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# **The Qualities of Local Participation: The Explanatory Role of Ideology, External Support and Civil Society as Organizer**

JOAN FONT and CAROLINA GALAIS

Joan Font (joan.font@cchs.csic.es), CCHS — CSIC, Institute of Public Goods and Policies, Albasanz 26–28, Madrid 28037, Spain and Carolina Galais (carolina.galais@uab.cat), UAB, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Facultat de Ciències Polítiques i Sociologia, Bellaterra 08193, Barcelona, Spain.

## **Abstract**

*Previous research into local participation (often based on in-depth studies of the most successful examples of the phenomenon) has highlighted its qualities and potential. In this article we adopt a different strategy, in the first part building an explanatory analysis of the procedural qualities of local participation based on a mapping of local processes. This mapping — comprising 103 experiences drawn from Catalonia (Spain) — allows us to make a more accurate assessment, and to get a more plural and diverse (albeit less optimistic) picture of this reality. The second part of the article suggests a multidimensional strategy to capture some of the important democratic qualities of local participation, and discusses the role that several factors play in the explanation of these qualities. We pay special attention to the ideology of political parties in the development of participatory processes, the role of external support from supra-local institutions, and the role of civil society (which emerges as the most crucial explanatory factor) in the promotion of these experiences.*

## **Introduction**

A significant proportion of the literature on local participatory processes focuses on their democratic qualities and consequent promising potential. The Porto Alegre participatory budget has contributed to ending clientelistic practices, and has led to important social transformations in local politics (Abers, 2000). Addressing educational and policing issues, the Chicago participatory scheme has resulted in improved test results for students and greater participation in working-class neighbourhoods (Fung, 2001). In British Columbia, the Citizens' Assembly produced interesting new proposals for the electoral system, allowing participants to better present the case for the representation of rural interests (Lang, 2007). The merits of participatory processes are also topical on the eastern side of the Atlantic; the Danish deliberative opinion poll, for example, demonstrated increased awareness and greater ability to form reasoned opinions among its participants (Normann and Hansen, 2007). These four examples constitute quite a varied set of cases in terms of social context, methodologies used and

issues being discussed. If the democratic promise that emerges from these processes could be extended to the hundreds of similar experiences being developed in many other cities, the diverse merits of these processes would be indisputable.

However, it is likely that many of these experiences have been chosen for in-depth analysis precisely because of their especially promising characteristics. While the analytical use of best practices to learn from successful strategies makes sense, the risk of drawing an overly optimistic picture from a set of very interesting, but wholly unrepresentative, group of experiences clearly exists.

In addition, if participatory processes are in reality far more diverse and achieve quite different levels of success, it is crucial to understand why this happens. Certain characteristics of the processes and the context in which they develop are likely to be important in understanding their different degrees of success. Three characteristics have been mentioned in previous studies as likely sources of different participatory outcomes: the political ideology of the institutional promoters; the existence of external support; and the involvement of civil society as a co-organizer of the process. This article seeks to examine how these three factors contribute to the democratic qualities of participatory experiences.

Since we want to explore these ideas by looking not just at the most successful cases, we compiled a database comprising a broad and diverse set of participatory experiences, covering a broad array of towns and derived from different sources. This mapping was undertaken in Catalonia, Spain, an appropriate region in which to explore the role of the above-mentioned characteristics in the success or failure of participatory processes, as its new regional government has initiated a policy devoted to supporting local participation, the effects of which can be examined.

Our spectrum of analysis is constituted by local participatory processes. We define these as processes recognized as governance mechanisms by local governments, that had some degree of citizen involvement and that dealt with local policy. For each of these processes, we have captured and coded the most important contextual and organizational characteristics.

This article is divided into five main sections. The first presents our research questions. We discuss our hypothesis that Left-wing governments, external support and a partnership role for civil society improve participatory processes. In the next section we highlight the relevance of Catalonia as the location for our study, present the methods used to collect the data and describe the central characteristics of the 103 Catalan experiences being analysed. The subsequent section presents the dependent variable of the article: the diverse qualities of participatory processes. Next, we test our main research questions using OLS (ordinary least squares) estimation and briefly present its results. Finally, in the last section we discuss and interpret the results, and their implications for the development of local participatory experiences.

### **Research questions: which participatory processes and why**

The amount of research devoted to local participation instruments is today quite

substantial. There have been important contributions dealing with normative debates (Macedo, 1999; Dryzek, 2000), detailed case studies used for theory building (Mansbridge, 1983; Fung, 2001), analysis of families of participation processes, often identified by common organizational patterns (Fiorino, 1990; Schattan, 2006; Sintomer et al., 2008), as well as overall evaluations of specific national situations (Lowndes et al., 2001). Although most of this literature points to significant specific problems in each of these processes<sup>1</sup> (e.g. participatory inequalities or limited educational opportunities of participants) or focuses on the gaps between the normative ideal and the empirical realities (Bobbio, 2005), the general impression from the best-known cases is that the benefits of participatory processes outweigh the problems involved.

All of these approaches have added substantially to our knowledge and understanding of local participatory processes. However, none has produced a reliable picture of the general situation regarding local participation in the countries studied. As most of them are based on cases that have attracted attention precisely because they are considered successful, our understanding of the merits of these cases and the potential they represent (and indeed our descriptive picture of them) is inherently biased. To build a more reliable picture of local participatory processes, our first task is to produce a regional map of these processes in Catalonia.

