



City  
Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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To cite this article: Jane Wills (2023): Bridging the gaps between *demos* and *kratos*: broad-based community organising and political institutional infrastructure in London, UK, *City*, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2023.2209446](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2023.2209446)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2023.2209446>



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Published online: 17 May 2023.



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# Bridging the gaps between *demos* and *kratos*: broad-based community organising and political institutional infrastructure in London, UK

Jane Wills

*This article explores the gap between people and rule (demos and kratos) in democratic societies by exploring the history and practice of broad-based community organising, as applied by London Citizens, United Kingdom (UK). The paper outlines the origins of this model of politics and how it has been translated from the United States to London and the UK. The paper highlights the power of mobilising the demos to put pressure on the decision-making governance structures that determine the kratos. While London Citizens does this through kratos-at-a-distance, the article goes on to explore how hyper-local, neighbourhood-scaled governance structures—‘community councils’—could provide a powerful tool to further connect demos to kratos. Such councils could underpin a democratic revival that combines representation and participation at the scale at which people still live their lives.*

Keywords **democracy, governance, community, social capital, local councils, neighbourhood**

URL <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2023.2209446>

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## Introduction

Every four years since 2004, the broad-based community organising (BBCO) network, London Citizens, has orchestrated 'people's assemblies' to intervene in the city's Mayoral elections. Thousands of people from church parishes, mosques, schools and community groups come together to put their 'peoples' demands' to the candidates seeking election. These assemblies are a political drama—they begin with a roll call of community leaders, feature testimonies that document the key issues being raised, and reach a climax when the people's representatives confront the candidates on stage. The assembly turns democracy into theatre by asking the simplest, yet most powerful, question: 'will you support our request or not?' The trick is to turn an issue into a question which demands a response and in so doing, the *demos* have shaped the *kratos* in the city, evident in the success of the living wage campaign and the development of community land trust housing, among other things.

Since its founding in London (UK) in 1996, a broad-based coalition of civil society organisations (comprising faith, education and community groups), now called *London Citizens*, has developed the capacity to challenge the priorities of political life in the city. In the early days, the group worked on local campaigns to improve the quality of hospital food, or the infrastructure to help people cross the road, but over time, the ambitions of the organisation grew to incorporate campaigns for a living wage, the regularisation of irregular migrants and properly affordable housing. As outlined later on in this article, the key focus of this model of politics is about building the capacity of the people, via their organised communities, to engage more fully in democracy. It seeks to take residents and turn them into active citizens through providing opportunities for developing leadership and experiencing the power of collective organisation for change. The large assemblies organised by *London Citizens* allow people to experience democratic politics in a way that is rare in other arenas. In an assembly, you see the people, hear their demands, and get to see the individuals who are responsible for changing the course of history, holding them to account for making that change. Most of our democratic life is handled by elected representatives who make decisions in quiet rooms, set aside from the people. Indeed, democracy has been institutionalised such that the people are largely removed from any potential drama and it is only during elections, times of crisis or intense political campaigns (such as the referendum to leave the European Union) that we normally experience the emotional power of democracy to mobilise and motivate people to act. BBCO seeks to bring people into the drama of democracy during and beyond elections and crises, and in so doing, it exposes interesting questions about the state and practice of democracy.

This article looks at these efforts to organise the *demos* in London, using the example of *London Citizens* to expose important questions about the peoples' access to *kratos* (rule/power). In engaging with the institutions of representative democracy and the wider network of state-led and funded organisations, BBCO has encountered the legacy of the particular geo-constitutional arrangements that have made it hard to hear the voice of the people. Politics takes place a long way away, in both geographical and psychological distance, and the *demos* has very few opportunities to engage in important decisions. Here, I explore this gap

between the *demos* and *kratos* and use these terms to reflect the Greek origins of the word democracy whereby the *demos* comprised of the citizens who were able to govern themselves as well as later formations whereby the *demos* elected representatives to rule on their behalf (Dahl 2020; Schattschneider 1960).

Working with *London Citizens* has exposed the limits of our institutional inheritance and the need for changes in the constitutional arrangements through which the people can rule. To this end, I advocate the take up of new powers to create neighbourhood institutions or community councils in London. While we tend to assume that the city is somehow more democratic than the countryside, on some measures, in the UK at least, the reverse is the case. In the final part of the article, I make the case for bringing the model of the rural parish into urban neighbourhoods, to bolster democracy in London. Community councils would honour the lessons of *London Citizens* in fostering democratic engagement while also providing additional power to shape the *kratos* of the city.

