

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Inside the Mind of Politicians: Understanding Elected Representatives' Knowledge of Participatory Mechanisms (and Why it Matters)

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In the context of the growing expansion of citizen engagement mechanisms, political elites are one of the main actors influencing the development of institutional participatory mechanisms. In order to undertake this democratic endeavour, elites hold information and opinions about these mechanisms, yet their knowledge has not been thoroughly explored. How familiar are elected representatives with participatory tools? Does enlarged knowledge reduce critical concerns regarding citizen participation? This article seeks to 1) measure the extent of elected representatives' knowledge of participatory mechanisms, 2) uncover the factors associated with this knowledge, and 3) explore the correlation between this knowledge and their views on the shortcomings of citizen participation.

The analysis departs from an online survey conducted among elected representatives in Spain at the local, regional and national levels. Results indicate distinct levels of knowledge, but, more importantly, they show that knowledge varies with ideology, age and elected representatives' receptiveness towards citizens' initiatives and participation in politics. Notably, a link emerges between knowledge and the evaluation of participation challenges: representatives with greater knowledge are less troubled by citizens' capacity and willingness to engage, as well as other effectiveness issues on the governmental side.

**Keywords:** political elites; citizen participation; participatory mechanisms; political knowledge; attitudes

## 1. Introduction

Government-led participatory practices encompass various mechanisms designed to address citizens' demands.<sup>1</sup> Although most prevalent at the local level, the spread of participatory tools has occurred globally and at different levels, including regional and national (Elstub & Escobar 2019). From the most direct forms of citizen participation to the more deliberative, most of these experiences have been top-down initiatives (Smith 2009), with governments—and politicians in particular—acting as the main promoters. Participatory processes are diverse, have evolved in recent years, and continue to grow in number and forms (OECD 2020). This expansion makes it timely to examine politicians' knowledge of these mechanisms.

Implementing these mechanisms requires elected representatives<sup>2</sup> to have, at a minimum, a basic awareness of the different possibilities for involving citizens in politics. However, Radzik-Maruszak, Haveri & Pawłowska (2020) revealed that non-executive representatives are

not as informed as one might expect about existing mechanisms for citizen participation. Similarly, a recent study highlights the need for deeper knowledge among politicians to effectively involve citizens in decision-making (Sonderskov 2020). Some authors, though lacking evidence, argue that politicians are familiar only with long-standing democratic processes, such as referendums or town halls (Beauvais, Warren & Yaylacı 2019). Differences in politicians' familiarity with participatory mechanisms may explain variations in their implementation. Given the growing interest among practitioners and stakeholders in promoting citizen involvement in decision-making, it is crucial to further investigate the knowledge and attitudes of those who promote these mechanisms.

Until now, most studies suggest that general democratic preferences are the ones shaping elites' implementation of these relatively new participatory mechanisms (Sonderskov 2020; Close 2020). It is reasonable to assume that political elites need incentives and a particular system of belief to implement mechanisms that challenge their role as policy-makers. However, knowledge may also be an important factor in shaping these preferences and behaviours, which are influenced by one's information, as some studies have already revealed (Carpini & Keeter

1993; Leighley 1990; Jablonski & Seim 2024). This relationship, well-documented for citizens, has not been studied for elites when it comes to citizen participation. Although the aim of this paper is not to understand the causal relationship between knowledge and behaviours, it is essential to examine the current knowledge of one of the main actors involved in the implementation of citizen participation and how this connects with their (possible) concerns towards participatory mechanisms, which they can have despite overall favourability and support (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment 2019).

Following this line, the present research explores politicians' knowledge of different participatory mechanisms and reflects on why such familiarity matters. This study is important for two main reasons: 1) While there are mechanisms that have been taking place since the 1970s–80s, such as advisory councils, referendums or opinion surveys, there are others that are relatively novel—citizens' assemblies and citizens' initiative review (CIR)—that involve new developments with which elected representatives may have been less acquainted. Thus, a lack of knowledge could act as a barrier to the implementation of participatory policies; 2) in line with the above, representatives' attitudes may vary according to their knowledge, as it could shape their understanding of the challenges of implementing participatory mechanisms. Hence, this study also examines the potential relationship between politicians' knowledge and their concerns about participatory mechanisms.

This paper aims to shed light on these different questions by exploring the responses to an online survey conducted among Spanish elected representatives at the local, regional, and national levels (N=340). We examine how much knowledge they have, mainly how familiar they are (in quantitative terms) with different participatory mechanisms, and which ones they know the most. Then, we investigate what factors (socio-demographic and political) are related to political elites' knowledge and, finally, if this knowledge differentiates their assessment of potential shortcomings in citizen participation. The answers to two survey questions related to political knowledge on participatory mechanisms are used: one closed and one open-ended. The results show that knowledge is mainly related to ideology, age and receptiveness towards citizens' participatory initiatives. The findings also indicate that the assessment of citizen participation shortcomings varies with the level of knowledge of participatory tools. In all, politicians more familiar with participatory mechanisms are less concerned about different aspects regarding citizen participation.

The article is organised as follows. First, we lay the groundwork for what we already know and what is lacking about the relationship between elected representatives, knowledge and attitudes about citizen participation, introducing the hypotheses of this investigation. Then, we describe the Spanish scenario to understand the particularities of citizen participation in the country. Next, we explain how the survey data was collected and how it has been used. Subsequently, results start with a short descriptive data analysis. Then, observed knowledge

of political elites is tested using a logistic regression. In order to approach our third aim, results on the elites' assessments of citizens' participation shortcomings are developed, showing how knowledge matters for them. Finally, political implications of the results are discussed.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 A gap in academic literature: representatives' political knowledge

Political knowledge refers to factual information about politics stored in long-term memory (Carpini & Keeter 1996). Most research has focused on the citizenry, examining their knowledge of political topics and differences among social groups (Galston 2001; Tolbert, McNeal & Smith 2003; Jerit, Barabas & Bolsen 2006; Fraile 2014). However, there has been little attention given to understanding the knowledge that elected politicians possess, especially regarding the various forms of institutional citizen participation.