Addressing participatory diversity in the Catalan case allows us to compose a set of criteria to measure the procedural qualities of participatory experiences. We rely upon literature on procedural quality for these kinds of experiences (see the subsequent section dealing with results) to compile a minimum set of qualities that account for process excellence: availability of information, deliberation, citizens' influence and inclusiveness.

Once these qualities are measured, our second task is to discuss and analyse the relationship of the characteristics of the promoters of local participatory processes to the democratic qualities of these experiences. In particular, we want to explore the effects of three factors mentioned in the literature as having a potential impact on participatory processes: the role of (external) institutional support; the role played by civil society in their organizational development; and the importance of the ideology of governing parties. Other factors, such as the issues being discussed, the previous attitudes of participants or the size of communities (to name but a few) are also relevant, but our primary goal is to concentrate on how the characteristics of the promoters of the participatory experience shape its results.

The development of these local participatory processes can hardly be successful without decisive support from local institutions. Even in cases where there is a strong bottom-up component in the process, the existence of an institution providing resources and setting rules of the game is of crucial importance (Fung and Wright, 2001). However, in a complex system of multilevel governance, the support received may come not only from the institution where the participatory process is developed, but also from larger supra-

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the literature mentioned, other critical appraisals include, among others, Booth and Jové (2005) and Levine et al. (2005).

local institutions such as the World Bank, Habitat and the UNDP (Allegretti and Herzberg, 2004), or national governments (Lowndes *et al.*, 2001).

This external support can be significant for several reasons. First, it sends the symbolic message to local government that participation is important, and this may at the very least provide legitimacy for the idea. Second, this outside help may provide substantial resources to local governments, specifically financial help and expertise. These resources may be particularly important for small and medium-size municipalities lacking the human and financial resources needed to initiate these kinds of processes.

However, the level of success of participatory processes that are based on external support is far from clear. In Latin America for example, many of the externally promoted experiences in participatory budgeting have not reached the level of democratic qualities of the Porto Alegre case.<sup>2</sup> Policy diffusion through networks of parties and cities or promoted by international agencies has facilitated the spread of participatory budgeting, but in many cases the local energies behind these budgeting processes have probably been more limited, resulting in reduced levels of success.<sup>3</sup> Thus, our first analytical research question is: does supra-local institutional support help to improve local participation?

The second research question we address is: do the ideological identities of the promoters have a decisive effect on the characteristics of these processes? Two alternatives will be considered: one sees participatory processes as part of a tendency towards more modern and effective forms of governance. As a result, international institutions such as the World Bank support them. From this perspective, all local governments regardless of ideology are equally interested in developing participatory processes, and thus ideology plays no role. According to an alternative hypothesis, the centrality given to these processes is strongly connected to the ideological redefinition of the post-communist Left, which has given participation a central role in their new political project,<sup>4</sup> and thus ideology plays a strong part in the spread of participatory processes.

There are several studies which suggest a possible relationship between ideology and

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<sup>2</sup> Baiocchi (2001) affirms that the process is more successful in Porto Alegre than in other Brazilian cities. Goldfrank (2006) compares it with those of other Latin American cities, drawing similar pessimistic conclusions about the quality of many other experiences.

<sup>3</sup> We can draw parallels with individual participation, where we often talk about the role played by resources and motivations. Resources are needed to compensate for the burdens of participation, but no amount of resources will produce participation unless motivation also exists. In local participation the same can happen: external resources help municipalities wanting to organize participation processes but lacking the necessary resources. Nonetheless, these resources will not be effective if motivation to organize these processes does not exist.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen and Fung (2004) present a basic characterization of this project which they call 'radical democracy'.

local participation. In the case of participatory budgeting, Sintomer *et al.* (2008) have pointed out that these processes have been primarily developed by Left-wing local governments. Colino and Del Pino (2006) have identified a more specific pattern whereby the main ideological difference is in the style used: Right-wing governments develop mechanisms following more 'consumerist' logic, whereas Left-wing governments primarily support processes with more deliberative content. However, Nezand Talpin (2010) identify greater differences in the rhetoric than in the actual practices followed by the communists in French municipalities.

Finally, we want to address the role that the participation of civil society in the launching of participatory process has in explaining its characteristics. Civil society will almost always be present as a participant in these processes, but only in a limited number of cases will it have a definitive role in the launching or development of these processes, as many of these participatory projects will be exclusively promoted and developed by local government institutions. Several authors have emphasized the importance of a bottom-up component in these processes (Fung and Wright, 2001; Boyte, 2005). Della Porta (2008) has similarly hypothesized that having a definitive bottom-up component could be a crucial variable in explaining the democratic qualities of these processes. However, previous research has only addressed this issue through case studies. Consequently, we ask as our third research question: does the inclusion of a bottom-up component produce better participatory processes?

## **What kind of local participation?**

### *The characteristics of local participation in Catalonia*

In this section we will outline the participatory landscape of Catalonia, explain the policies formulated to increase local participation, the methodological process used to build our database and the main characteristics of the region's participatory processes.

Catalonia is one of Spain's 17 Autonomous Communities. After more than 20 years of being governed by the same nationalist conservative party (CiU), a coalition of Left-wing parties took control of the regional government in 2003. One of the changes introduced by the new administration was the creation of a department devoted to citizen participation, the first to be created by a Spanish regional government.<sup>5</sup> This department has been run by ICV, Catalonia's green party, which had made participation an issue in their regional election campaigning and local government projects (Blanco *et al.*, 2005).<sup>6</sup> In several cases, the department has implemented participatory processes at the regional level and has given greater visibility to

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<sup>5</sup> More recently, the Valencia and Aragon regional governments have also developed their own departments dedicated to issues of participation at the regional level.

