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## Where Are the Boundaries of Deliberation and Participation? A Transatlantic Debate

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# Where Are the Boundaries of Deliberation and Participation? A Transatlantic Debate

## **Abstract**

This article uses recent empirical results from a comparative Southern European study to show that the participatory practices commonly developed in this area are quite different from some of the common ideas related to deliberation in the English-speaking world. One of the main differences lies in the characteristics of the promoters, since most of them are top-down experiences organized by public authorities. The other main difference lies in the role played by equality concerns, which are quite marginal in most of these processes. In other aspects, like the role of participation professionals or the existence of important inequalities in the participation of different groups of citizens, the experiences developed in this area are not as different from what most of the comparative research has shown.

## **Keywords**

Deliberation, public participation, citizen empowerment, democratic innovations, comparative analysis

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

The contours of socio-political objects are likely to be more controversial than those pertaining to the natural sciences. The precise definition of what is and what is not a social movement, a lobby or a protest event are behind many of the debates and controversies affecting each of these fields. There is no reason to expect that this same type of debate does not affect the public deliberation field. In fact, there are good reasons to think that, at this point, the discussion about what does or does not belong to the public deliberation field is much stronger than in any of the fields mentioned above.

There are three different but connected main reasons to have these expectations. First, the object being discussed is much more recent and we have more limited empirical evidence about it, especially at the comparative level. Second, as a result of the previous point, the academic subfield of public deliberation is also at a very early stage and has not reached a considerable level of institutionalization or even a creation of an agreed language and set of concepts. Third, the reality of deliberative practices around the globe shares a few common patterns that reflect the globalization of ideas and practices (e.g., the influence of deliberative ideals), but it also presents very different regional traditions that produce completely different sets of concepts and controversies.

One of the clearest regional-cultural differences is the one concerning the role attributed to participation and deliberation. The US and the English-speaking world in general are clear examples of a context where movements in this field over the last decades, both at the academic and at the practical level, have been dominated by the deliberative tradition<sup>1</sup>. Two recent exceptions are Pateman (2012), pointing at some of the important differences between both traditions, and the “Journal of Public Deliberation” monograph about Participatory Budgeting, which aims to establish a dialogue between both traditions (Wampler and Hatzkarp, 2012). In contrast, in the Southern European context, the deliberative tradition is incorporated into the broader “participatory” movement, where participation is the rallying force and deliberation is one of the more or less important participatory possibilities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The most important coalition of practitioners is called “National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue”, this publication is entitled “Journal of Public Deliberation” and in the purely academic production the domination of the “deliberative” label over the much less frequent “participation” label is quite obvious. This pattern is quite clear in most of the US and in other countries like Australia. In most of Western Europe a more mixed situation appears and this is reflected for example in the name of the section of the “European Consortium for Political Research” called “Democratic Innovations”, whose aim is to combine more deliberative and participative traditions (<http://www.democraticinnovations.net/>).

<sup>2</sup> In France, the broad coalition of academics, public institutions and other civil society organizations studying deliberative and participatory practices (“Groupement d’Intérêt scientifique”) is called “Participation du public, décision, démocratie participative” (Public Participation, Decision and Participatory Democracy) and it edits a journal called “Participations”. In Italy, the journal that incorporates these topics among their main concerns is called “Partecipazione e conflitto” (Participation and Conflict). Spain does not have a specific journal or

The main goal of this article is to contribute to the comparative debates about which are the boundaries of the public deliberation reality we discuss. In order to contribute to this common understanding we provide evidence showing the dominant characteristics of the deliberative-participative reality<sup>3</sup> in Southern Europe, establishing a debate on the basis of some questions that spring from the English-speaking academy, highly relevant on account of its prolific international influence. We claim that, in order to have a truly international dialogue, we should set up a certain general common understanding (to avoid the harder claim that we need a concrete common definition) about what constitutes the reality we are talking about. This understanding should incorporate the diverse empirical realities, conceptualizations and academic traditions of different regional-cultural traditions. To advance in this direction, we will present some traits of the Southern European reality in the field, which is in sharp contrast with the predominant reality in some of the English-speaking countries (as well as in other countries, as Iceland with a high grassroots participatory reality; Finland with a considerable influence of the academy; or Denmark with a more governmental leadership). We could go back to our previous examples of other neighboring political-science subjects to illustrate this argument. Some academic debates have been strongly determined by the literature of one country or region. For example, the debates about lobbies are mainly located in the US, while in other fields, like parties or welfare states, there is a higher influence of the continental European tradition of more structured parties and more interventionist states. In contrast, the field of social movements may be an example of an issue where, despite important differences about what is the prevailing model used to organize social movements in Vancouver, Kerala or Italy, the comparative literature has established a fruitful dialogue between these different continental traditions, as well as models and ideas that travel quite well along different realities (McAdam et al., 1996; Meyer et al., 2002).