Current knowledge about political elites and citizen participation merely relates to recent literature on attitudes and preferences towards different processes and factors determining politicians' and public managers' support for participatory mechanisms (Svensson 2017; Junius et al. 2020; Pálsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir 2021; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle 2021a; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle 2021b). This literature highlights diverse factors that explain preferences. Those include general attitudinal frames like party ideology and the conception of their representative role (Junius et al. 2020). Other influential factors include their position within the party and chamber and years in office (Vallbé & Iglesias 2018; Rangoni, Bedock & Talukder 2023). Personal characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, or age have also been shown to influence attitudes towards participatory mechanisms (Close 2020; Heinelt 2013). However, these characteristics have been less frequently studied, and while there is evidence of their impact on attitudes, we still lack knowledge about whether and how they relate to familiarity with participatory mechanisms.

Apart from these factors, we claim that knowledge asymmetries are likely to arise primarily from two sources: 1) experience and 2) favourability or sympathy towards citizens' demands and preferences (Close 2020; Junius et al. 2020) in the context of representative democracy. This second aspect gathers different political variables that are presented from H2 to H4.

In the case of experience in office, policymakers with no prior political positions are often more open to implementing citizen participation (Rangoni, Bedock & Talukder 2023; Niessen et al. 2019). In Spain, support for civic engagement decreases with political experience (Vallbé & Iglesias 2018). Thus, differences in attitudes may indicate differences in knowledge. However, experience may also provide insight into various aspects and possibilities of citizen involvement in politics.

**H1:** *Elected representatives with previous political office experience will be more knowledgeable about participatory mechanisms.*

Additionally, this paper considers the conception of representatives' roles (Pitkin 1967; Junius et al. 2020; de Smedt et al. 2024). Representation involves the representative acting as the principal would. However, political representation is complex, generating the mandate-independence controversy: should representatives follow constituents' instructions, or should they act independently in pursuit of their welfare?

This aforementioned question highlights two different interpretations of the role of representatives. Politicians who favour the mandate view see representatives as delegates or spokespersons of their constituents, whereas those who advocate for independence view them as trustees, acting on their own judgement. This perspective shapes attitudes towards citizen participation, making some representatives more supportive than others and thus more inclined to gather information about it. For instance, 'delegates' are more likely to feel they must be closer to citizens' needs and opinions (De Smedt et al. 2024), so they can also be more attentive to ways for extending the influence of citizens in decision-making.

***H2:** Elected representatives with a 'delegate' view of their roles will be more knowledgeable about participatory mechanisms.*

Apart from how politicians conceive their representative role, some politicians may be more receptive to citizen demands, implying favourability towards participatory mechanisms. Some studies affirm that most representatives sympathise with hearing citizens' demands, and they only reject participation when they are uncertain about their role (Radzik-Maruszak et al. 2020) or when they believe it is not possible given the circumstances (Sønderskov 2020). Despite their final considerations to implement (or not) an innovative participatory tool, we hypothesise that representatives who view citizen participation positively will be more knowledgeable about participatory tools.

***H3:** Elected representatives receptive to citizen demands will be more knowledgeable about participatory mechanisms.*

In spite of its widespread adoption, participatory practices have been pioneered by left-leaning parties (Sintomer 2005; Font & Galais 2011; Heinelt 2013), and differences in implementation and understanding of participation persist between parties and distinct ideologies (Becerril-Viera, Ganuza & Rico Motos 2024; Alves & Allegretti 2012). Thus, ideology's importance emerges as a hypothesis.

***H4:** Elected representatives inclined to the left will be more knowledgeable about participatory mechanisms.*

#### 2.1.1 The role of knowledge on politicians' concerns about citizen participation

The information asymmetries we expect to find among representatives may also shape the degree of concern politicians express about specific shortcomings associated

with citizen participation. Attitudes toward citizen participation are often studied in terms of favourability or support. However, regardless of whether their overall attitudes towards participation are more or less favourable, elected representatives often express different concerns associated with participatory mechanisms (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment 2019), not necessarily reflecting a negative stance towards participation. As such, before adopting participatory mechanisms, politicians evaluate potential advantages and drawbacks (Liao & Schachter 2018; Rangoni et al. 2023).

For instance, politicians often focus on how implementation of these mechanisms may impact institutional performance (Sønderskov 2020; Eckerd & Heidelberg 2019). These concerns are often framed within an instrumental perspective, where the primary focus is on the extent to which participatory mechanisms align with institutional performance and policy goals. While this perspective is dominant in the literature explaining public managers' attitudes (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle 2021b), there are other considerations that are in the minds of politicians regarding citizen involvement in decision-making, such as citizens' knowledge, individualised interests or general mistrust (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment 2019; Vabo & Winsvold 2023: 923; Uddin, Mori & Adhikari 2019). However, the role of knowledge or politicians' familiarity in moderating these two categories of possible concerns remains unexplored: institutional efficiency and citizen competence.

