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Studying Cherrypicking:
Substantive and Methodological
Reflections

Joan Font
&
Graham Smith

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Abstract

The [Cherrypicking project](#) developed an innovative methodological strategy to assess the consequences of participatory processes. This led to a number of publications on the determinants of the fate of citizens' proposals, amongst other considerations. The completion of the project marks an opportunity to reflect critically on our methodological choices and the substantive findings from the research. This paper considers what we learned from the project and how this relates to on-going debates about methodological strategies to analyze the consequences of participatory processes. To what extent do the methodological choices adopted condition the results reached? What are the theoretical and practical implications of our findings? Is the evidence we uncovered generalizable to different social and political contexts?

Keywords

participation, deliberation, implementation, local politics

Authors

Joan Font is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Advanced Social Studies (IESA-CSIC). Most of his research deals with the different methods to incorporate citizen voices in democratic life (from surveys or elections to referenda or citizen juries) and their consequences. E-mail: jfont@iesa.csic.es

Graham Smith is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. He is a specialist in democratic theory and practice with a particular interest in participatory democratic institutions. E-mail: g.smith@westminster.ac.uk

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Introduction¹

The project ‘The Results of Participatory Processes: Public Policies and Government-Society Relationships’ ran from 2013 to 2016. Better known by its shorthand title ‘Cherry-picking’, the project aimed to understand a broad range of consequences of participatory democratic institutions. Drawing on two existing Spanish datasets constructed through web content mining and online surveys, the project aimed to move away from the ‘anecdotal’ evidence and ‘single case studies’ that proliferate across the study of democratic innovations. Instead the ambition was to engage in comparative analysis of the impacts and outcomes of more mundane participatory processes – hence the project tended not to use the normatively-loaded, but popular term ‘democratic innovations’.²

In progressing the project and, latterly, reflecting on its ambitions and shortcomings, we are able to generate insights on the conceptualisation and measurement of consequences of participatory processes and on our understanding of why some participatory democratic institutions are more consequential than others.

This paper outlines the different streams of the Cherry-picking project before moving on to consider both methodological and substantive lessons. This second section focuses primarily on the work on the fate of proposals, which was only one aspect of the broader project. This was the element of the project on which the two authors of this paper focused most of their attention: familiarity allows for more intimate and (hopefully) honest reflection. The paper ends with unanswered questions generated by the project and brief thoughts on future research agendas.

Why cherry-picking?

The starting point of the Cherry-picking project was the perception that a clear gap exists in the study of participatory democratic institutions between extensive research on the internal qualities and practices of these processes and much more limited analysis of their broader policy impact and social outcomes. This is especially relevant given the normative foundation of most participatory processes: while participation can be seen as a desirable goal in and for itself, theorists, practitioners, policy makers, media actors and the like make the case for

¹ The first version of this paper was presented at the International Workshop “The Consequences of Democratic Innovations”, Louvain-La-Neuve (Belgium), 9-10 September 2019. We thank participants for their insights that have hopefully contributed to improving the paper’s quality.

² See Smith (2019) for a personal reflection on the conceptual weaknesses of the concept ‘democratic innovations’.

increasing opportunities for citizen participation on the basis that it will have some effect politically – whether on particular policies or more broadly. However, empirical evidence regarding the results of participatory processes is scarce, and not always positive. Muddying the water, much of the existing evidence is based on case studies, selected precisely because they represent exemplary participatory processes (Font et al, 2014) – or the reverse, as examples of the problems associated with participatory practices. The biased sample on which much of the evidence is based prevents clear generalizations of what happens across more common, mundane participatory processes (Spada and Ryan 2017).

The trajectories of our earlier work provided impetus for the project. On the one hand, Smith (2001; 2009) had articulated the hypothesis that public authorities may well be cherry-picking proposals from participatory processes. On the other, Font and his colleagues had developed the MECPALO project, which was an early exploitation of a large N study of diverse cases (Font et al, 2014; Galais et al, 2012). This project had already examined some results of participatory processes, mostly focused on individual effects on participants (Funes et al, 2014).³

As a result, in 2012 we submitted the application for the Cherry-picking project for funding under the National Research Plan of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The application aimed to cover major potential effects of participatory democratic institutions, except for those that had already covered in the MECPALO project. These effects can be captured in two main areas. First, we focused on potential effects on public policies, aiming to understand which proposals were implemented effectively and which were abandoned. Second, we aimed to analyze impacts beyond policy: especially the pattern of relationships between public administration and civil society, within civil society and the social capital of communities. Across both areas we were aiming to investigate the nature of the conditions that must be met to realize change.