## Broad-based community organising

Broad-based Community Organising (BBCO) has its origins in the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago and the urban experimentation of one of their graduate students, Saul D. Alinsky. Shaped by the philosophical tradition of pragmatism that was developing in the USA in the early twentieth century, Chicago's sociologists sought to ground their academic scholarship in the social life of the fast-changing city that was growing around them (Harney et al. 2016; Wills and Lake 2020). Their program of research—described as ‘the City as a sociological laboratory’ (Burgess and Bogue 1964, 5)—comprised a mix of research, analysis and action. Over time, some of this research became associated with ‘neighbourhood work’ whereby an organiser would be hired to help local people to solve their own problems (Park, Burgess, and MacKenzie 1925, 153/4; see also Fisher and Strauss 1978).

In 1932, a number of academics associated with the Chicago School of Sociology set up the Chicago Areas Project that established three new initiatives in tough neighbourhoods in inner city Chicago. Their vision was to find the local talent and leadership who could ‘coalesce into an effective neighborhood (sic) organisation—completely indigenous, completely independent, and fully self-determining’ (Burgess and Bogue 1964, 316). Once formed, these ‘community committees’ were trained and supported to draw on the resources of local institutions such as ‘churches, societies and clubs’ (in Bogue 1974, 82) in order to provide support and new facilities to young people (Schlossman and Sedlak 1983). The theory was that by identifying local leaders and winning the support of the local institutions, ‘the entire community can be involved cooperatively in working out its own salvation’ (Burgess in Bogue 1974, 88).

In 1938, Saul D. Alinsky, a graduate from the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago, was appointed to lead a new project being established in the neighbourhood called Back of the Yards (Engel 2002). In following the established model, Alinsky developed a committee that included representatives from the Catholic Church, the Meatpackers’ Union, the Chamber of Commerce, Chicago Park district, the American legion, social and sports clubs. In April

1939 the Back of the Yards Neighbourhood Council was founded at a large public meeting under the banner ‘We the people will control our own destiny.’ The local leadership established eight different committees looking at infant and adult welfare, the development of a community centre and housing, a credit union, jobs and new experiences for young people, dental services, green spaces, community events and youth organisation. Their statement of purpose explicitly linked this work, and the relationships upon which it was built, to the nature of democracy:

This organization is founded for the purpose of uniting all of the organizations within the community known as Back of the Yards, in order to promote the welfare of all residents of that community regardless of their race, color or creed, so that they may all have the opportunity to find health, happiness, and security through the democratic way of life. (Alinsky 1941, 800)

The new Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council went on to take its own initiatives to improve local facilities and services as well as challenging the established vested interests in the meat-packing industry, government and public services. Indeed, Alinsky’s encounter with the organised trade union movement in the Back of the Yards was particularly significant for the development of community organising as he fused the lessons of urban sociology—most notably, an understanding of the importance of locally-rooted social networks and community leadership—with an appreciation of the power of collective organisation (Horwitt 1992; Jones 1992; von Hoffman 2011). On the back of these experiences Alinsky developed a battery of principals and techniques for changing the balance of neighbourhood power writing two best-selling books *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules of Radicals* (1971), that are still widely read today.

Following Alinsky’s unexpected death in 1972, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) further developed this model of community organising and sought to respond to criticisms of the first wave of development, particularly in relation to the purported instrumentalisation of community, the gratuitous use of personal attacks and the potential to foster neighbourhood scale exclusions on the basis of ‘race’ (Fish 2015 [1973]; Sen 2003). As a result, alliances were built to reach a wider geographical scale and to connect more deeply with the faith traditions of many of the people involved (Warren 2001; Schutz and Miller 2015). Newer community organising alliances were established in order to mobilise the community at the scale required to challenge the key power-holders in any jurisdiction (including large employers, government officers and elected politicians). Through the organisation of people in a manner more akin to a traditional social movement, impressive gains, in relation to school standards (Stone et al. 2001; Warren and Mapp 2011), urban infrastructure (Warren 2001), affordable housing (Gecan 2004) and living wages (Fine 2006) were made. The experiences of those taking part in these campaigns and the related negotiations then provided the opportunity to teach and learn political skills and develop the capacities needed to create political change.