Research on related contexts involving citizens has shown that familiarity or knowledge can foster more positive perceptions of innovative institutions or political representatives. For instance, familiarity and experience with mini publics fosters more support for them (Goldberg et al., 2024). Furthermore, Esterling et al. (2015) demonstrated that citizens' familiarity with their congressional representatives positively influenced their attitudes towards them. Drawing on this, we propose the following:

***H5:** Elected representatives with a high level of knowledge will be less concerned about the challenges commonly associated with citizen participation.*

The next section presents the case, the data and the methods used.

### 3. Case, Data, and Methods

#### 3.1 The Spanish case

The Spanish context is not markedly different from other Western states in terms of the development of participatory mechanisms, albeit with uneven implementation between them. Top-down citizen participation in Spain originated primarily at the local level in the late 1970s, with advisory councils as a prominent institution. This initiative was predominantly promoted by leftist governments and mayors (Navarro 1999; Martínez-Palacios 2021). During this period, neighbourhood associations, unions, and

other influential stakeholders advocated for a renewed approach to citizen participation, consistent with trends in the broader European-Mediterranean region. Several municipalities in Spain subsequently embraced this participatory culture (Aguar & Navarro 2000), which also facilitated the adoption of collaborative governance, referenda, and opinion surveys to solicit citizen input and preferences.

Then, other forms of citizen participation emerged. In the 2000s, we witnessed the establishment of the first examples of participatory budgeting, primarily in Southern Spain (Ganuzá Fernández 2005; Ganuzá & Francés 2014), which continue to be among the most replicated forms of public engagement. More recently, mini-publics have gained traction in Spain's participatory landscape, although their implementation remains limited, especially at the national level. The first national citizens' assembly convened in December 2021, with subsequent regional and local assemblies following suit.

Given this trajectory of participatory practices, it is timely to enquire why elites are adopting these mechanisms. However, it is crucial to first understand what elected representatives know about them and why all this matters for the democratic innovation field.

### 3.2 Sampling and data collection

We need to measure how much elected representatives know about participatory mechanisms and how this connects with their concerns regarding citizen participation through quantitative data. This study utilises a dataset derived from a web survey administered to Spanish political elites in the context of a project funded by the EU. The survey questionnaire encompassed their perspectives on current decision-making processes, their familiarity with various participatory mechanisms and assessments of potential participation challenges.

Fieldwork began in December 2021 and concluded in February 2022, with an average response time of 27 minutes. The dataset consists of 340 responses from Spanish politicians across three administrative levels—national, regional, and local. First, at the national level, we collected information from the members of the national Parliament (*Congreso de los Diputados*, MPs) and the Senate (MSs). At the regional level, we approached the information of members of all regional Parliaments (from 17 regions in Spain, MRPs). Finally, at the local level, we collected information on the municipal council members, including the mayor, of the 30 largest cities in different regions.

Accessing information for MPs, senators and parliamentary groups was facilitated by publicly available institutional webpages, which enabled comprehensive coverage of these representatives at both the national and regional levels. In the case of the local level, we used web scraping and direct contact via email or phone where information was inaccessible. This methodological approach is standard in studies involving elite populations due to their limited accessibility (Kertzer & Renshon 2022).

The final sample is compositionally balanced, albeit slightly under-represented by state-level representatives

**Table 1:** Response rates by governmental level and political party group.

Governmental Level	Response rate (%)	N
State level	11	61
Regional level	15	159
Local level	15	120
<b>Political Party</b>		
Unidas Podemos/IU/Others left (Radical left)	18	38
Regional parties	17	51
Ciudadanos (Liberal)	17	25
Socialist Party (Social democratic)	16	139
Mixed group <sup>3</sup> /not attached	16	5
Vox (Radical right)	10	12
Local parties	9	19
Popular Party (Conservative and Christian democratic)	8	51

Source: own elaboration.

and those affiliated with right-wing or local parties, as it happens in similar studies (Junius et al. 2020). **Table 1** shows an overall response rate of 14%, with a noticeable decrease at the national level (11%), primarily influenced by lower responses from the Spanish Congress. Examination of response rates by a political party or party group reveals lower rates for participants from right-wing political parties and local ones. Despite these variations, the final sample diversity adequately facilitates exploration of representatives' knowledge and perceptions of citizen participation in decision-making processes.

### 3.3 Measuring political knowledge through survey questions

The measurement of political knowledge in surveys has been extensively debated (Carpini & Keeter 1993; Sturgis, Allum & Smith 2008; Rapeli 2022). This discussion typically revolves around two primary questions: 1) What do respondents need to know? 2) How do you best assess that knowledge? In this study, our focus on knowledge of participatory tools concerns respondents' familiarity with various types of mechanisms. This encompasses general awareness, rather than detailed knowledge (origins, objectives, limitations, etc.).

To effectively capture this information, multiple questions and formats were employed. It is widely acknowledged that a single question inadequately measures knowledge (Carpini & Keeter 1993; 1996; Sturgis, Allum & Smith 2008). Moreover, given the reliance on web-based survey data, measures were taken to minimise response biases, including potential dishonest responses (Rapeli 2022; Janezic & Gallego 2020; López & Hillygus 2018).

The main starting point is what has been named declared knowledge, which builds on the responses to a closed-ended question on whether or not they knew about six types of participatory mechanisms: advisory councils, mini publics, participatory budgeting, citizen-initiated referenda, opinion surveys and primaries in political parties.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the answers to the closed-ended question have to be checked. Hence, this paper also examines the answers to an open-ended question, which was previously asked and in which elected representatives had to briefly mention the participatory mechanisms they knew about, giving a maximum of two examples (see survey questions in Appendix 2). In our database, we have 163 completed answers with one or two methods, and 177 expressed either not knowing (155) or not answering (22). In this case, the comparison between both answers allows for the construction of the dependent variable, observed knowledge.

