforts without imposing a single model of democracy that smothers the growing energy found in our politics.

Fortunately, there is an opportunity to do exactly that. The British state is being dramatically restructured by the ongoing wave of devolution deals, both to the cities and counties of England, and to the constituent nations of the UK. Yet the focus so far has been on devolving powers for [economic development](#) and the delivery of [public services](#). By contrast, there has not been substantive devolution of how we run local democracies or how these new powers are to be adequately held to account, beyond the imposition of the metro-mayor system.

The next step of devolution should therefore be to devolve how local and city democracies are run to the cities, regions and local authorities themselves, to help reinvigorate our democracy and renew local politics. For example, if setting the franchise were devolved as part of future devolution deals, we could see experiments with votes at 16 becoming common place, not just in occasional [referendums](#).

Similarly, if setting what electoral system was used for local democracy was devolved, we could see a wave of

experimentation, whether that is through PR for local government or the introduction of compulsory voting. With proportional representation at a national level currently on ice, devolving the setting of electoral systems to local government could therefore provide an important avenue towards making our politics more pluralistic and representative.

Devolving how we organise local democracy could also lead to experiments in more participatory and deliberative decision-making practices, whether that is support for community budgeting, deliberative assemblies or new types of democratic institutions not yet invented. Of course, it is likely that many political incumbents might not be ready for such innovation. Yet the strength of devolving democratic decision-making is that the most progressive places might innovate and experiment and others could learn from them; there would be room for manoeuvre and advance, even if not it is uniform across the board.

Importantly, this idea goes with the grain of public opinion. As a new survey on the 'Northern Powerhouse' shows, [82%](#) of respondents want local politicians to have more control, not MPs in Westminster. Nonetheless, there are a whole series of questions and challenges that need to be explored and stress-tested before a wave of democratic devolution can occur. In 2016, IPPR will therefore be developing a major programme of work on how to rejuvenate local democracy to do exactly that, based on the premise of devolving how our local democracies are organised to the localities themselves.

There is no single piece of legislation or institutional mechanism that can do this on its own. Imposing a centralised, monocultural form of democracy upon an increasingly diverse country, politically and culturally, will also not create a lasting settlement for democratic renewal. Rather, it can only be achieved by encouraging invention and pluralism in political life and supporting new ways of participating, deliberating and being represented, with a focus on building powerful democratic relationships and spaces in society. Devolving how we organise our democracy would be an important step towards that goal.

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