<sup>6</sup> A similar pattern emerges at the national level with ICV's affiliated federal organization, IU (Verge, 2007).

participation in the overall political agenda, but one of its most important programmes has been to foster, evaluate and give financial support to local initiatives for citizen participation.<sup>7</sup> The new Catalan government also approved legislation making the implementation of participatory processes a necessary precondition to obtaining financial support for neighbourhood renewal projects. The existence of these new policies means that Catalonia provides an interesting case study for analysing the effects of supportive regional policies on the characteristics of local participatory policies.

To analyse the success of local initiatives for participation in Catalonia, we built a database where each participatory process is an observation. The database contains details of 103 experiences. We consider as 'local experiences' those processes which have been recognized as part of governing mechanisms by local governments,<sup>8</sup> even if the initial proposal or activities came from citizens or from other levels of government. We incorporated any experience where citizens formally discussed a local public policy to any extent. Thus, the three criteria that any process required in order to be included were citizen involvement, recognition from local government and dealing with a local policy.<sup>9</sup> As a previous map of Catalan local participation had been compiled in 2001, we began our fieldwork where that map left off, and included experiences up to 2008.<sup>10</sup>

Information was collected from different sources, with two goals in mind. Since an exhaustive census was not an efficient strategy,<sup>11</sup> the realistic goal was to get a plural

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2006 this programme provided grants totalling €2 million. The average grant was around €15,000, a very small amount for a big city like Barcelona, but crucial for a small municipality or a poorly funded department in a medium-sized city.

<sup>8</sup> Being recognized by local government is measured through the existence of an explicit message emanating from local government encouraging citizens to participate in the local governance process (e.g. the message appears on a local government website) or where a specific event is organized by local government or there is an official reception regarding the outcome of a process celebrated by local officials. In most cases, 'local government' means city councils, but a few experiences have been developed by counties or other similar sub-regional units. These do not appear in the final regression results as they are not run by elected governments.

<sup>9</sup> We excluded experiences that had some participatory aspects but which did not fit any of these criteria (e.g. processes where participation consisted simply of cleaning up a park, with no discussion about policies involved).

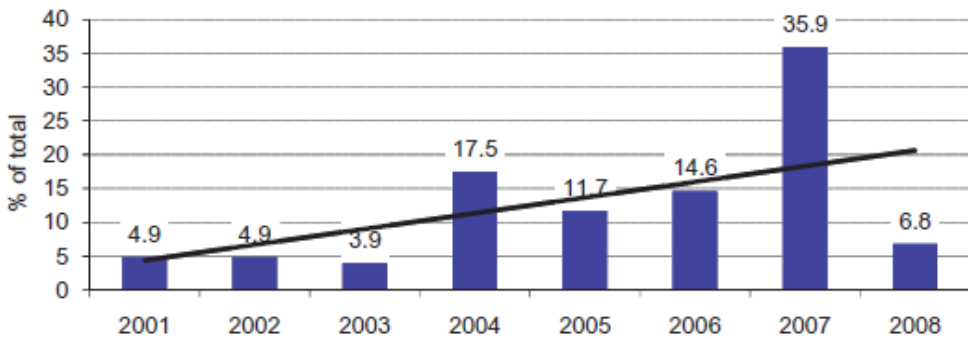
<sup>10</sup> The previous mapping was limited in scope and primarily included processes from medium-sized and large cities (Subirats *et al.*, 2001). Later in this article, there appear some comparisons with the main results of that earlier research.

<sup>11</sup> At least several hundred processes that fit our criteria have been developed. In addition to the significant resources needed to classify all of them, many would be extremely similar, making the effort to analyse all of them a wasteful exercise. For example, Agenda 21 (a strategic planning process focusing on sustainability which incorporates participatory elements) had been developed in more than 100



and diverse database. Since the most common problem is that most databases over-represent the experiences of large cities and municipal experiences which have more resources and consequently greater visibility, we made every effort to guarantee an adequate representation of small towns and processes based on more modest resources. The first and most important source was the Catalan government's 2007 initiative to fund local participatory processes. From the funded projects, we selected 47 that fitted our criteria (and that were complete enough to provide most of the information we needed). Secondly, we included 31 experiences gathered from several databases belonging to universities, private foundations and provincial government, as well as from a network of local governments. Thirdly, we searched the web using different combinations of the words 'local', 'council', 'participation', 'experience', 'citizen' and 'policy' and selected 24 cases (all post-2000) from which sufficient information could be extracted. For each of the 103 total cases (from 78 different municipalities), we organized the information into 79 categories, including contextual information about the locality and each of the main characteristics of the participatory process.<sup>12</sup> Information was retrieved from documents produced by the organizers, the municipality or external evaluations, as well as from online media. These sources contained most of the necessary information to fill the 79 categories for each experience, but when the necessary information relating to a particular variable was not available, no value was assigned, i.e. it was coded as a missing value.

**Figure 1** Experiences launched (% of total) every year and trend line



municipalities, following in most cases very similar procedures. In the rare cases where we found two or more experiences with extremely similar characteristics — launched at the same time and in the same area — we selected the one that provided more information about the process.

<sup>12</sup> A double coding of the most important variables was done and inconsistencies between both coders were corrected.