In sum, our goal in this article will be to problematize what the content and meaning of deliberative practices are in the specific Southern European context, to enrich the discussion about the boundaries of this research tradition. After a review of some of the existing academic debates and a presentation of the methodology and the sources, we will present and discuss empirical evidence in four sections. First, we will discuss who the promoters of deliberative practices

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an organized community, but the participation frame also dominates the academic and the practitioner domains. To mention just an example, in the academic domain, the most recent Spanish political science conference (2013) had two groups devoted to participation (with no paper including the word “deliberation” in its title). Deliberation only appeared in the political theory section. See also section 2 in this article and Font and Galais (2012) for more details about the presence of the deliberative discourse in democratic innovation practices in the Spanish case, and Sintomer (2011) for the relationship between both concepts in the French case.

<sup>3</sup> “Public deliberation” would not be the term we would use to refer to the set of practices developed in Southern Europe. However, since we will argue that they play a similar role and act as functional equivalents for both engaged citizens and academic communities, we will call them “deliberative practices” on several occasions.

are in the Southern European case, focusing on the roles played by parties, political institutions and civil society in the development of deliberative practices. We will show that, contrary to the tendency in the US, most of the action has been developed by public institutions, and this is likely to have important effects on the practices developed. The following sections will be precisely devoted to these practices, the crucial role of professional organizers and the types of participants, showing once again sharp contrasts (but also similarities) with the prevailing tendencies in other world areas. Finally, the last section will discuss the substantive policies and the general goals of these practices. Even if some of these processes deal with social welfare issues, this concern is often not central, showing that social inequalities are not their main motivation. These six parts will be the basis for defining a very different set of deliberative practices and call for some discussion about the borders of our common object of interest and the validity of the picture we can draw about them in different world areas.

### **Thinking the Object: Previous Debates**

Through the presentation of the deliberative practices developed in the Southern European context we want to contribute to a certain descriptive and conceptual gerrymandering of the idea of public deliberation. To organize the presentation and discussion of these results, we will establish a dialogue with some academic contributions and especially with several of the interesting assumptions made in this Journal by Lee (2011). We will argue that some of these assumptions, presented as implicitly comparative, are rather a reflection of the reality of some of the English-speaking countries, and in some important points do not fit in with the existing Southern European reality.

The first assumption stated by Lee (2011) that we will question here is that the expansion of public deliberation processes is the result of a grassroots, progressive, bottom-up deliberation movement for political reform, rooted in the participatory democratic movements of the 1960s. These movements were decisive to create the cultural context, the individuals or some of the organizations which are decisive for the promotion of these processes, but their development in the Southern European context has been basically top-down, where bottom-up initiatives play a secondary role at the most.

The second important idea to be discussed in this article is the role played by inequalities in deliberative processes. These potential inequalities may be related to every aspect in the organization, from the role played by organizers, professionals or participants. For example, Bobbio (2010) discusses the existence of symmetrical and asymmetrical models, depending on the different degree of information and expertise of the different types of participants. In his two models of asymmetrical deliberation a clear disparity is present between participants, some of them (experts, activists, politicians) displaying more resolute and less malleable positions and better argumentative skills than ordinary citizens.

Deliberation addressed to citizens in general is linked to important debates regarding pre-existing inequalities in society. This is also the case with respect to civil society organizations, whose composition reflects the social, economic and cultural inequalities of the population. A central concern that appears in perspectives more reluctant towards participation (Fiorina, 1999) as well as in more sympathetic views (Lee, 2011), is that the widespread promotion of participatory practices could lead to the reproduction of social stratification and inequality. Socio-economic status, the material and social resources available to individual citizens and their place in social networks are central in determining the levels at which different people will engage with an experience (Brady et al., 1995; Lowndes et al., 2006). Apart from structural social inequalities, different attitudinal explanations underpin personal motivation towards being involved in participative mechanisms, especially in a context of general political disengagement (Pratchett & Wilson, 1996; Pratchett, 2004; Navarro & Font, 2013). The desire to deliberate is not universal and, as a result, many participatory processes involve only the most motivated citizens, and even when participants are randomly selected, some decline invitation (Levine et al., 2005). Lee's study in the USA (2011) shows both the presence of these features in participants and points out that the majority of practitioners surveyed did not consider equity and diversity to be a central concern in their field.