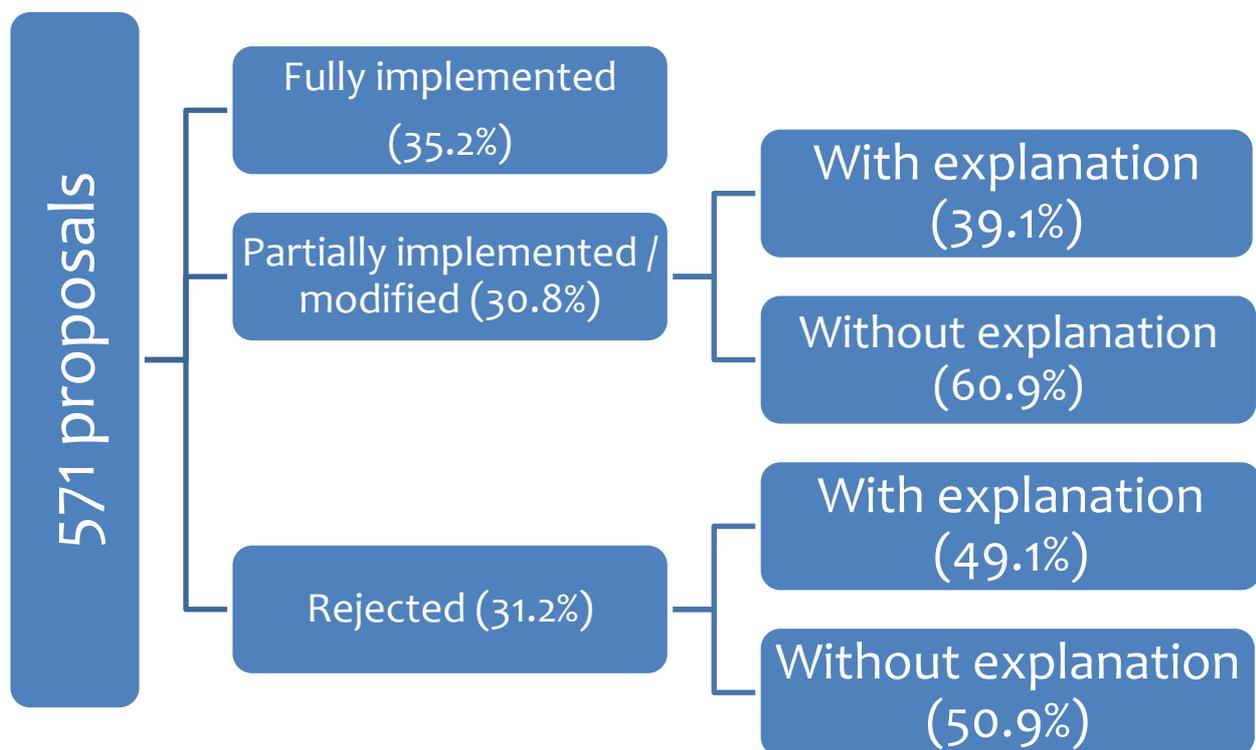
Since both the research questions and the adopted methodological strategies were quite different, the different elements of the research team worked fairly independently, while using common resources, sharing information, meeting regularly and providing feedback. Most of the analysis from the two streams of work appeared in different publications.

³ The Mecpalo project provided not only a complementary approach on effects, but also a large dataset of highly diverse participatory processes that could be used as a sampling frame.

Do local administrations cherry-pick policy proposals?

Yes, they do. Behind this simple answer lies a more nuanced picture. Our study of the impact of participatory processes on political decision making focused on the fate of over 600 proposals from 39 participatory processes at the municipal level in Spain. The 39 processes were randomly selected from a sampling frame constructed along three dimensions: region/municipality size; extent of experience in participatory practices; and process design. We used proposals generated by the participatory process as the final units of analysis, including all of them if there were less than 20. Where more than 20 proposals were generated, proposals were randomly selected using stratified sampling. For more on this methodology, see Font et al (2016). Back to the more nuanced picture. First, cherry-picking, by definition, only occurred in those participatory processes that generated more than one proposal.⁴ This is the situation for 37 processes, which generated between 2 to 130 proposals.