Each source may demonstrate some bias in its individual selection system,<sup>13</sup> but it is precisely the fact that the sources are so diverse which compensates for the bias among them, resulting in a remarkably complete mapping of experiences. The result is a sample that may not be entirely representative of all types of local participatory instruments,<sup>14</sup> but which constitutes a plural and diverse spectrum from which a better picture can be drawn, with sufficient diversity to allow us to explore the different procedural qualities of these processes.

The first noticeable characteristic of our sample is the yearly distribution, showing a clear increase in the number of projects over time (Figure 1). Although the 2007 result is an anomaly resulting from our sources (see above), the upward trend is a clear one,<sup>15</sup> revealing an initial possible result from supportive regional policies: an increase in the number of participatory processes developed.

A second important characteristic concerns their geographical distribution. Previous research had shown local participatory processes to be predominantly concentrated in the Barcelona area (Subirats *et al.*, 2001), but our research shows that processes were scattered throughout most of the territory. The new funding sources may be the most likely explanation for this diffusion throughout wider Catalonia. In general, one significant characteristic of these processes is that they were usually quite modest. In contrast with previous research, these participatory projects occurred in all kinds of municipalities (43% in medium-sized local entities of between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants), cost only a limited amount of money (the average cost being circa €20,000, with half of the participatory experiences in the sample costing less than €10,000)<sup>16</sup> and had a limited number of participants. The average number of participants was 337,

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<sup>13</sup> Foundations are more likely to incorporate processes that asked for their external assistance, universities those that have more visibility, the regional government database those that were more in need of external finance, and the network of local cities those with a government more engaged in participatory networks. Nevertheless, during the same period, a representative survey of Catalan municipalities was conducted and most of the descriptive characteristics of participatory processes (methodologies used, budgets, etc.) were strikingly similar in both data sets (Fundació Pi i Sunyer, 2009), providing further evidence of the quite representative character of our database.

<sup>14</sup> For example, stable mechanisms like policy-oriented councils are clearly under-represented since they are often without cost and the diffusion of their results is very limited. This bias is more important for the descriptive data (e.g. Table 1), but not to assess causal relationships.

<sup>15</sup> Fieldwork ended in September 2008, making it very likely that the 2008 figure would have been substantially higher if the data had been collected a year later.

<sup>16</sup> At least 63% of them received outside financial support, in many cases from the Catalan government, but also from provincial government and other public and private sources, including one EU-funded project.

although 90% of them had less than 70 participants.

Another important characteristic concerns their objectives. As Table 1 shows, their organizers considered participation in itself to be a central goal in 94% of cases, with policy efficacy coming in a distant second position (in 52% of them). The specific issues being discussed in these cases resemble those of any local government agenda, with an important focus on urban planning (53%), followed by social welfare (22%), environmental protection (16%), economic development (16%) and political participation (16%). In conclusion, these processes did not just address peripheral concerns on the local political agenda, but a diverse set of topics whose global composition was quite similar to the usual concerns of any municipality.<sup>17</sup>

Another crucial characteristic concerned the use of participatory methodologies. Again in contrast with the best-known researched cases, which used a specific set of participatory instruments (e.g. deliberative opinion polls, participatory budgets and electronic consultations), the Catalan data reveals a very different scenario: most processes combined different methodologies and participatory instruments. The most popular instrument (34%) was the ‘participation workshop’, a flexible tool based on gathering participants’ opinions following the presentation of information and a discussion regarding a local project. In fact, most experiences used more than one instrument, combining them in different stages in the local policy process (e.g. decision, evaluation).

**Table 1** Main goals, subjects and methodologies of local participatory experiences in Catalonia (%)

Main Goals (maximum: 2)	%	Subject (maximum: 2)	Discussed%	Methodologies (maximum: 2)	%
Citizens’ participation	94	Urbanism	53	Workshops	34
Policy efficacy	52	Social welfare	22	Open meetings	29
Social capital	24	Environment	16	Combination of methodologies	18
Trust in politicians	10	Economic development	16	Standardized questionnaire	18
Stakeholders’ engagement	4	Political participation	16	Focus group	16
		Local budget	14	Forums and conventions	11
		Mobility	12	Specific consultations	9
		Other (culture, technology)	5	Web, forum or blog	8
				Interviews	4
				Citizen jury	1

<sup>17</sup> Early research into the Catalan case revealed that the first consultative councils launched did not deal with issues central to the local agenda such as urban planning or local budgets, touching instead on issues such as culture, youth and women (Gomà and Font, 2001).

### *The procedural qualities of participatory processes*

The characteristics outlined above are illustrative of the general nature of these processes, but do not address their democratic potential. Quality measurement has been an important issue in the analysis of participatory processes, but scholars have yet to agree on a standard group of indicators. A key feature of these criteria is whether they emphasize procedural aspects related to the democratic characteristics of the process or its outcomes (i.e. the process's real effects on policies, attitudes, social justice or other desirable outcomes). A combination of both might be ideal, but other democratic processes are essentially judged on their procedural aspects (e.g. we generally consider that elections are fair because they follow certain rules, not because they produce the best possible policies). In our case, we also used procedural aspects alone, since the data collection strategy did not allow for the in-depth case study that would be required to obtain appropriate measurements of outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, there are numerous important aspects to the task of evaluating whether one participatory process is better than another.<sup>19</sup> The question is whether these different aspects can be empirically collapsed into a single dimension. Most authors have established a relatively extensive list of criteria to be considered. Among them, Fung (2006) and Della Porta (2008) make quite simple and similar proposals that include three main criteria: who participates (inclusiveness),<sup>20</sup> how participants communicate (quality of deliberation) and how the process is linked to policies (empowerment).