To gain deeper insights into their knowledge and comment briefly on the participatory mechanisms most frequently mentioned by politicians, the results will be completed with a short analysis of this open-ended question using Atlas.ti software. The responses were coded as context code units (Prasad 2008: 13) following the categories presented in the closed-ended question: 1) advisory councils, 2) mini publics, 3) participatory budgeting, 4) referenda, 5) opinion surveys, and 6) others. In the responses, these mechanisms were explicitly mentioned or were explained through an example. Since the latter type of response was more common, a detailed coding scheme with descriptions and examples of indirect mentions or references for each category is provided in the appendix (see Table 1 in Appendix 3).

To explore differences in observed knowledge among political elites, a logistic regression was employed. Thus, the dependent variable is a dummy that stems from combining the closed-ended question and the open one: politicians who provide an answer to the open-ended question and declare to know at least four mechanisms of the list are considered to possess high knowledge (N = 158, 47%, value 1). The rest are coded as low knowledge (N = 180, 53%, value 0).<sup>5</sup>

The independent variables (IVs) include four main variables corresponding to each hypothesis, alongside several control variables capturing the politicians' profile and political context. Notably, previous experience in office (H1) is coded as a dummy variable indicating whether respondents held office prior to the 2019 mandate (no previous experience, value 0; previous experience, value 1). Another variable aligns with the conceptualisation of their role as representatives (H2), drawing from Pitkin's (1967) distinction between trustees and delegates. This is operationalised by agreement or disagreement with the statement 'I know what is best for the public based on my professional expertise' (delegate, value 1; trustee, value 2).<sup>6</sup> This distinction relies on one fundamental idea of this two-role conception: whether the representative relies on his

or her own judgement or the judgement of a third party to determine the substance of the good at which he/she aims (Rehfeld 2009).

Additionally, the model captures the receptiveness towards citizens' initiatives (H3), and following the same logic of operationalisation mentioned above, we have considered the agreement or disagreement with the following statement: 'Governments should be more receptive to the political initiatives organised by civil society and social movements'. Then, pro-citizens' initiatives value 1, and anti-citizens' initiatives value 2. Furthermore, the model has also incorporated ideology as an IV in order to test H4. In this case, ideology is a discrete variable from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right).

Also, we add three control variables.<sup>7</sup> Gender is captured as a dummy variable (men, value 0; women, value 1). Also, age is included as a continuous variable to further explore sociodemographic factors. Lastly, given the varying development of participatory mechanisms across different levels of government, a categorical variable distinguishes between local, regional, and national levels.

**Tables 2 and 3** summarise the descriptive statistics of the numeric and categorical independent variables used in the logistic regression performed.

**Table 2:** Independent variables' descriptives\*.

Variable	Average	Min	Max	SD
<b>*'I know what it best for the public based on my expertise'</b>	1.99	1	5	0.76
<b>*'Governments should be more receptive to...'</b>	3.41	1	5	0.82
<b>Ideology</b>	3.76	0	10	2.38
<b>Age</b>	50.16	24	76	9.79

Source: own elaboration.

\*Original variables of *Representation role concept* and *Receptiveness towards citizens' initiatives* without standardization.

**Table 3:** Categorical independent variables' descriptives.

Variable	Categories	%	N
<b>Experience</b>	No previous experience	39.9	134
	Previous experience	60.1	202
<b>Representation role concept</b>	Delegate	13.2	45
	Trustee	86.8	295
<b>Receptiveness citizens' initiatives</b>	Pro-citizens' initiatives	81.5	277
	Anti-citizens' initiatives	18.5	63
<b>Levels of government</b>	Local	35.3	120
	Regional	46.8	159
	National	17.9	61
<b>Gender</b>	Men	60.9	206
	Women	39.1	132

Source: own elaboration.

**3.4 Potential participation shortcomings**

Finally, to explore the relationship between knowledge and politicians’ concerns on citizen participation (H5), several questions were used that align with concerns related to both citizen competence and institutional efficiency. **Table 4** below presents the statements that respondents rated in terms of importance (with the smallest number showing the greatest concern), along with descriptive statistics for each variable.

**Table 4:** Variables descriptives of assessments of potential citizen participation shortcomings (1–5).

	Potential problems involving citizens in policy-making	Average	SD
Citizen competence	People don’t want to be involved	1.97	0.81
	People are ill informed	2.56	1.30
Institutional efficiency	Decline of effectiveness	3.85	1.52
	Participation leads to conflict	4.08	1.53
	Too much time and effort	2.54	1.31

Source: own elaboration.

The next section presents the main descriptive results, and the role played by explanatory factors related to knowledge are tested with a logistic regression. Finally, the relationship between knowledge and the perception of potential problems for citizen participation is addressed.

**4. Results**

**4.1 How much do elected representatives know of participatory mechanisms?**

Elected representatives were surveyed about their knowledge of various participatory mechanisms. Overall, more than 90% of respondents reported familiarity with

advisory councils, participatory budgeting, referenda and opinion surveys, and 80% in the case of mini-publics (see Figure 1 in the Appendix).