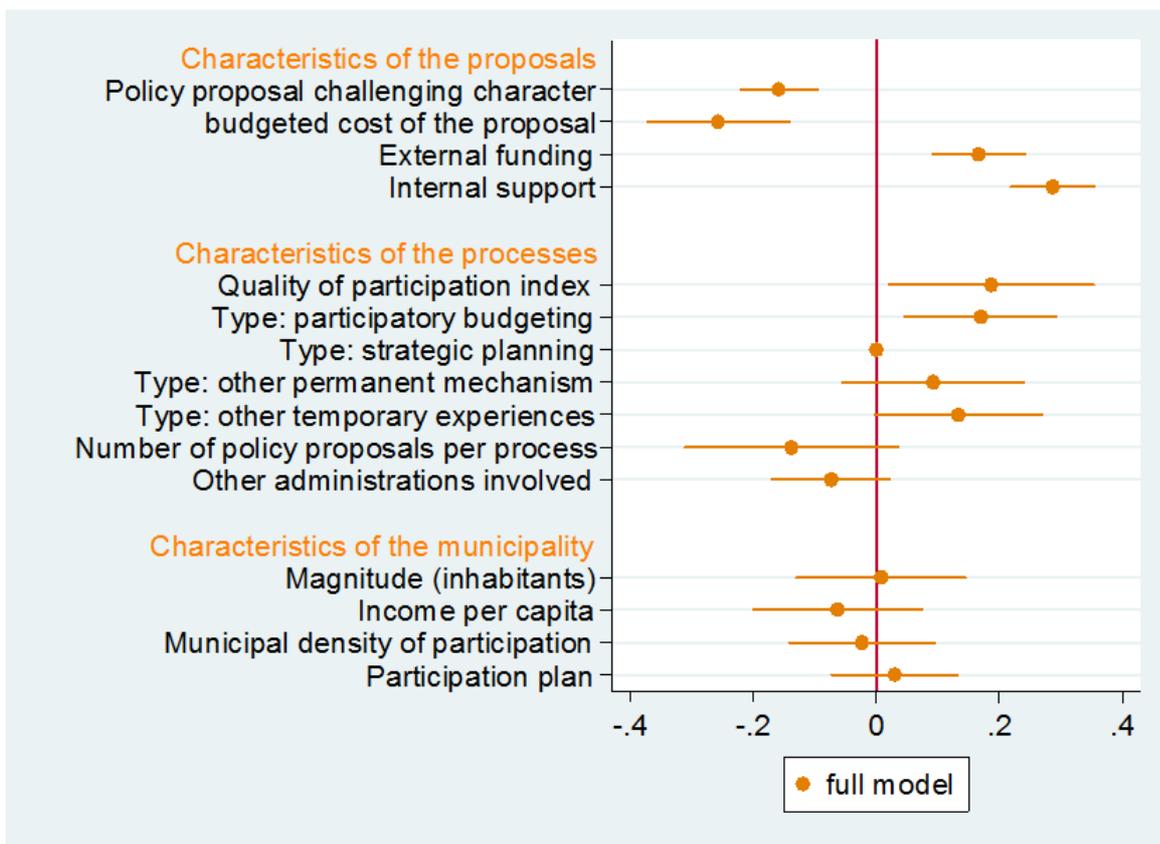
Figure 1: Degree of implementation and accountability of the policy proposals



⁴ Two participatory processes generated only one proposal. In these cases, the proposal was fully implemented. Full implementation is also the situation in one process including four proposals and in one where we analyzed 20 proposals. The remaining 35 had some degree of variation in their outcomes.

Second, proposals were implemented to different degrees. Taking the overall set of proposals, approximately one third were implemented following the content of the proposal, around another third introduced substantial changes in the implementation process, with the final third having no impact (see Figure 1). These general figures hide significant diversity across the 39 participatory processes. Nonetheless, different fates of proposals from the same participatory process occurred in all but two of the processes that generated more than one proposal. We found no cases of zero implementation and only a few of full implementation, with most processes in different intermediate situations.

Figure 2: Explanatory variables of the different degrees of implementation



Source: Font et al (2018).

Third, the idea of cherry-picking implies that the choice of proposals is not simply random. Rather, the choice follows a certain logic (Font et al 2018). The project has clearly exposed some of the patterns governing this choice. First, process variables matter: controlling for everything else, participatory budgeting leads to more effective implementation, as do those processes that have been more carefully designed and organized. Some aspects of institutional

design are significant, not just in terms of democratic qualities (Smith 2009), but also because they tend to produce more consequential results. However, if almost all cases have a mixture of fully implemented, modified and non-implemented proposals, it becomes quite obvious that the most important aspect of the explanation must lie at the proposal level. Proposals that are less costly (or that have external funding), imply less policy change and are supported by both local bureaucrats and politicians, have significantly larger chances of being implemented (see Figure 2).

Finally, we found no proof of the famous adage that context matters. All context related variables we tried (including regional context and differential participatory experience, local GDP and political ideology of the governing party) did not have a statistically significant effect. We reflect on the meaning of these findings as the paper progresses.

Changes in civil society and its relationship to local administration

The second area studied by the project team where results of participatory processes might be found also offered a mix of challenging and promising findings. First, the analysis of the broader trends made clear that only a small minority of the cases could be expected to produce changes within civil society or its relationship to public administrations. Most participatory processes are too fleeting; too short or superficial to expect lasting effects (Bherer et al, 2016). Thus, the 6 case studies selected concentrated on the small set of comparable experiences which had more chance of producing these effects, trying to understand when, why and how these develop.