We have two arguments in favour of reducing these three aspects into two dimensions, one theoretical and one empirical. First, while the three aspects are all important, two of them are in classic contradiction to one another (which is an argument against collapsing them into a single dimension): it is quite difficult to facilitate successful deliberation among large groups of people. However, there is no necessary contradiction between making a process more influential (empowering) and at the same time trying to make it more inclusive. In fact, one of the main arguments used against many participation processes is precisely that since they are not inclusive, but dominated by an unrepresentative minority (Fiorina, 1999), increased inclusiveness may indeed be a necessary condition to make a participatory process influential.

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<sup>18</sup> Even our measurement of influence is not based on an assessment of outcomes, but on whether the process was aimed to have or not have a clear connection with policymaking.

<sup>19</sup> For an interesting review of the literature on criteria to evaluate participatory processes, see Rowe and Frewer (2004).

<sup>20</sup> 'Who participates' is the expression used by Fung (2006) and 'inclusiveness' the term chosen by Della Porta (2008). The same logic applies for the other two criteria.

At the empirical level, the results also point to the existence of two dimensions. From our database, we selected four indicators to measure participatory qualities: information, deliberation, inclusiveness and influence. Table 2 provides the results of the measurements we obtained for these characteristics among the Catalan cases. The amount of information available to participants is an important characteristic of participatory processes (Diduck, 2004; Parkins and Mitchell, 2005). In the table, ‘High’ means that external experts have thoroughly informed citizens; ‘Medium’ means that local politicians or officials (without external assistance) have informed citizens; and finally ‘Low’ means that only very limited information has been shared with citizens.

A second important dimension concerns the level of deliberation or exchange of opinion (Halvorsen, 2001; Diduck, 2004). Deliberation was also measured by a three-category variable. Just under a third of the experiences (‘High’) were coded as considering debate a priority, since they allowed enough time (one long session or several meetings devoted exclusively to deliberation among participants). In just over a third of the experiences (‘Medium’), only limited discussions were allowed. Finally, in the remaining third (‘Low’) there was neither time nor occasion for discussion.

**Table 2** The four initial components of participatory qualities (%)

	%
<i>Information</i>	
High	37
Medium	41
Low	21
<i>Level of deliberation</i>	
High	30
Medium	36
Low	33
<i>Inclusiveness</i>	
High	51
Low	49
<i>Level of influence</i>	
Consultation	71
Co-design	15
Co-decision	9
Co-management	6

We took the capacity to involve wide and diverse sectors of society as the means to measure inclusiveness. Depending on the nature of the participatory experience, this could be achieved through either a rich representation of societal sectors and stakeholders incorporating many different voices (Webler *et al.*, 2002), or a large number

of participants (Budge, 1996). Consequently, we built a dummy variable where the value 1 referred to those cases that had one of the two following characteristics: either 1% of the total local municipal population participating;<sup>21</sup> or the presence of at least three of the following groups — public administration bodies (other than town councils), individual citizens, and private stakeholders, civil society associations and other agents from civil society such as local employers. The 0 value was assigned to cases that did not fulfil either condition (49% of the total).

Finally, we captured citizens’ political influence in the policy process through a four-category ordinal variable, built using the lessons of Arnstein’s (1969) work. The lowest category (consultation) applied when there was no connection between the participatory process and any real policy. Co-design implied that citizens had proposed actions and specific solutions for a problem. Co-decision happened when citizens’ recommendations were considered binding for politicians. Finally, co-management experiences included co-decision situations where citizens would also contribute to the implementation of the policy.

In order to explore the relations between these four variables, a principal-component factor analysis was conducted, the results of which are displayed in Table 3. Two factors were clearly identified by this procedure. A varimax rotation was applied, in order to maximize the variances of the squared loadings within factors. In other words, this made the two factors as different and uncorrelated as possible in order to better interpret the results. This revealed a first factor which gathers information and deliberation (the deliberation factor), and a second which captures the inclusiveness and influence variables (the inclusiveness factor). We cannot tell whether a much larger and diverse set of experiences could produce the three factors expected by Fung (2006), but the Catalan data reveals a clear relationship between some of these components, along with the traditional trade-off between seeking to mobilize large numbers of citizens and produce high-quality deliberation.

**Table 3** Factor loadings based on a principal-components analysis with varimax rotation (N = 102)

Rotated Factor Loadings

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Information	0.760	0.279
Deliberation	0.859	-0.131
Influence	0.349	0.538
Inclusiveness	-0.116	0.882

<sup>21</sup> The 1% threshold differentiates the 40% of the sample that has achieved a larger proportion of participants from the majority of the cases that involved only a small number of citizens.

Eigenvalue (variance of the factor)	1.44	1.16
% variation explained	36.2	29.0
Cumulative	36.2	65.3

Note: Method: principal-component factors; Rotation: orthogonal varimax with Kaiser normalization; Italics indicate factor assignment.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Catalan experiences for these two factors. Two examples demonstrate the clear distinction between them. Callús is a small Catalan village that organized a participatory process in order to decide how to spend €18,000. Participants had the final decision and more than 3% of citizens participated. However, the process assumed that all neighbours had the necessary information about their village, and deliberation opportunities were almost absent. By contrast, the experience of the school Agenda 21 of Vilanova might be an example of the opposite, organizing deliberative forums that incorporated external experts, but having only limited connection with real policies and attracting only a limited group of participants. In short, these two distinct factors constitute our measurements of democratic qualities; we will elaborate upon their distribution in the next section.