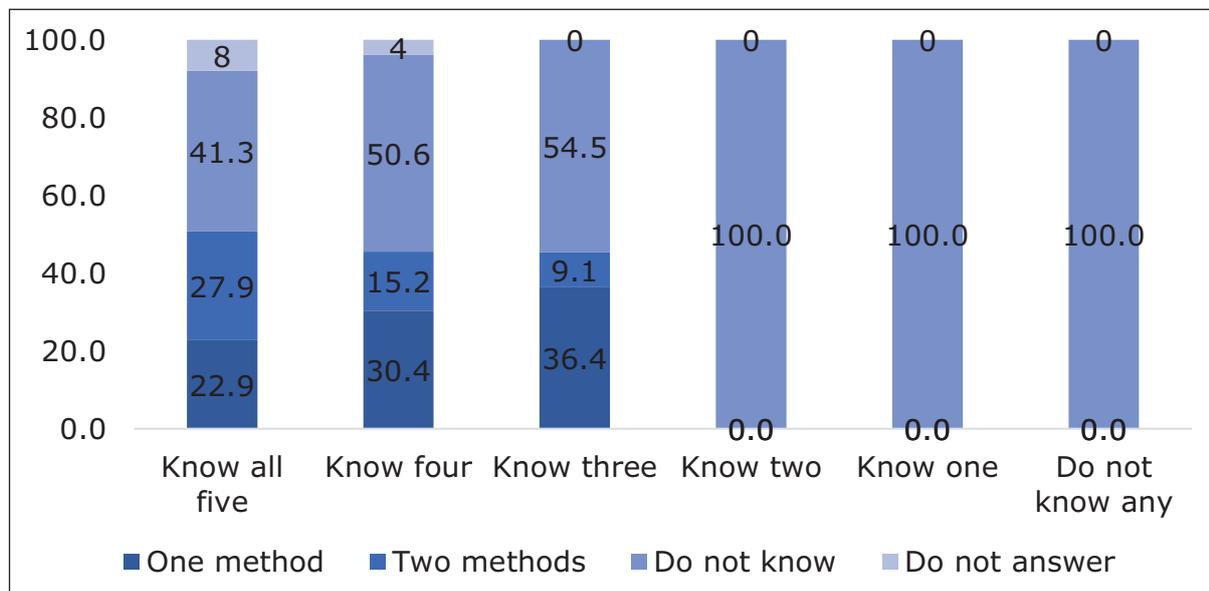
However, this aggregate view obscures individual-level nuances and does not capture informational asymmetries among representatives. The self-reported knowledge is notably high: 71% of surveyed politicians claimed to know all participatory mechanisms, and 23% reported familiarity with at least four mechanisms.

Despite these high percentages, comparing declared knowledge with responses to the open-ended question reveals a sharp discrepancy: nearly half of the elected representatives (45.6%) did not name any mechanisms, while 6.5% did not respond. These non-responses may contradict their self-reported knowledge in the closed-ended question. However, we must also be cautious and consider the possibility of non-response due to the time-consuming nature of open-ended questions (Neuert et al. 2021). That said, these questions were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire and structured according to existing evidence to minimise non-response and improve response quality (Schuman & Presser 1979).

**Figure 1** below compares these responses, indicating that elected representatives possess less knowledge than self-reported. For instance, among those claiming to know all five participatory mechanisms (70% of respondents), only half provided one or two examples in the open-ended question. Similarly, among those claiming knowledge of four mechanisms (23%), only 45.6% responded to the open-ended question.

**4.2 Participatory mechanisms known by politicians**

The responses to the open-ended question were categorised following the response categories of the closed-ended question. From the 163 answers, only 114 were valid<sup>8</sup> to be categorised (see descriptions and examples of each category in Table 1 in Appendix 3).



**Figure 1:** Valid answers to the open –ended question, by declared level of knowledge.

**Figure 2** shows that participatory budgeting and advisory councils were the most frequently mentioned, each garnering over 30% of mentions, likely due to their prevalent implementation in Spain (see 3.1 section above). Referenda and opinion surveys were also commonly cited, while mini-publics were less frequently mentioned, with respondents typically referring in this category to deliberative citizens' assemblies.

Other participatory mechanisms mentioned emphasised proximity to citizens and community engagement. Respondents described these as ways to maintain transparency and close community ties, such as 'a citizen participation process for drafting a city model and a general urban development plan'.

Having identified the most well-known participatory tools among political elites, the next section examines the factors influencing this knowledge.

**4.3 Is knowledge different between distinct representatives' profiles?**

To further understand the knowledge of Spanish political representatives, a logistic regression analysis was conducted with observed knowledge as the dependent variable.

**Table 5** below shows the degree of high knowledge for each of the values of the three categorical independent variables.

Now, the results in **Table 6** indicate that knowledge is associated with certain factors related to representatives' political stances, and some hypotheses are confirmed (H3, H4) while others are rejected (H1, H2).

The odds ratio indicates, following this formula  $Percentage\ Change = (OR - 1) \times 100$ , that receptiveness to citizens' initiatives is the variable that best explains knowledge, confirming hypothesis 3 regarding sympathy