Finally, the third important debate we address refers to the impact of deliberation. The most extended view is that most public deliberation processes do not directly alter public decisions and actions (Levine et al., 2005). Suspicion may spread about the limited scope of the political process or even about manipulation and co-optation of these arenas by political elites to legitimize their own decisions (Smith, 2009). There are different examples of how these problems can develop. Lowndes et al (2001) found that only one third of local authorities in the UK felt that public participation entailed significant influence on decision-making. Ulbig (2008) argues that giving people a voice is not enough. If this voice is often perceived to have no political influence, the result may be more detrimental than failing to provide any avenue for citizen expression at all (Font and Navarro, 2013). Disappointment with participation is highlighted by NGOs or community groups commonly reporting unsatisfactory participatory experiences, for example, relating to the lack of meaningful involvement with a government aiming to maintain control over processes and the shaping of results (Head, 2007). Alves and Allegretti (2012) have related empowerment with duration of participative mechanisms, pointing out that many Participatory Budgeting programs in Portugal disappear from the local political agenda after a short time: only those processes that entail significant power in the citizens' hands are able to survive the different difficult circumstances that they face in the mid-term.

In regard to the comparative aspiration of this article, our claims face a major obstacle: the realities we discuss do not correspond with those being discussed by Lee (2011) and by much of the US literature. Different definitions of the object being discussed to start with end up almost necessarily in completely different

pictures of reality. To be clear about this, in our case, the definition of the universe we have more fully researched is that of any organized activity that attempts to involve citizenry in the discussion or in making decisions about local issues, and it has gained recognition as such from public institutions. This definition means that activities that start from below but are recognized as a legitimate space for public discussion over collective issues are included<sup>4</sup>. However, as we will show in section 4, most of the activities that fit this definition are in practice promoted and developed by public institutions themselves. It can be easily argued that, departing from this different definition, we must necessarily end up describing a different reality. Nonetheless, we claim that the different reality we describe is not only the product of different definitions made by researchers, but the outcome of quite different realities. Put briefly, the bottom-up deliberative dynamics that are more common in other countries (Lee, 2011) are almost inexistent in the Southern European context. For example, the Spanish “Occupy” movement (15M or “indignados” movement) has been really interesting for many reasons, including their extensive use of deliberative styles in their internal organizational activities<sup>5</sup>. However, these activities focus mostly on internal deliberations and, as such, are only loosely connected to the outside world and to specific policy-making processes. Neither of the two important research traditions existing in Spain<sup>6</sup>, neither the one dealing with social movements and protest events from below (Castells, 2012; Fishman, 2011) nor the one dealing with democratic innovations (Navarro, 2005; Subirats et al., 2001), has mentioned deliberative processes that have a collective goal (beyond the organizational activities of movements themselves) and that are developed without any kind of institutional participation<sup>7</sup>.

### **Drawing the Landscape: Sources of Information**

We will provide empirical evidence using different sources. Our main source is the collection of 552 participatory experiences developed mostly at the local level

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, this is the case with the Sectorial Advisory councils for young people’s issues, which in many cases are networks of young people’s associations formed from below, but recognized as the main partner for youth-related policy and debate by local authorities.

<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, the movement is innovative (Nez, 2012). Even if assembly practices have always existed in very diverse social movements, the emphasis on consensus, in respect to different points of view and on avoiding domination of assemblies by the core group of militants represent a certain break with the most common practices of other alternative movements (Rucht, 2012; Mutz, 2006), where assembly practices had always existed but were often more dominated by adversarial style practices.

<sup>6</sup> Similar arguments could be applied to the French (Bacqué and Sintomer, 2010; Neveu, 2011) and Italian cases (Bobbio and Giannetti, 2007). For a slightly different version that highlights some differences in the Italian case see Della Porta et al. (2014).

<sup>7</sup> If these deliberative practices had some kind of institutional recognition, they would be incorporated into the reality we will describe throughout the article. We should only be concerned about missing important pieces of evidence if these practices existed, but did not have this institutional recognition.

in three Spanish and two Italian regions. These data have been collected by Internet data mining in the context of a comparative research project<sup>8</sup>.

Focusing on the Southern European region allows us to cover an area that encompasses certain homogeneity in political, social, economic and cultural terms. We have chosen three countries that share a great deal in terms of politics and citizen participation in particular. Spain, France and Italy are all characterized by a strong left/right divide, by low levels of political trust and all of them have a significant presence of former communist parties. In all three countries, governments are not very open to citizen participation, nor is legislation especially favorable to it, although all three have strong traditions of radical social movements. Participation devices usually tend to be a “political” matter rather than a mere “managerial” one<sup>9</sup>. The transfer of knowledge between the three countries in the domain of citizen participation has also been significant. These particular political culture and institutional traditions could affect the design and outputs of participation and therefore deserve a specific focus.

We have selected a few regions that have municipalities with active participation policies, but also certain diversity in political and economic terms. Thus, we have rich (Catalonia, Madrid, Tuscany) and poor regions (Andalusia, Apulia) and different degrees of support for participatory policies from the regional governments. Table 1 provides a summary of the most important policies to set the contextual stage where these experiences take place.