### **Results: the role of external support, ideology and civil society**

In this section, we present the results of two regression analyses used to test the influence of ideology, institutional support and the organizational role of civil society on both measures of the qualities of participation. We will start by justifying the independent variables included in our analysis, explain how they work and finally present the results of the regressions.

Ideology is measured using the political composition of local government. Although the Catalan political landscape is a rich one, the limited number of cases in the database and the dozens of particular compositions of its local governments led us to choose a simple dummy variable, dividing those where the Left is clearly hegemonic from those where this is not the case (Table 4). The logic behind this decision is that only in those local settings where Left-wingers are unconstrained<sup>22</sup> by political alliances can they put into practice their theories relating to deliberative participatory processes.

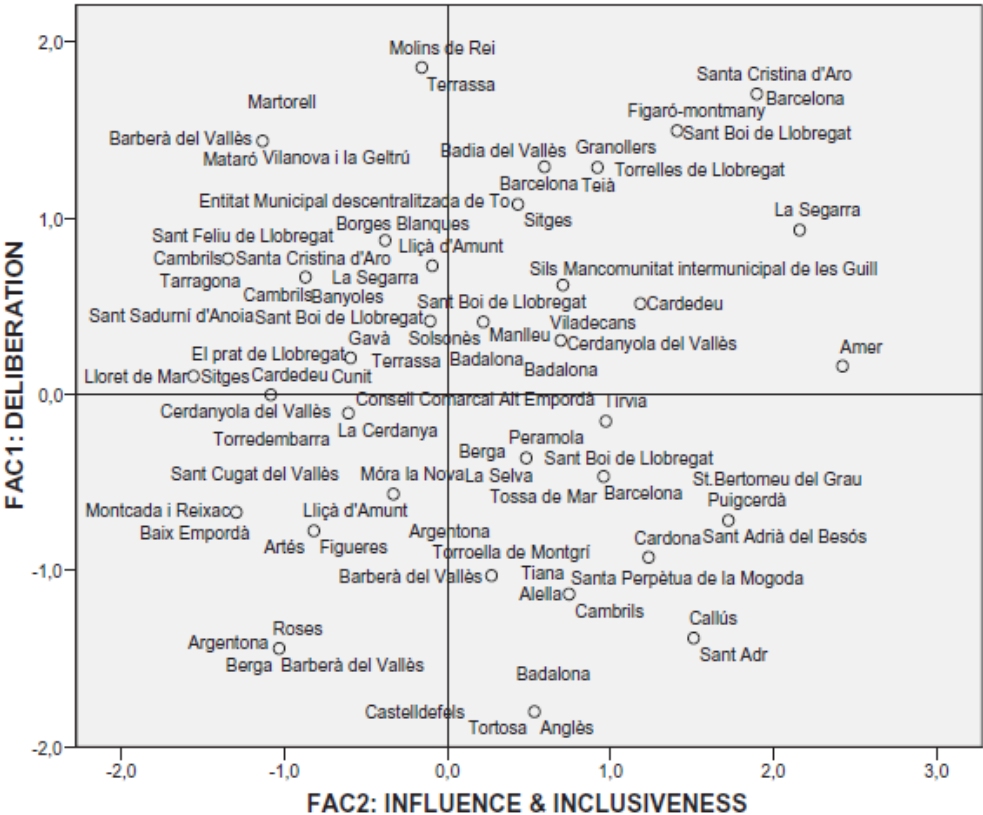
Our second independent variable measures whether civil society was present at the

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<sup>22</sup> Many local coalitions include a combination of Left-wing (socialists, pro-independence, greens and other small parties) or centre and Right-wing parties (Catalan nationalists, conservatives and other local parties).

launching and promotion of the participatory experience, or whether the process was exclusively top-down. Our original variable captured four possible scenarios as to who were the driving forces of the experience: local government alone, local government with some collaboration from civil society, civil society with some collaboration from local government, and civil society alone. Table 4 shows that the distribution was extremely skewed, with 81% of the experiences conducted entirely by local governments. As a consequence, we grouped the other three categories into one, measuring some level of involvement of civil society in the origin of the process (and assigning value 1 in these cases).

**Figure 2** Distribution of the experiences by the two factors





**Table 4** Main independent variables used in the regression analyses (%)

<b>Political Composition of Local Government</b>		<b>Initiation of the Participatory Experience</b>		<b>External Help</b>	<b>Financial</b>
Left single party	14	Local government only	81	Yes	63
Left coalition	41	Local government mainly	12	No/ no information	37
Mixed coalition, where left parties are hegemonic	17	Civil society mainly	6		
<i>Subtotal Left</i>	72	Civil society only	2		
Right single party	13				
Right coalition	5				
Other mixed combinations	10				
<i>Subtotal non-Left</i>	28				
Total	100		100		100

Our third variable deals with the role played by external institutional support, measured through the most important kind of support that these processes can have, namely economic support.<sup>23</sup> We simply used a dummy variable distinguishing those experiences where external financial support existed (value 1) from those where it did not or no information was available about it (value 0).<sup>24</sup>

We also incorporated four control variables into the analysis. The first one refers to the main goal or aim of the project (see Table 1). We created two dummy variables for the two most common aims: facilitating public participation, and increasing the efficacy of local policies. If it appears as the only aim, the first (i.e. facilitating public participation) may be seen as a euphemism for ‘good-will experiences’: participatory processes where the specific goals are not very clearly defined, and as a result the claim is made that participation *per se* is the main goal. The second identifies those experiences more clearly connected with the process of policymaking where the aim is to have a specific effect (i.e. policy efficacy).