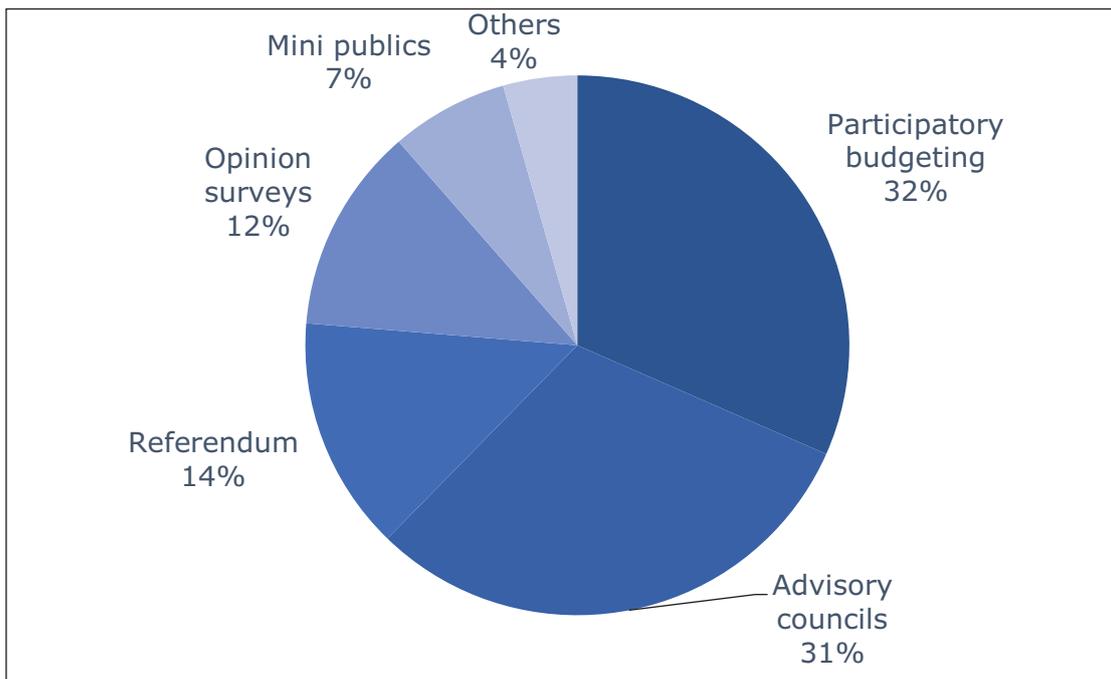
towards citizens' voices in decision-making. In this sense, rejecting citizens' initiatives decreases the probabilities of having a high level of knowledge by 45%. **Figure 3** illustrates the predictive margins of this variable.

Also as hypothesised (H4), the negative odds ratio of ideology indicates that a right-leaning ideological stance decreases the level of knowledge. As such, an increase of one unit in the ideological scale decreases the probability by 12% of having a high level of knowledge of participatory mechanisms.

However, contrary to expectations, hypotheses 1 and 2 do not reach statistical significance. Experience in office (H1) does not influence knowledge levels, as it seems to shape attitudes. Additionally, the elected representatives' conception of their role (H2) is not correlated with

**Table 5:** Categorical main independent variables' relation with high knowledge (%).

Independent variables	High knowledge (%)
<b>Experience in office</b>	
Experience	60.9
No previous experience	39.1
<b>Representation concept</b>	
Delegate	12.7
Trustee	87.3
<b>Receptiveness towards citizens' initiatives</b>	
Pro-initiatives	86.71
Anti-initiatives	13.38



**Figure 2:** Participatory mechanisms mentioned by elected representatives in the open question.

knowledge levels. It was hypothesised that ‘trustees’ who believe in making decisions independently would know less about participatory mechanisms, but the data does

**Table 6:** Binary linear logistic regression model for observed knowledge.

Independent variables	Odds ratio	Standard errors
Experience (Ref.: No previous experience)	1.187	.244
Representation concept (Ref. : Trustee)	1.058	.344
Receptiveness (Ref. : Pro-initiatives)	<b>0.549**</b>	<b>.305</b>
Ideology	<b>0.880**</b>	<b>.050</b>
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Level (Ref. Local)	Regional 0.726 State 0.801	.265 .343
Sex (Ref. Male)	1.233	.234
Age	<b>0.980*</b>	<b>.012</b>
Constant	4.341	.659
N	338	
-2 log verosim	440.9	
R2 Nagelkerke	.07	

Note: \*<0.1; \*\* <0.05;\*\*\*<0.001.

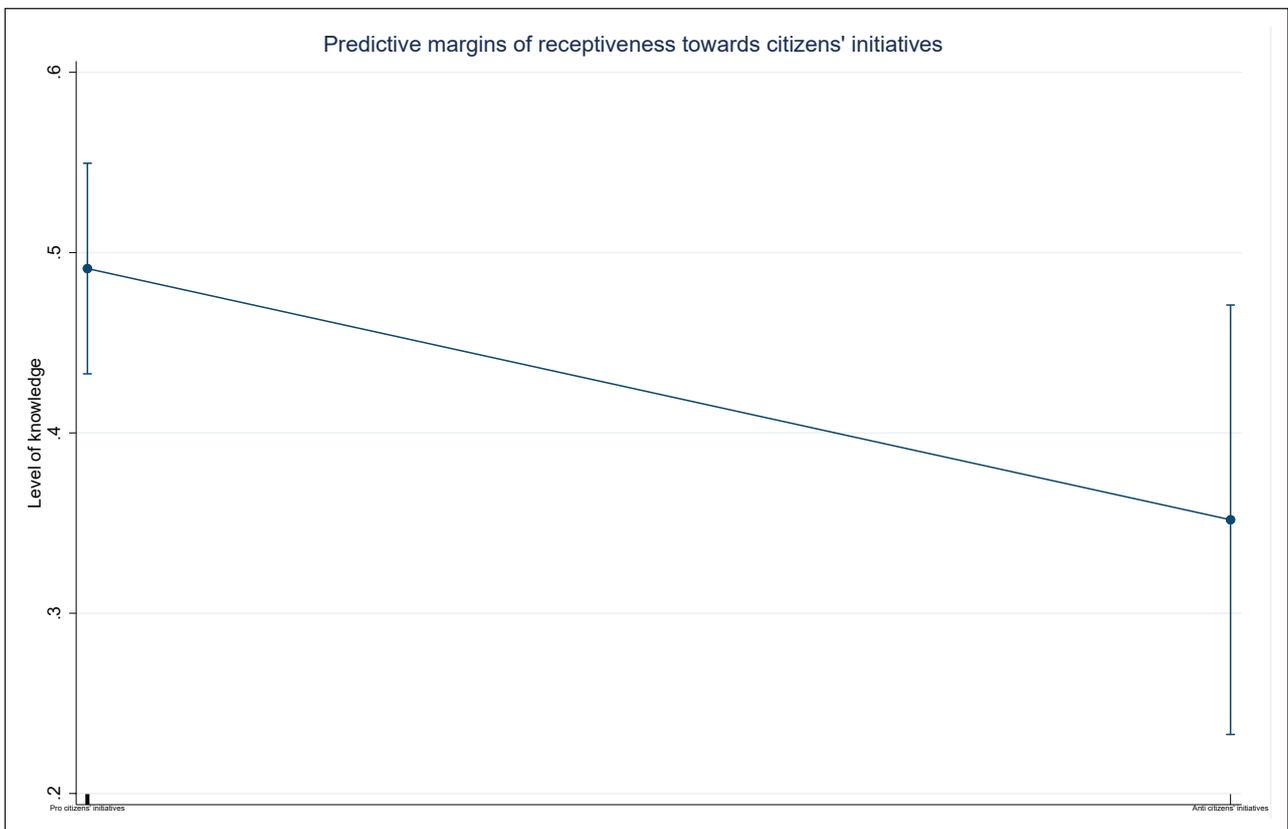
not support this claim. The results suggest that sympathy for citizens’ initiatives is more determinative.