This more focused case study research identified a set of changes that occurred, at least partially and at least in some of the cases: new political actors being incorporated into policy networks, changes in the flows of information between both actors (administrative and civil society) and the emergence of new patterns of cooperation. However, the capacity of these developments to empower social groups and reduce clientelistic patterns was limited and the most positive changes only developed in some of the participatory budgeting experiences being analyzed: “Our cases display a story of limited micro political change. In most cases [participatory processes] had to surmount critical resistances and inertias. They had to face, on the one hand, the instrumentalization tendencies of political promoters and, on the other, the distrust of well-established political groups and opposition parties” (Bherer et al, 2016: 358).

When new questions emerge

In the process of data collection and analysis across these two areas of study, new research questions and hypotheses emerged. Two were particularly important regarding the effect on implementation. First, in the meetings to discuss how the fieldwork was developing an unexpected issue started to emerge: most participatory processes had to cope, one way or another, with incorporating expert criteria. But how this was achieved was diverse and, to our knowledge, has not received systematic attention in the democratic innovations literature. Describing and understanding this diversity and, if possible, examining whether it had other consequences for the implementation of proposals emerged as a new intriguing puzzle rather late in the day (Rico et al, 2015). It arguably requires a different research strategy to uncover systematically the varied effects of different approaches to the incorporation of expertise.

Second, while our attention was focused on one aspect of political reality, Spain was experiencing its hardest economic and political shock since the return of democracy. A significant set of socio-political consequences of what became known as the Great Recession was developing across Southern Europe (Morlino and Quaranta, 2016) and beyond. Research was pointing to far-reaching consequences in most areas of policy and public administration, to existing political actors and to the most basic political attitudes. We were inevitably asked at presentations – and asked ourselves – whether the world of local participatory processes had been affected too. And if so, how? While it was not part of our original research design, we were fortuitous that the sudden arrival of the crisis was in the middle of the period covered by our data collection, so that about half of our participatory processes were developed prior to the economic crisis, providing a quasi-experimental scenario worthy of investigation. Our results show that the shadow of the crisis had also reached local participation, with an effect on both citizens and administrators. Citizens appeared to adapt their demands, making cheaper, but more challenging proposals, with local administrations implementing a smaller proportion of them (Alarcón et al, 2018). Relative to other areas of policy and practice, the changes we uncovered are relatively small, probably reflecting the relatively marginal character of these processes, where room for major budget cuts did not exist.

If these two were research questions that had not been anticipated, a third unexpected hypothesis emerged. Research about the cultural impacts of participatory processes tends to mostly focus on ‘positive’ changes. However, a theme that appeared consistently in the analysis of the case studies was ‘participatory frustration’, a negative cultural legacy of the experience among most participants. Its appearance is mostly related to four factors: too many

expectations, design failures, poor implementation, and strong process discontinuities (Fernández-Martínez et al, 2019).

What did we learn: reflections on our findings and their implications

While we have presented some of the broad headline findings from across the project, our reflections in this section focus primarily on the lessons from studying the fate of proposals from participatory processes.

Methodological considerations

The choice of a large N strategy and its implications

Adopting a large N approach and a population that includes the most diverse possible set of cases was a central strategic choice of the project. Both the interesting results obtained and their acceptance by the research and practitioner community has reaffirmed our conviction that this was an appropriate strategy. Even if we cannot claim that this is a fully representative picture of the overall Spanish universe of local participation, it is the first empirical picture that offers an approximation of the degree of implementation of proposals beyond the reality of a few case studies. The incorporation of diversity in the sample has been crucial to identifying explanatory factors.

However, as with all methodological choices, our strategy has shortcomings and implications for interpretation. Our first important decision was to specify the degree of diversity of our sample. Many of the comments offered during the development of the project and the fieldwork warned against too diverse a population, suggesting that it would be too difficult to compare across too many variations in participatory practice. The degree of diversity within the population of Spanish cases took on many dimensions, for example: processes that generated just one through to a few hundred proposals; processes that developed in large and quite small municipalities; processes that were one-shot or permanent institutions that had been going on for years. Comparing so many different participatory realities was a challenge (from the point of view of data collection, analysis and interpretation), but any attempt to make the population more homogeneous would have been at the clear cost of external validity and the capacity to generalize the findings. Reducing the diversity of municipalities or types of process would have undermined the analysis of how different factors affect the chances of a given proposal being implemented.

Our concern with ensuring diversity within our sample was shared by two coterminous research endeavors also focused on understanding the effects of participatory processes using large N strategies. Both the EDGE and Participedia projects adopted strategies to draw on the extensive academic and ‘grey’ (policy and practice related) literature as the population from which to collect data. The EDGE project, led by Jens Newig, aims to understand the impact and outcomes of participatory processes within environmental governance (Newig et al 2018). The research team coded several hundred articles, chapters and reports from across Europe and North America. The impressive size of the dataset means that the EDGE project can begin to test various causal mechanisms that may explain impact and outcomes.