In the 1980s, a British social worker, Neil Jameson, went to the USA to explore this model of politics. After launching a number of experiments outside London

that were not sustained (Warren 2009), he decided to move to London where political power was obviously concentrated and there was a closer geographical (if not psychological) distance to decision makers. He then set up the first alliance, in east London, that later became *London Citizens* and over 25 years, the organisation has grown and developed, becoming part of a national network of local alliances involving hundreds of groups. Although it is most well-known for its successful campaign for a living wage and the establishment of the living wage foundation, as well as support for a growing number of urban community land trusts, it has also had significant impact on its member groups by bringing new people into the orbit of political campaigning and active citizenship, often for the first time (Bretherton 2015; Wills and Linneker 2014; Wills 2012; 2016).

Jameson and colleagues officially launched London's first alliance in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham, east London, in 1996. This first alliance was called *the East London Communities Organisation* (TELCO) and it subsequently expanded to a larger number of boroughs in the east of the city including Hackney, Waltham Forest and Barking and Dagenham. As the organisation won early success and gained recognition, it was able to raise the funds to hire new organisers to build alliances of civil society organisations in other parts of London, expanding to South London (2004), West London (2005) and North London (2011). It also became possible to operate as *London Citizens*, bringing together the whole organisation when targeting London's Mayoral candidates before and after elections. Over time, the organisation successfully developed a multi-scaled network of civil society institutions that can also reach up to the national scale—as *Citizens UK*—during national election campaigns. The national work brings the alliances in London into a much broader network that incorporates alliances established in other cities including Milton Keynes (2010), Birmingham (2013), Nottingham (2013), Cardiff (as part of *Citizens Cymru/Wales*, 2014), Leeds (2015), Tyne and Wear (2015), Manchester (2016), Brighton and Hove (2018), Essex (2019), Somerset (2021) and Peterborough (2022).

BBCO is designed to work through the organisations to which people already belong (such as schools, faith organisations, community centres and trade union branches), and then engage them in political life, around a set of locally-determined shared goals that can be scaled up or down depending upon political opportunities (Bretherton 2015; Schutz and Miller 2015; Tattersall 2013). As such, it demonstrates the very clear relationship between *demos* and the political structures of the *kratos*. The organisation is structured to take advantage of the political opportunities posed by the geo-constitution and in London, it has a borough structure that can be scaled up to a particular part of the city (east, south, north, west) as well as the city-at-large, and even the nation. This organisational geography allows it to mobilise large numbers of people to attend political assemblies before important elections, putting its demands to those who would be elected. However, this still reflects the kind of *kratos-at-a-distance* more widely associated with representative democracy. BBCO seeks to develop personal relationships with elected and appointed officials and to mobilise people and engage in public theatre to 'encourage' official representatives to respond to the demands of the *demos* (Wills and Linneker 2014; Wills 2009b).

In London, this has been successfully prosecuted to secure commitments from senior politicians such as leaders of borough councils and the Mayor of London, as well as being used to negotiate change with other public bodies such as the police, health services and schools. The same model has been used to target large private sector employers to secure payment of the living wage, offering public rewards and credit to those that adopt the campaign. As such, BBCO mobilises the people and puts them into dialogue with the political system and other forms of authority, trying to ensure that their voice is heard. In so doing, it engages residents and educates them with civic and political skills, using campaigns as a way to develop local leadership skills that can then shape the organisations to which they belong as well as providing new avenues for personal growth (Wills 2009a; 2012; Harney et al. 2016).

However, as with all forms of political organisation, this model also has weaknesses. The most obvious one is its reliance on existing organisations, all of which are themselves struggling to engage and build their membership. Moreover, in London, the rate of population change, and the pressures of rising housing prices and short-term rents, can make it particularly difficult to sustain civil society organisations. My own research has highlighted the challenges of sustaining community groups when the population changes every few years, making it hard to find anchors of stability around which longer-term organising is possible (Wills 2012). It is difficult to find the leadership required in some institutions, making the alliance over-reliant on its full-time organisers to do much of the work. In addition, the organisation is unable to reach residents who don't belong to any civil society organisation and they cannot then be brought into the alliance and its activity. Rather counter-intuitively perhaps, this has had differential demographic effects in relation to 'race' as it has proved easiest to organise the religious communities to which minority ethnic and new migrant communities belong. While leaders and organisers have experimented with setting up new organisations for people who don't belong, this makes heavy demands on staff time and resources, and is extremely hard to sustain. It also means that in urban settings at least, 'white British' populations are least likely to engage in this work.