Regarding control variables, the respondents’ gender and the governmental level do not significantly influence knowledge. However, age is found to be a significant factor, although the effect is weaker: older representatives are less knowledgeable about participatory mechanisms, with the probability of high knowledge decreasing by 2% per additional year of age. As some of these participatory mechanisms are entrenched in an innovative way of understanding the relationship between citizens and politicians, or political participation in general, young politicians might be more aware of them, not because experience in office is significant, but rather because a new culture of participation is gaining momentum in democracy and democratic discourses. The political and social implications of these results are further discussed in the conclusion section.

**4.4 Why knowledge matters**

Does this knowledge about participatory mechanisms influence the assessment of common concerns regarding citizen participation?

The results show that most politicians are more concerned about citizens’ lack of interest in politics and whether they are poorly informed than about potential conflicts or reduced effectiveness resulting from participation (see **Table 7**). Interestingly, conflict is the least concerning issue for politicians. This suggests that politicians might perceive participation shortcomings



**Figure 3:** Receptiveness towards citizens’ initiatives and knowledge (predictive margins).

**Table 7:** Relation between politicians' attitudes and knowledge (mean).

	Citizen participation shortcomings	High knowledge	Low knowledge	F	p	Eta <sup>2*</sup>
<b>Citizen competence</b>	<b>People don't want to be involved</b>	2.11	1.84	9.52	0.002	0.028**
	<b>People are ill informed</b>	2.76	2.39	6.90	0.009	0.020**
<b>Institutional efficiency</b>	<b>Decline of effectiveness</b>	4.08	3.67	6.10	0.014	0.018**
	<b>Participation leads to conflict</b>	4.27	3.94	3.90	0.049	0.011**
	<b>Too much time and effort</b>	2.64	2.46	1.66	0.198	0.005

\*Note: \*<0.1; \*\* <0.05;\*\*\*<0.001.

primarily as a citizen competence issue rather than an institutional efficiency issue, which is commonly regarded as the main concern of public managers (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle 2021b).

As hypothesised (H5), differences emerge between respondents with high and low levels of knowledge. The importance assigned to potential problems decreases among those with higher levels of knowledge, with scores actually increasing towards 5. An ANOVA test shows that a significant relationship between knowledge and politicians' appreciation of participation exists, except for the perception that participation takes too much time and effort.

Results suggest that knowledge about participatory mechanisms affects how individuals evaluate various aspects of citizen participation's shortcomings. However, the magnitude of this impact is relatively small.<sup>9</sup> These insights imply that while increasing knowledge about participatory mechanisms may slightly shift participation perceptions and concerns, other factors likely play a substantial role in shaping these evaluations, which should be further explored in the future.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In recent decades, we have witnessed an increase in government initiatives to implement participatory mechanisms aimed at including citizens in public decision-making. Much of the literature focuses on the main actors, citizens, and politicians, arguing that the latter are attempting to cope with declining trust in institutions. Thus, citizen participation is often seen as a way to complement and address the challenges of the current democratic system (Pateman 1970). However, such an ambitious agenda requires the knowledge of these key actors to set these mechanisms in motion. While understanding attitudes and preferences is crucial, and some scholars have been approaching these questions (Close 2020; Junius et al. 2021), we have so far been one step ahead of the logical decision-action chain, in which knowledge is an indispensable piece. Until now, no studies have considered this aspect, and this is the first to approach politicians' knowledge on citizen participation. Thus, this paper aims to bridge this gap in the literature by examining how much Spanish politicians know about citizen participation and the factors related to this knowledge.