The Participedia project takes an unconventional crowdsourcing approach to collect data on cases of participatory democratic institutions across the world. As a crowdsourcing project – where the crowd is predominantly researchers, but also public officials and participation practitioners – its cases include those developed both from already published materials and first-hand experience. The open wiki nature of the platform increases the potential to collect data across design types, geography and issues, although at present it is dominated by data from the Global North, reflecting the location of the more active research groups within the project. The crowdsourcing logic generates novel challenges of reliability and quality, but has already been mined to analyze the relationship between input, process and output variables (Gastil et al 2017). Together, the Cherry-picking, EDGE and Participedia projects represent a decent first step in the attempt to build a more extensive understanding of the diverse reality of the impacts of participatory politics.

All three have methodological limitations, not least the different types of bias generated by their sampling strategies. But much will be learned not only through their individual endeavors, but through careful comparison across their methodological choices and substantive findings. For example, it is intriguing that, in spite of their different approaches, the EDGE and Cherry-picking projects both find about a third of proposals are completely neglected by public authorities. Or that deliberative characteristics of the participatory processes (knowledge in EDGE, quality in Cherry-picking) increases influence. A more systematic cross-project analysis would be a welcome development for our understanding of the different aspects of implementation.

A further challenging methodological decision was the operationalization of our dependent variable. Only through the data collection process did we come to fully appreciate the messy character of implementation. As the fieldwork progressed, we realized that to more

fully capture the complexity of implementation we needed at least two different variables. First, one capturing the highest level of implementation that a proposal attained: a six-value categorical variable ranging from rejected/ignored to full implementation. This needed to be complemented with a second variable that captured the state of implementation at the time of the fieldwork. This was necessary to accommodate situations that do not fit with the deterministic view of policy implementation as a linear and progressive process.⁵ For example, our sample included proposals that required continuous implementation, but where implementation had actually only occurred for a limited period of time.

The combination of both variables meant we had 42 potential outcomes, with 18 actually existing. We describe and discuss this pattern in Font et al (2016) and a richer analysis of the 18 categories is possible and probably desirable. But to proceed with the quantitative explanatory analysis we needed to reduce the complexity of the 18 categories. In the end we settled for full implementation, partial implementation and no implementation (Font et al, 2018). This is a choice that has been criticized: “Font et al.’s research does violence to concepts— such as implementation—in ways that are ironically unnatural and constraining” (Richardson et al, 2019: 267). We believe that such decisions are necessary and defensible for robust large N analysis. What we lose in nuance, we gain from the capacity to analyze systematically a range of contextual, process and proposal level variables that cannot be captured by the more qualitative interpretative and case-study based approach favored by our critics. No doubt, future exploitation of the results using a more case-by-case systematic comparison of similar participatory processes of the dataset, would be desirable.

These debates over the merits of different types of research strategy relate to a broader tension we faced within the project in combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis strategies. Our shared disposition is that such a combination is attractive and often desirable. However, our experience is that even if the resources to collect both types of data are available, the combination implies practical difficulties. The overall project involved data collection efforts of both types. Nonetheless, most of our research about policy effects was published based almost exclusively on quantitative data, with the work on civil society and local administration practices published using only qualitative evidence.

⁵ Penco and Sozzi (2013) also distinguish in their two case studies between formal acceptance of a proposal and final implementation.

One of the challenges we faced was that the specific research questions for each part of the project implied different sampling strategies. This meant, unfortunately, that only one case across the two areas of work was shared, reducing the opportunity for combined analysis. Also, practical problems are generated by such mixed methods, not least how to provide a convincing methodological explanation of both approaches within a single article! For the proposal work, we had to produce a full methodological article in the *Journal of Public Deliberation* (Font et al 2016) to free up space to discuss hypotheses, analysis and findings in other pieces. In practice, qualitative evidence collected in fieldwork journals was important in persuading reluctant reviewers as to the veracity of our methods, but this is far from the mixed methods panacea. While the desire to engage in mixed methods research was high across the research team, a more pragmatic approach emerged as the project progressed.

A biased sample in spite of all efforts?

Building a robust and diverse sample that included all types of participatory process was one of the project's clear priorities. A highly diverse set of cases, a stratified random sampling strategy and a strict protocol for abandoning cases were some of the procedures put in place. Even when the temptations for case substitution were high, with fieldworkers faced with reluctant attitudes from crucial contacts in a few of the municipalities, the low rate of substitution is a very positive signal for the robustness of the data collection process. Only 9 cases had to be substituted due to complete lack of cooperation from the local institutions, allowing us to realize an 81 percent cooperation rate.