There is also a challenge in raising the funds to pay for the organising work, which is very expensive. A city like London, with 32 boroughs, really needs an organiser in each one, as well as a national office and infrastructure, and paying salary costs is generally beyond the abilities of the local member institutions to pay. Thus the alliance has grown through raising additional funds from charities and the income from its own Living Wage Foundation to which living wage employers pay annual membership fees, but this, in turn, makes it difficult to sustain the core purposes of the organisation. In something of a chicken and egg, the alliance needs stronger civil society groups in order to pay the membership fees to support the alliance, but without those fees and the organisers, it is difficult to support the groups that have joined. BBCO has struggled to find a way to bridge this financial-organisational gap in a way that doesn't compromise the work that it does. While outside money can help, it brings its own strings attached, often steering the organisation away from its core rationale (Wills 2016).

Finally, there is also a scalar gap that reflects the wider geo-constitution in London. Many member groups that belong to the alliance are focused on



particular neighbourhoods and that is their focus. The mosques, churches, schools and community centres that join *Citizens UK* are generally oriented towards small areas of the city, and particular groups of people. They are often most interested in working with their neighbours on common problems around their institution, such as the state of street cleaning, the quality of the local doctors' surgery and public parks, as well as access to housing and education, so that their community can be sustained over time. Indeed, when you ask local leaders why they joined the alliance, it is often to become better neighbours with those who share the same part of the city (Wills 2016). As such, organising at the more local, neighbourhood scale, makes the most sense in terms of their interests, as well as making it easier to engage a greater density of member-groups and larger numbers of people.

In the main, people do not identify with the artificial and remote body of the borough council, the larger political unit to which they are affiliated, and their focus is much closer to home. Rather than reporting that they live in the London borough of Tower Hamlets (a geographical jurisdiction that contains many neighbourhoods and an estimated population of 325,000) they would say they live in Bow, Mile End, Poplar, the Isle of Dogs or Wapping. These are the 'natural geographies' of the city; the places that make sense to the people and around which their lives are organised. At present, BBCO does not have the means to organise very effectively at this very local scale. Rather, it looks up to the broader geography determined by the geo-constitution, targeting the institutions and people who rule, even though this tends to erode the purchase of local engagement. In this regard, it is significant that local government bodies used to be focused on smaller geographical areas and associated communities at the parish scale. This is the scale at which the *demos* lives rather than the scale at which *kratos* tends to be organised, but it is also the scale that has been most eroded in our governance structures, as explored in more detail below.

## Attending to the role and influence of the geo-constitution

The institutional matrix through which politics is organised can be characterised as a national 'geo-constitution' that determines the spatial division of political authority and responsibility, as well as the opportunities for people to engage in democratic decision-making (Wills 2019b). Once settled, it can prove very difficult to change a national constitutional settlement but there is often significant—albeit it gradual—change at the sub-national scale (Hooghe and Marks 2016). In Britain, for example, there used to be a much greater role for parish-scale government, partly through necessity as the capacity of the central state was weak, but since the early nineteenth century, there has been a strong process of internal centralisation (Wills 2016, 2020). Local government has been subject to ever-greater central intervention in the pursuit of national standards and outcomes. This desire for standardisation was at its peak during the twentieth century and was most clearly demonstrated in the legislative reforms made by national governments in 1945–1951 (Labour), 1979–1997 (Conservative) and 1997–2010 (New Labour). As might be predicted, over time, the British electorate came to expect national standards of service delivery,



and this was reinforced by the dominance of national political parties in the operation of local government. People have tended to vote locally on the basis of national partisan affiliations (Bulpitt 1983; Bogdanor 2009; Copus 2004; Loughlin 2013) and despite the façade of democracy, local government has been largely reduced to being part of the national administrative state, managed by politicians who reflected the views of their national political parties and paymasters, losing political credibility and local affection as a result (Loughlin, Gelfand, and Young 1985). The imposition of funding controls and cuts have further reinforced this local decline (Barford and Gray 2018) and growing exhaustion amongst those particularly hard-hit by the cuts has made it hard to resist (Emejulu and Bassel 2020).