The findings suggest that knowledge, although not scarce, is unevenly distributed among the different

Spanish political representatives. Most surveyed politicians claim to know almost all participatory mechanisms, but when asked in greater detail, their level of knowledge decreases. This lack of knowledge may not hinder their implementation, given that politicians are supported by other actors (technicians, advisors, etc.) who can initiate these participatory processes. Nevertheless, these results should prompt us to reconsider our assumptions about who primarily promotes participatory mechanisms, as they also suggest that knowledge affects politicians' concerns regarding citizen competence and institutional efficiency in participation. It may be that, as hypothesised by Beauvais, Warren & Yaylacı (2019), politicians are familiar only with the most commonly implemented mechanisms but unaware of newer, more innovative forms of participation. For instance, participatory budgeting and advisory councils are the most known and mentioned participatory mechanisms by elected representatives, as they are the most implemented in Spain (Ganuza & Francés 2014; Font & Alarcón 2022). Other, potentially more attractive participatory tools for citizens or in terms of democratic goods might not be implemented due to politicians' lack of knowledge.

One of the most relevant results of this study is that knowledge of participatory mechanisms is related to several factors that, at first glance, have little to do with their political position in the representative system but rather with the ideological spectrum, age, and interest in citizens' initiatives and participation. First, the present work distinguishes between those who think governments should be receptive to citizens' initiatives and those who do not. This distinction proved significant in possessing higher knowledge of participatory mechanisms, confirming H3. Also, those who are more knowledgeable lean towards the left of the ideological spectrum (H4). Participatory mechanisms are now a more widespread reality, where the government's political orientation seems to matter less in the implementation of such processes (Pogrebinschi 2023; Sintomer et al. 2012; Ramírez & Welp 2011). However, greater knowledge about these mechanisms does appear to be an ideological matter.

Furthermore, the results indicate that age is a relevant factor in explaining the level of knowledge of elected representatives. Older politicians are less familiar with participatory mechanisms. Since young elected representatives are under-represented in Western democracies (Espírito-Santo, Verge & Morales 2019; Stockemer & Sundström 2019), this could pose a challenge

for the diffusion of knowledge around these practices and their eventual implementation.

Finally, we analysed whether representatives' knowledge of participatory mechanisms influences their assessment of potential problems with citizen participation. It appears that politicians are more concerned with citizen competences than with institutional efficiency, contrary to public managers. These results, even if exploratory, are relevant because they demonstrate that knowledge matters as it shapes politicians' concerns about citizen participation. More knowledgeable politicians give less importance to problems related to citizens' capacities and willingness to participate, which are the most salient issues identified by them. Those with a high level of knowledge also believe that effectiveness does not decline with the use of these participatory mechanisms or that they lead to conflict. Still, while knowledge about participatory mechanisms influences perceptions of participation issues, the extent of this influence is modest.

This paper's contribution is particularly important as it is the first to approach elites' knowledge. It is also significant for the participatory and deliberative democracy field, as it gains insight into one unexplored aspect that can explain the behaviours of elected representatives. The paper helps us better understand the relationship between knowledge and other key variables, especially the association of knowledge and problems perceived by politicians when approaching citizen participation in decision-making. Now that we understand that the level of knowledge among elected representatives is not particularly high, it is essential to provide them with the necessary information to address the perceived challenges of citizen participation. If interest, ideology, and age are related to knowledge, scholars and stakeholders already know which profiles are less likely to foster citizen participation tools due to insufficient information.

However, this study has several limitations that are important to consider. The analysis is constrained to one country-specific case, and although it covers all administrative levels, future studies could benefit from a larger and comparative sample, as distinct cultural and political contexts could explain different knowledge levels and approaches to potential citizen participation concerns. The statistical analysis could be refined to delve deeper into the causality of these relationships. The questions addressed here relate to the knowledge politicians express, but we need to know more about how experience and participation in such mechanisms shape their attitudes towards citizen participation, an issue that has been little studied so far. Even if an ANOVA test lets us explore relations between the variables, further research on the drivers and consequences of concerns about citizen participation is needed.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While slight differences in meaning exist, this paper uses the terms 'participatory mechanisms' and 'participatory tools' interchangeably to refer to various forms of citizen participation in decision-making.

<sup>2</sup> We use the terms 'elected representatives', 'politicians' and 'political elites' as synonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Mixed group (Grupo Mixto in Spanish) is a parliamentary group made up of members who do not meet the requirements for forming their own independent group.

<sup>4</sup> Primaries in political parties have been excluded from the analyses since they are mostly an instrument in intra-party democratisation (Sandri, Seddone & Venturino 2015). That is, primaries do not concern most ordinary citizens and their engagement in politics.

<sup>5</sup> Other options for constructing the dependent variable (observed knowledge) were considered and ultimately discarded. Firstly, relying solely on the answers to the open-ended question was deemed insufficiently robust. Additionally, the distribution of responses to both the open and closed questions necessitated this recoding.

<sup>6</sup> The original variables relating to H2 and H3 were ordinals ranging from 1 to 5 (see Appendix). These variables were recoded as dummy categories for the logistic regression because the previous log-odds plot revealed a non-linear relationship, indicating that treating them as continuous variables would not accurately capture their effect on the dependent variable.

<sup>7</sup> The education level of respondents has not been considered, as all respondents have at least post-secondary education.

<sup>8</sup> Invalid answers are those that do not refer to methods of involving citizens in decision-making. These often are responses that are too vague, refer to non-institutional forms of expression, or do not describe a participatory mechanism. For instance, some answers refer to a territory in which citizen participation is known to be relevant, such as Switzerland, but they do not mention nor explain any participatory mechanism.

<sup>9</sup> The measure of association (Eta squared) indicated that the knowledge of participatory mechanisms has a small but significant effect on evaluations (ranging from 0.028 to 0.005).

## Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix 1 to 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1675.s1>

## Ethics and Consent

The survey has been approved by the CSIC Ethics Committee on October 6, 2021.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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