Is it possible that in spite of all these efforts, we still generated a biased sample that gave an overly optimistic picture of the reality of local participation. As Spada and Ryan (2016) have suggested, learning from failures should be central to the analytical strategies in this field. However, gaining information about many failed cases is almost infeasible. The lack of visibility of these processes is sometimes a characteristic of their overall lack of professional management and sometimes a deliberate decision to hide a process that would be embarrassing, either because of overt manipulation or explicit process failure. Such extremely poorly designed and organized processes are simply not documented and, as a result, not present in our extensive datasets. No easy (or even difficult!) way exists for us to know whether such cases represent 5 per cent or 30 per cent (or some other figure) of the overall reality. That said, when compared to the data collection strategies of the EDGE and Participedia

projects, it is almost certainly the case that the Cherry-picking dataset contains a larger proportion of less successful and partially failed cases.

Finally, the central role of local authority personnel as informants may have also biased the results in a positive direction. Even if diverse information sources were used in all cases, and case and proposal exclusion was applied to the most disputable situations only, the need to rely on local authority informants to collect information about the process was difficult to avoid. This centrality of informants belonging to public administration may have affected the veracity of the data to some extent, potentially emphasizing the administration's version of events.

In sum then, the degree of implementation in a hypothetical full population of cases is likely to be slightly lower and the degree of cherry-picking slightly higher than for the data collected.

Are contextual variables really meaningless?

One of the results that surprised us was the lack of effects of contextual variables. Context has very often been a decisive variable to explain participatory outcomes (e.g. Baiocchi 2005). To this end we collected data on a number of context characteristics where good reasons exist to expect significant effects on implementation. These included variables that capture the economic capacity of the municipality and its population size, the quite different participatory traditions of the three regions from which we collected data and the political composition and ideology of the local government. However, none of these factors reached statistical significance and their overall contribution to the explanatory power of the explanatory models was almost null. The lack of effect of political ideology was particularly difficult to accept. After all, the political ideology of governing parties has been a common explanatory factor of the emergence and sustenance of participatory processes across the study of democratic innovations.

The answer could be simple: contextual factors matter for the successful development of participatory processes, but not to explain the fate of proposals. The framing of the research question may be critical. Our research does not address whether ideology explains (or not) the existence of participatory practices, but only whether proposals have been implemented. Thus, ideology (and other contextual factors) could well be crucial in the development of

participatory processes, for example in making them more ambitious in their goals or procedures,⁶ but it is a completely different question as to whether this affects the degree of implementation of proposals that emerge from these processes. The result could be different in a context with a different legal setting, not least in countries with a national mandate to develop local participation. Here, a reluctant conservative party may well develop participatory processes to fulfill the legal mandate, but with no intention of responding to the results. However, where this mandate does not exist – as is the case in Spain – why would a conservative party that voluntarily developed a participatory process be more reluctant to respond to proposals than a party of a different ideological hue?

A second explanation rests on whether a sample including larger contextual diversity might realize different results. The potential problem here is not that our sample lacks diversity. For example, population size ranged from 4,229 to 3,000,000, income per capita from 499 to 1,655 Euros and participatory experience from none to extensive. Rather, we may have needed more cases (beyond the 39 selected) so that results could become clearer and significant – if any relationship actually exists. At present, we can only claim that we could not prove that ideology matters: we do not have any strong empirical evidence that it does not. The chance that a more diverse sample in terms of municipalities and governing arrangements could have generated a different result clearly exists. Focusing on one of the independent political variables, the largest party when the participatory process was developed, (a bit more than) half of our 25 municipalities had a social-democratic party, with only 6 conservative and another 6 post-communist. If we then also consider the major governing party during the period of implementation, the situation becomes more complicated, with only 7 social-democratic parties (and 5 conservative ones) continuing and a large number of changes across the other cases.⁷ In sum, the only possible answer we can provide from the existing data is that no differences exist and this result makes sense. But it would be highly desirable to further examine this question in different political settings, both including a larger and more diverse population of Spanish cases – and moving beyond the Spanish context.

Regardless of these musings on our null findings for this set of variables, our research points in the promising direction that factors closer to the proposal are overtly more relevant

⁶ For example, Font et al (2014) show that ideology has a clear effect in Italy and Andalusia, but not in other Spanish regions.

⁷ The situation becomes even more diverse if we incorporate whether the main party had a majority or if a coalition had been formed.

than those related to the local context, a result that is likely to hold even in a dataset with much larger diversity of local contexts.

Substantive considerations

Is the (participatory) bottle half full or half empty?

We have had endless discussions within the research team and with audiences more broadly as to whether one-third of proposals being fully implemented is a really depressing result that means we should abandon any hope for participatory democracy; or whether two-thirds of proposals at least partially implemented is more than any realistic person could have expected. Partly where one sits on this question will be affected by personal normative and empirical expectations of existing participatory governance and practices.