The use of different methodologies is also likely to affect the potential democratic qualities of a participatory process: a few of the processes were based solely on individualized participatory methods that would hardly allow for the development of

<sup>23</sup> We chose economic support because it is crucially important for small towns with limited budgets and because it is the most common kind of support (present in 63% of the experiences). In some cases, expertise and other resources may also have been of importance, but their presence could hardly be measured in a reliable way

<sup>24</sup> The amount of support would have to be controlled by the cost of the experience and the size and/or budget of the municipality. The simplest indicator of having received external funds or not captures in a more reliable way the idea that there was an external institution willing to provide help to the project.

friendly deliberative dynamics. As a consequence, we created a dummy variable that measured which cases had only used non-deliberative dynamics (standardized questionnaires, personal interviews and individual consultations — 7% of the total sample with value 0).

Finally, we introduced time (the year the experience started) as an additional control variable, to capture a possible supply-related effect: the appearance of many projects with less local energy behind them (essentially political commitment and the symbolic and material resources associated with it), which are merely a response to the new financial opportunities.<sup>25</sup>

Table 5 displays the results of both linear (ordinary least squares or OLS) regressions. Our hypotheses regarding the factors which affect participatory qualities receive differing levels of support from the analysis. The role of civil society as promoter of the experience appears as the variable having the largest and most significant effect on inclusiveness, and is the second most important variable with regard to impact on deliberation: everything else being equal, involving civil society in the development of the participatory process from its initial stages significantly increases both the deliberative capacity as well as the inclusiveness of the process.

External help shows a positive effect, but does not reach statistical significance for deliberation or inclusiveness: if the effects of external help exist they are either modest or not homogeneous. Finally, ideology plays no significant role in explaining the results: both coefficients are extremely small and far from significant.

**Table 5** Explanatory factors of participatory qualities

	Factor 1: Deliberation			Factor 2: Inclusiveness		
	B	Beta	Std. error	B	Beta	Std. error
(Constant)	316.14		111.134	236.38		109.588
Local government: Left	-.003	-.006	.219	.066	.030	.216
External financial help	.210	.101	.212	.139	.070	.209
Year of experience launching	-.158***	-.297	.055	-.117**	-.228	.055
Role of civil society	.744***	.287	.258	.823***	.328	.254
Goal: citizen participation	.145	.035	.413	-.016	-.004	.407

<sup>25</sup> The number of control variables had to be kept to a minimum in a context of a small sample. However, we tried alternative model specifications. For example, size of municipality did not have any significant effect, while issue at stake often produced statistically significant but not robust coefficients that changed easily with different model specifications. In any case, the inclusion of these variables did not change the main conclusions of this article.

Goal: policy efficacy	.733***	.357	.208	.543**	.273	.205
Deliberative methods used	were.782*	.188	.418	-1.19***	-.295	.413
R square	.277			.248		
N	92			92		

Note: \*p  $\square$  0.1; \*\*p  $\square$  0.05; \*\*\*p  $\square$  0.01.

Three of the control variables also attain statistical significance. Firstly, year of the experience shows the predicted negative result: recent processes have less democratic qualities than those developed in the early years of the period. Secondly, those experiences whose declared goal is increasing the efficacy of local policies are also clearly more inclusive and deliberative, showing large and significant effects for both factors. Thirdly, the use of deliberative methods is the only variable showing completely different effects for both factors: quite obviously, they have a positive effect on the factors measuring deliberation, but they also have a significant negative effect on Factor 2 (inclusiveness), pointing to the aforementioned contradiction between deliberation and inclusiveness.<sup>26</sup>

## Discussion and implications

The first conclusion we draw in this article is that once we move beyond the well-known world of the best local participatory practices, the scenario changes dramatically. The real universe of local participatory experiences is formed by hundreds of quite small and modest experiences, taking place in all types of municipalities and focusing on many different issues, particularly those connected to the usual local agenda issues. In most cases we seldom find the large numbers of participants, strong commitment of local government, centrality of the process to the local political agenda or the democratic qualities that characterize the processes that are best-known internationally.

This means that among these experiences we find quite a diverse distribution of democratic qualities. We concentrated on four of them: information, deliberation, influence in the policy process and inclusiveness. These factors collapse into two main dimensions of participatory qualities: one incorporating information and deliberation (in line with most of the previous theoretical and empirical literature), and the other inclusiveness and influence. The results of the factor analysis reinforce the theoretical arguments that point to a potential contradiction between inclusiveness and deliberation (it is difficult to maximize both simultaneously), and reinforce the idea that inclusiveness may be a necessary condition for influence. The fact that all the independent variables

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<sup>26</sup> The existence of this negative effect persuaded us to include deliberative methods as a control variable in both equations. In any case, if the variable is eliminated it does not affect the conclusions about any of the results concerning the main hypotheses of the article.

have quite a similar effect on both factors except for the use of deliberative methods is another message showing that some features of participatory processes are generally beneficial (e.g. civil society's partnership), but there may be important trade-offs when methodological decisions have to be made.