This history is particularly important for understanding the state of democracy in contemporary cities like London. At least 65% of England's population live in urban areas which lost their parish or neighbourhood political institutions at the time of rapid industrialisation during the nineteenth century and they no longer have access to neighbourhood-level government (NALC 2015; Poole and Keith-Lucas 1994). As national governments became more muscular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they further eroded the local basis of political institutions and decision-making through a process of centralisation. While rural areas retained their parishes, these bodies became much weaker with powers moving up to larger units of government and in many instances, local decisions can be blocked by those taken 'above'. In urban areas, the population become concentrated into ever-larger units of government such as cities and boroughs within cities, where political representation can seem very remote.

Thus the geo-constitution of a city like London has evolved over time, shaping the practice and possibilities of democracy today. The bulk of the city, now incorporating at least 9 million people, is governed via two forms of political institution, operating at different spatial scales. As indicated in [Figure 1](#), there are 32 boroughs, each of which is run by locally-elected councillors and some of which have an elected Mayor (Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets). Boroughs that had been created for the purposes of parliamentary representation in 1832 were later used as the spaces for local government organisation although the current geography was the result of reforms made by the London Government Act in 1963 (Travers 2015).<sup>1</sup> These boroughs range in population size from about 150,000 living in Kensington and Chelsea to 370,000 living in the outer London boroughs of Barnet and Croydon (Trust for London 2017). While each borough deploys a ward structure to elect its councillors, the decisions of the council depend on the balance of power across the borough council seats as a whole. This means that one or other of the two main political parties tends to hold power in the council, controlling the cabinet, and making all the important decisions. Electors may approach their councillor for help with a problem, but getting something done about the local neighbourhood when it is just part of a much larger borough, and particularly if it is not represented by the dominant party, is very difficult to achieve.

London also has a much larger political body that operates across the city-at-large, called the Greater London Authority (GLA), overseen by a directly-elected Mayor. This was created by the national government and the first elections were



**Figure 1:** London's 32 Boroughs and the City of London Corporation. Source: open source map available <https://londonmap360.com/london-boroughs-map>.

held for both GLA councillors and the Mayor in July 2000. Subsequent elections have been every four years. However, this body is also the product of a longer history, going back to the formation of the London County Council (LCC) in 1889. The LCC had limited jurisdiction for some services including schools and asylums in inner London until 1965. The Local Government Act (1963) then widened the geographical area to what became known as Greater London, creating a new Greater London Council (GLC) to work with the 32 borough councils, until it too was abolished in 1986 (Travers 2003). There was then a 14 year gap before the GLA was created, this time with a directly-elected Mayor in charge, in part reflecting new interest in the prominent role and apparent success of Mayoral leadership in American cities (Barber 2013; Glaeser 2012).

This complex history of institution-building and political reform in London highlights the importance of the geo-constitutional legacy for democracy in the city today. Residents pay taxes to support two layers of local government that make a variety of important decisions about the development of the city, the provision of services and the quality of the public realm.<sup>2</sup> Periodically, citizens are invited to vote to elect or reject the representatives who lead these bodies on their behalf and as might be expected, this institutional architecture plays a critical role in organising strategies for those seeking to have their voice heard, their interests represented and changes made. There have been many efforts to secure representation from excluded groups, backed by urban social movements.

The early Labour Party, for example, built a strong base in London by winning seats and shaping policy on the LCC and this legacy continued through the history of the GLC and to a lesser extent, the GLA (Webb and Webb 1920; Wills and Simms 2004). More recently, the minority ethnic community and women's movement have similarly organised within the Labour Party to increase their representation and voice (Fielding and Geddes 1998).