What our results offer is a clearer departure point for future research: a figure against which participatory processes in other contexts can be compared. The idea of incorporating a variety of participatory processes allows us to set different expectations against each other. Our research shows that participatory budgeting does a better job in implementing proposals. This is a result that should not surprise anyone given the expectations created by the organizers of participatory budgeting processes. But dig a little deeper and the 60 per cent implementation rate of proposals in participatory budgeting may be a worse result (compared to an expectation of near 100 per cent implementation) than a 40 per cent implementation rate for other permanent institutions like advisory councils, where the implicit expectation is that only a small number of ideas will be incorporated into policies.

We need to keep in mind as mentioned above, the possibility that this result is optimistically measuring implementation because of some degree of sampling bias. Further, the relatively limited ambition of many of the proposals means that implementation rates may be even lower in more ambitious settings. Local administrations can afford to be more participatory, listen and be more responsive when they face demands that require few resources and are politically unchallenging. Would they still be similarly open minded with more complicated, disruptive and expensive social demands? In other words, would these results hold for a different set of 'harder' decisions on more controversial issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980)? To a certain extent, we have an answer to this question, since our model already predicts that a population with a larger proportion of challenging proposals would result in more limited compliance by authorities.

Implementation was our central dependent variable, but a second related issue that we have not yet developed in as much depth is the question of accountability. More or less acceptable reasons could be offered as to why some proposals could or should not be developed, from budgetary constraints to technical feasibility, from conflicts with fundamental human rights or with a political program that had been voted for by a majority of the population. Thus, local governments could reasonably refuse to incorporate some of the proposals or introduce modifications. But accountability demands public explanations. How often were such explanations offered? For more than 60 percent of the proposals that had been abandoned, no public explanation was proffered (see Figure 1, above). Amongst those that were partially implemented, if we exclude those in the process of being implemented and those without rigorous information, a lack of public explanation was twice as common an outcome (Fernández-Martínez, 2018). In sum, accountability is even less present than implementation.

We have some limited information on why accountability is so lacking. Answers provided by local bureaucrats pointed to the lack of interest and political will (24 per cent of the cases), lack of resources (20 per cent) and the desire to avoid public acknowledgement of failure (13 per cent). Other technical (lack of clarity about who is responsible or lack of follow-up mechanisms, 7 per cent each) and political reasons (change of local government, 3 per cent), also make an appearance (Fernandez-Martínez, 2018).

Preliminary analyses suggest potential explanations for the conditions under which accountability emerges. At the municipality level, coalition governments tend to explain their decisions more than single-party governments⁸. At the process level, accountability is more likely to occur in participatory budgeting and in older and more established processes. Finally, at the proposal level, proposals that are not fully implemented, but which have broader societal support are more likely to generate some kind of public explanation. Here a difference between implementation and accountability practices emerges, with broader societal support having no discernible impact on the former. This suggests the need for further reflection and empirical research on how, when and why such societal support becomes a relevant factor.

⁸ Two different political actors being involved in the organization of the participatory process is also suggested in Font and Galais (2011) as a favorable condition to facilitate quality engagement.

Theoretical reflections

The field of democratic innovations is home to scholars who work across empirical and normative theoretical boundaries that are often separated in other fields of study. Our work on the fate of proposals is primarily empirical, but as we suggest in the last section, it speaks to the normative commitments of both participatory and deliberative democrats.

For participatory democrats, driven by a commitment to citizen empowerment, the findings make fairly grim reading since it is those proposals that make less demands on local government – whether that be in terms of cost or alignment with existing policy – that are implemented at a more extensive rate. The interests of the administration trump those of citizens.

Neither do the results offer succor for deliberative democrats. True, the ‘quality’ of participatory processes, which includes characteristics such as facilitation and the provision of information, has some explanatory impact on implementation rates of proposals. But from a deliberative systems perspective, the emerging findings about accountability jar. Transmission between empowered and public spaces is a critical element of systems thinking – and the evidence is that this is not functioning well.

But none of these findings should really surprise us. Both participatory and deliberative democratic thought rests on the necessity of structural change to fully embed these modes of democratic practice. That is why exemplary cases are exemplary – those instances where participatory processes realize participatory and deliberative ends are rare because we are a long way removed from well-functioning participatory societies or deliberative systems. If nothing else, our research is a timely reminder that simply bolting on participatory processes without cultural, social and political change is far from achieving participatory or deliberative democracy. One reading of the evidence is that what we are seeing is in fact a step away from such normative visions and another form of co-optation of citizens into dominant patterns of social and political governance.

Concluding thoughts: open questions and future agendas

In this final section we briefly open up a few issues that are explicitly related to our research questions, but where our results were not sufficiently conclusive or where our research strategy could not address them adequately.