This does not mean that there is a necessary contradiction between inclusiveness and deliberation. The participatory budget of Santa Cristina d'Aro could be the Catalan equivalent of the internationally well-known best practices. This experience shows a high participation rate (over 4% of the total population), a process fully connected to the structuring of the local budget by the municipality, and a rich informational and deliberative setting. Also, it represents an example of the territorial extension of participatory practices from large cities to smaller municipalities (in this case just 4,000 inhabitants). It may well be that it is the smaller scale which makes it possible for both democratic qualities, inclusiveness and deliberation, to be successfully incorporated into the participatory process, but further research on this subject is needed.

The main goal of this article has specifically been to understand the role that three factors have played in producing the distribution of these democratic qualities. The strongest conclusion we draw is that having civil society involved in the launching and promotion of the process is the best guarantee of obtaining a more meaningful participatory process. This is probably not a genuine Tocquevillian effect, where the presence of civil society *per se* improves the quality of the participatory process. Instead, we are inclined to interpret this result as the combination of three possible mechanisms. The first is purely the partnership effect: experiences with two or more promoters result in greater efforts and more scrupulous procedures as a result of increased scrutiny. Second, the presence of local organizing groups will normally mean a greater degree of cooperation from organized civil society. Scenarios where the participatory process arises exclusively from local government often demonstrate a lack of trust and cooperation from groups concerned that the process will reduce their bargaining power.<sup>27</sup> Third, the presence of local groups will act as a guarantee of the significance of the experience, as they are unlikely to waste their time getting involved in poorly planned processes with uncertain effects.

The Catalan case is of particular interest because the new policy of the regional government aimed at promoting these local experiences in participation allowed us to test the effect of external support. The evidence in favour of this hypothesis is limited: there were several indications that the existence of external support may have contributed to the existence of more and better experiences (particularly in new areas), but we were unable to clearly demonstrate this (though the participatory qualities of those cases which had received external support were greater). If there are positive effects from external support they may have more to do with increasing the number of experiences and the resources available, or equalizing the opportunities that different types of municipalities have to develop a project, than with improving the quality of

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<sup>27</sup> This problem has appeared in many countries (Australia, France, Spain and others). A detailed discussion of its causes can be found in Hendricks (2002).

the funded projects.

On the other hand, the overall decrease in the quality of the experiences over the years points to a possible more complex effect: even allowing for everything else, the participatory experiences in recent years have been less inclusive and deliberative than earlier ones. We cannot be certain what the causal mechanism for this is, but two possible explanations present themselves. One explanation may be a demonstration effect: new financial possibilities have led to a greater number of participatory projects, though these projects have been less intense and 'genuine' than earlier ones. If this is the case in Catalonia, we might find the same tendency in similar circumstances in other places (external help would mobilize new experiences, but these would never reach the intensity of the original ones). The other explanation may be the appearance of a bureaucratic effect: obtaining funding has become a central goal, but filling out applications, following a strict calendar and completing evaluation forms has become a liability affecting the quality of the process. In this case, a different kind of administrative procedure (e.g. on a biennial basis) might lead to more positive results than those that have been achieved in the Catalan context.

Our hypothesis regarding ideology was not supported by the data available: the participatory processes developed by non-Left-wing parties had the same participatory qualities as the rest. Does that mean that ideology does not matter in local participation? For the moment we have to accept the null hypothesis, but there are several different interpretations of this result.

Firstly, it could be that this hypothesis does not fit the Spanish case. The history of the Spanish Left, with strong links to local political associations established during the later years of the Franco period, has forged a strong preference for associative models of local democracy among Left-wing Spanish voters and elites (Font and Navarro, 2009). This preference would limit the preferential introduction of deliberative models by the Left, and associate them with all kinds of political parties. If the introduction of new participatory methods is more a question of new and efficient models of governance, Right-wing parties would be similarly attracted to them.

Secondly, ideology could be important, but party labels may not capture ideological diversity accurately: different patterns for recruiting local elites, the lack of a clear policy towards participation at the regional or national level from most parties, and the strategic use of policies in intra-party struggles could all obscure the existence of a clear party distinction in each of the municipalities analysed. The third possibility is that the main divide is not a simple Left versus Right one, but one that distinguishes those parties that make participation a high priority from the rest. In the first group we would find the green and 'new politics' parties, and on the other side the centre-Right and social democrats. Unfortunately, our data does not allow us to test this possibility because the first group is too small, but it should be further explored in the future.

In general, the results reveal participatory experiences that were only loosely connected to the policymaking process. In reality, these processes covered a wide range of topics relevant to local communities (much more so than a decade earlier), but the cases that were clearly oriented towards producing an input in the policy process were in the minority. It is precisely this desire to connect participation and policies that has become another factor affecting the democratic qualities of participatory processes, this

characteristic having a clear explanatory power in the regression analysis. The fact that this variable has a powerful effect on both democratic qualities suggests that it is probably acting as a proxy for seriousness of purpose, which is shown through the act of connecting the participatory and the policymaking processes.

One of the problems with the picture of local participation that emerges from this article is that the characteristics most important to the democratic qualities of participatory processes were those that occurred least frequently. Only a limited number of the processes incorporated civil society among its organizers or had a clear connection to the policy process (the two characteristics that had the greatest effect in our multivariate analysis to explain participatory qualities). Local participation (at least in the Catalan case) is in short supply of the most powerful determinants of quality participation.

The Catalan case represents just one possible setting for the development of local participatory experiences. Other mappings that also represent the wide variety of experiences developed at the local level are needed. These should allow for important contextual variations, taking into account regions where these experiences have received no external support, faced significant financial constraints or found allies among major political parties.

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