## The case for geo-constitutional reform in London today

For some time there has been interest in creating new neighbourhood scale institutions that can better represent the people living in cities (Jones 2007; Wills 2019a). A change in the national law in 2007 made it possible to create new urban parish councils in London (catching up with legislation that had been passed earlier covering the rest of the country) and since then, one new community council has been formed in Queen's Park, West London.<sup>3</sup> These community councils are a modern version of the older parish councils that still exist in rural areas of the country. Such parish councils have limited funds and powers but they look after important local assets such as community centres, recreation grounds, footpaths and in some cases, are taking over the assets transferred by larger councils as a result of the cuts (Wills 2020). However, there is scope for modernising and widening their brief to incorporate unofficial representation from the key institutions and organisations in the geographical area, including local businesses, faith groups, schools and community centres. As such, they could better reflect the spirit of BBCO, providing the infrastructure to convene the key stakeholders and political leaders in a geographical area, to act on local concerns. This type of relational governance would allow organisations to work together over shared concerns, by convening and mobilising people to extend the impact of political power, thereby changing the terms of the *kratos* as well as better representing the *demos* (Fox and Macleod 2023; McFadyen 2014; Sandford 2020).

To date, it has proved very challenging for people to use the new law to create such community councils. In Queen's Park, a group of residents who had prior experience of working at the neighbourhood scale, inaugurated a new community council in 2014. Following the legal procedures took more than 3 years including a governance review from the local borough council (Westminster), a subsequent referendum and then electing and establishing the community council (Wills 2016). This new body can raise income (via a precept on the council tax that is paid to Westminster Borough Council) to administer their activity and work for the benefit of the local population. However, it took a great deal of organisation to do this, and in most areas, the population are unlikely to have the prior connections, ambitions and resources to make it happen.<sup>4</sup>

The potential role for urban community councils has been considered for a long time. It surfaced during the Royal Commission on Local Government in the late 1960s, when researchers found some public support for the idea (Redcliffe-Maud 1969). Indeed, at that time, Michael Young and colleagues set up The Association for Neighbourhood Councils to 'press for the establishment

of neighbourhood or urban parish councils as part of the reformed local government' (Baker and Young 1971, no page). Challenging the way in which parliament was advocating ever larger units for political administration that were increasingly remote from the people, the Association wanted to create new councils as 'champions of general community interests on a geographical basis' (Baker and Young 1971, 1). When they asked people: 'Do you think it would be a good idea or a bad ideas to have a number of local neighbourhood councils under your current local councils to help with such things as local schools, housing etc?' the Association found that just over half (53%) gave positive answers, with the strongest endorsement from London (Baker and Young 1971, 5).

Support for such urban neighbourhood councils featured in the parliamentary debate that followed the publication of the Commission's report, in February 1970 (Rose 1971), but it was not followed up at that time. Indeed, during the 1970s the political focus turned to organising people outside parliament rather than trying to set up new formal structures. In 1971, for example, a group of community activists formed their own neighbourhood council in the ward of Golborne, in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, acting without any legal jurisdiction to do so. After local riots, up to 120 local people including local clergy and community workers secured funding from the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust to appoint a neighbourhood worker who organised the constitution and a local election. In April 1971, 1,415 local people (28% of the local electorate) voted for the 38 candidates who were contesting 26 places representing 7 different parts of the ward. As a participant reported at the time, the council was

operating under the principle that a People's Council must initiate a People's Plan: it will call upon all the relevant professionals, authorities and developers to help the people of the area formulate and finance a community plan, a development corporation and a housing association. (Blair 1971)

Echoing some of the ideas developed by the IAF in the USA, it was argued that communities needed to organise themselves, around their own agendas for change.

During the 1970s, new left activists started to focus on organising in increasingly diverse urban communities around perceived local interests. As Baine (1975) points out, these groups incorporated middle class residents organising over their own interests (in relation to the preservation and renovation of existing buildings for example), those campaigning for others (in relation to homelessness, housing or poverty for example), broader coalitions focused on particular services (the Barnsbury Action Group or the Holloway Housing Aid Centre) and housing tenants and residents (self-organising over their own housing concerns or demanding better racial representation). As in Golborne, local activists were able to secure charitable funding to support this community work and they established new social infrastructure such as playgrounds, Legal and Housing Aid Centres. The work was both practical and political and it started to shape the culture of the Labour Party and the development of local government in the areas affected, many of them, in London (Gyford 1985; Cochrane 1993). A new generation of political activists came to

see extra-parliamentary community campaigns *and* local government as arenas for struggles around race, gender, class and community (Newman 2012).