Our focus on effects on policy making, and to a lesser extent on civil society and governing practices, leaves a number of areas untouched. Two areas stand out. First, our focus

on implementation fails to account for the agenda-setting role that participatory processes might play. Following the extent to which proposals were implemented was a tortuous process (ask the poor postgraduate students who had to interview local administrators on each of the 600 plus proposals selected), but trying to develop an empirical strategy to capture agenda-setting is a challenge of a different order. Equally, we recognize a lack of attention to the impact of participatory processes on broader social transformations: to outcomes that change significantly the rules of the game and the way in which government and society interact. We have touched on this lack in our discussions above. This may be where the power of exemplary case studies rests. After all, it is such transformative change that often drives researchers to such cases (e.g. participatory budgeting in Porto-Alegre, Irish Citizens' Assembly, etc.). The rationale of our strategy was to study the impact of mundane participatory processes that are relatively common across municipalities. This everyday world of participation is a long way from social transformation.

Second, our analysis indicates that institutional design matters. Not as much as proposal level characteristics, but it is still important. While we were able to show the significance of indicators of quality (including facilitation, information provision and external consultants) and the differential effects of participatory budgeting compared to other categories of participatory process, we were unable to dig deeper into design features. For example, what is it that makes participatory budgeting more facilitating of implementation? Is it the implicit promise that proposals approved within the process will be executed and the existence in many cases of budgets for implementation? Or is the crucial characteristic its annual cycle and the accountability mechanisms it usually entails? A more diverse sample of participatory budgeting cases and/or a sufficient number of case studies would be needed to provide a clear answer to this and similar questions.

One broader subject related to institutional design is the way in which participatory processes are 'coupled' to public authorities (Hendriks 2016). This is likely to be a significant aspect of participatory design that impacts both implementation and accountability: our finding that different institutional designs have differential effects on these outcomes is certainly suggestive. But at present 'coupling' is a factor that lacks clear empirical specification. A further area where our results could be more decisive relates to the impact of the preferences of local elite actors. When the preferences of politicians and local bureaucrats are aligned, we find a powerful effect on the chances that a proposal is implemented effectively. However, what happens when they are not? Who is more likely to prevail? How are such

disputes resolved? Re-analysis of our data may offer provisional answers, but again, more extensive or different data is needed to delve deeper into this critical issue.

External validity is another important subject that deserves more detailed attention. This includes, for example, the type of proposals approved. By analyzing more everyday participatory processes, the focus tends to be on relatively small demands. Our analysis tells us very little about the use of participatory processes to deal with more difficult and complex policy issues and potential societal transformations. A strong conceptual distinction may need to be drawn between the more common forms of participatory dynamics that our study is capturing and the move to bring citizens into more strategic forms of participatory decision making.

Concern for external validity also brings into focus broader questions of context. We are intrigued to know how our results travel to different legal and cultural contexts. Factors such as the existence of national or regional legislation mandating or otherwise incentivizing local participation, degrees of political and fiscal autonomy of local governments, differences in how local political elites and civil society groups behave and interact may well generate crucial differences. Our interest here is not just the fate of proposals in terms of implementation, but also consideration of the very different accountability contexts that exist across democratic systems.

Our research contributes partially to debates about how best to design participatory processes to achieve socially-desirable outcomes. In a sense this builds on familiar work on democratic innovations that suggests that design is always a compromise, with trade-offs between different goods and principles (Fung 2003; Smith 2009). On the one hand, we contribute to identifying features that facilitate implementation. On the other, these characteristics are only partially similar to those facilitating accountability, favoring the argument that building the “perfect” process is hard (perhaps impossible) to achieve since different institutional dynamics are at play. The EDGE (Newig et al 2018) and Participedia (Gastil et al 2017) projects are pointing in similar directions.

However, the most significant limitation of our research in this regard is that while we focus attention on one crucial area – policy implementation – this is not the only democratic goal of participatory processes. Impact and outcomes are much broader than implementation and accountability and goals of participatory processes can just as well relate to building citizenship and civil society. Or, as more recent research seems to suggest (Font et al, 2019), participants themselves may be more interested in information flows and building networks

than on achieving substantive policy effects⁹. Building a more sophisticated account of how aspects of democratic design (and arguably context) relate to different types of impacts and outcomes will be a significant next step in our understanding of participatory democratic institutions.

A final provocative comment. Is it all worth it?! Clearly the empirical work is worth undertaking, but what of our object of concern: participatory institutions? Reflecting on the findings of the Cherry-picking and the preceding Mecpalo project, if participatory processes only rarely change civil society and its relationship to public administrations, have a limited capacity to transform citizen's attitudes and behaviors beyond a small set of participants (Michels 2011) and have only a limited effect on policies, where governing actors choose only their preferred proposals, is it all worth the effort? Have participatory processes promised much more than they can ever actually deliver?

⁹ See also Levine (2016) on the possible relationships between the relational and the policy implementation goals of participatory processes.

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