As outlined in relation to the more recent work of *London Citizens*, such organising initiatives tend to be more successful in developing local voice and political leadership than in democratising the state or changing the geo-constitution. Indeed, their very success often depends upon having a critical distance from the arms of the state and in instances when the state initiated or funded any such activities, this has tended to reduce their community strength (Yates 1973, 24). However, fuelled by a turn towards localism and devolution in the national polity, as well as the threat of populism and associated demand for political voice from below, there have been renewed calls to look at the geography of political structures (Chou, Moffitt, and Busbridge 2021). The formation of new urban community councils would be a geo-constitutional reform to help reconnect with the people, and provide a space for organising that would complement the approach taken by *London Citizens* over the past twenty five years. Indeed, *London Citizens'* work has demonstrated the scope for building positive relations between the diverse people and organisations that live together at a neighbourhood scale, finding shared interests and making democracy work. This is the kind of activity that could be done and supported via new community councils, as has been done in rural parishes for 'time out of mind' and is being done in Queen's Park today. Furthermore, in connecting the *demos* with the *kratos*, the new councils would have limited powers to deliver local change as well as being able to convene and mobilise people to further demand local change.

## Concluding remarks

This article opened with the example of *London Citizens* to highlight the power of broad-based community organising (BBCO) to engage the *demos* in political life. By building a coalition of groups around shared interests such the living wage and affordable housing, it has been possible to democratise the city in limited ways, thereby changing the *kratos*. However, this model of politics is limited by the strength of the civil society organisations which belong to the coalition, the need to raise money to pay for organisers, and the challenges of movement and scale. In London, there is a lot of interest in organising at the neighbourhood scale but the political institutions operate at a much broader scale (borough, city and nation) and we need new institutions to sustain action at the scale at which people live.

I have used the case of *London Citizens* to highlight the geographical or scalar gap between the *demos* and *kratos*. London's geo-constitutional inheritance has no provision for neighbourhood level political representation and even though there are now mechanisms to establish community councils, only one has been set up (in Queen's Park) in more than 10 years. The onerous procedures involved make it difficult for others to follow. The work of organisations like *London Citizens* or the grassroots community organisations that were active in the 1970s, exposes the absence of vital political infrastructure at the neighbourhood scale. Establishing community councils could be made easier, with additional

powers, making it more attractive for people and politicians to do it. This would provide people with an independent vehicle to raise local interests and issues, to engage in place-based policy making and practice, bridging at least some of the gap between the *demos* and *kratos* in London today.

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Amanda Tattersall and Kurt Iveson for including me in the international team that were challenged to unpick questions of democracy in the city. Their provocation has slowly borne fruit and I much appreciate their support in bringing this paper to print. The team at City have also been a joy to work with; many thanks to you all. This paper was sent for publication on the same day that Neil Jameson, the founding leader of Citizens UK, passed away (24 April 2023). His legacy lives on in the work being done to foster active democracy in London and beyond. His was a public life well-lived.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The author had financial support for the work of which this was part via a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust.

## Notes

1 It is important to note that the City of London Corporation is an exception to this system. The small area around the financial centre of London has been protected by an ancient charter that predates the Magna Carta, first signed in 1215. The freedoms and traditions of the Corporation have been successfully maintained, resisting efforts to amalgamate it with the wider political structures that were created as London grew (Allen, Massey, and Pile 2005). Unlike other local authorities in London, it has a very small residential population (less than 10,000 at the last census) but it has very significant income. It has its own particular constitution, operates through its own ward-based system of representation including a business franchise, and it runs a police force and port authority. Over time, the individuals leading the Corporation have been able to defend its role and traditions, leaving it as a separate body within a much larger urban area, where the vast majority of citizens live.

- 2 Residents in the one area of London with a community council—Queen's Park—pay for three levels of political representation and administration. This case is explored in the penultimate part of the article.
- 3 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) included a process for allowing the creation of new community councils in London.
- 4 Having said this, it is important to recognise the scale of activity around neighbourhood planning in London and the associated attention now being paid to this spatial scale (Wills 2019a). Given the right to develop a neighbourhood plan, urban communities have had to constitute new bodies ('forums') to create the plan, drawing their own boundaries—in consultation with neighbours—around the 'natural' areas that make sense for planning. In London these areas could be seen as the potential areas for more formal community councils to be established in future: <https://www.neighbourhoodplanners.london/map>

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