The Catalonia dataset was created in 2008, covering the participatory experiences developed during the period 2001-2008. Data was collected from official reports, other databases and Internet searches. The mapping cannot claim to be a representative picture of all the local participation experiences developed in Catalonia, but it is quite diverse in terms of types of municipalities or methodologies used. The Tuscany dataset was created in 2009, covering the period 2000-2008 and using the same research protocol. Data was collected via the Internet, starting from existing collections of experiences. The three remaining datasets (Andalusia, Madrid and Apulia) were set up in 2010, covering all municipalities above 1,000 inhabitants in Apulia and Madrid and a sample including half of Andalusian municipalities. The comparative database of the three regions was made searching for keywords on the council websites of each of the 788 municipalities (adding up the three regions) and general web searches.

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<sup>8</sup> The data collection process is part of the broader MECPALO project. The project focuses on Spain as its central case and, for each of the data collection procedures, it incorporates either France or Italy as mirror cases that allow going beyond the single state approach. Most of the local results presented here will be from Spain or Italy, but the French case shows clear similarities with many of the patterns of these two countries (Talpin, 2011). The project has been developed with financial support from the Spanish Science Department (Grant CSO2009-08968 and Grant CSO2012-31832). For a full description of the data sources and data collection procedures of the local databases see Font et al (2014).

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of the similarities and differences among the participatory patterns in the three countries see Sintomer and Del Pino (2014).



**Table 1. Main characteristics of each of the regions' participation policy**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Regional Legislation</b>	<b>Other regional policies</b>	<b>Regional government structure</b>	<b>Summary</b>
<b>Andalusia</b> Poor region	References to participation in sectorial laws (the elderly, territorial planning)	Small programs at the provincial level; no global regional policy	No participation department. Low-profile participation observatory managed by association of local governments.	Partially active
<b>Catalonia</b> Wealthy region	Neighborhoods Law (2004) makes funding for urban renewal dependent on the existence of participation	Funding for local participation processes (2005-10), 10 million €; other sectorial participation processes; Inter-Department Regional Participation plan	Institutional Relations and Participation Department (2003). Includes high-rank participation office	Very active
<b>Madrid</b> Wealthy region	No regional legislation	No regional policy	No office	Not active
<b>Apulia</b> Poor region	Sectorial Laws (youth, territorial planning, coast protection)	Strategic planning using participation for sectorial policies	No office	Active
<b>Tuscany</b> Wealthy region	Law 69/07 for the promotion of participation in regional and local policies and other sectorial laws (health, environment)	The main form of support is financial: One million € per year to develop Law 69/07 (2008, 2009, 2010)	Authority to promote participation is elected by regional government using a criterion of professional competence	Very active

Source: Compiled by authors based on the regions' websites and secondary evidence.

The product of these strategies is a database with a large N, which is not a perfectly exhaustive or representative collection of all participatory experiences but represents a quite diverse picture of what is the broader reality of participatory processes developed at the subregional level in these countries. With this type of results we try to go beyond the common research trends that tend to focus on “exemplary” institutions, focusing instead on the everyday and more mundane use of engagement techniques (Cooper & Smith, 2012) in the most common and less well-known cases. We cannot claim we have done a detailed mapping of any kind of bottom-up activity that shares these characteristics, but our institutionally recognized participatory processes represent a significant part of the participatory activity existing in (certain regions of) Italy and Spain dealing with public issues.

Complementary to these Internet data mining, we will also use evidence provided by a couple of Spanish surveys to the general population<sup>10</sup>: a 2006 survey of the Spanish adult population living in cities of 100,000 to 400,000 inhabitants that includes 3,994 interviews (CIS study 2661); and a 2010 survey of the Spanish adult population consisting of 2,500 interviews (CIS study 2860). Occasionally, we also resort to other secondary evidence to complete our picture: a smaller study based on 58 experiences collected by the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD)<sup>11</sup>, or information collected by Ramió and Salvador (2007) from interviews addressed to the 42 local administrations with more than 20,000 inhabitants in the Barcelona province.

### **The Promotion of Deliberative Practices: A Movement from Below?**

It is very clear that bottom-up promotion of institutional deliberative practices is not the case in the Southern European context, where this process has mostly been directed by public institutions. In this section we will develop three main arguments. First, we show some general results that point to a clear domination of a top-down dynamic. Second, we discuss the types of Southern European institutions that are pushing more strongly for the development of these participatory practices. Third, we discuss whether this movement is the result of their own motivations or merely a product of pressures from below, paying special attention to the process of institutionalization of these processes at the local level.

In relation to the direction of the origin of participative processes, our mappings of local participatory experiences allow us to analyze who the main promoter of these experiences is: either civil society (*insisted space*, where an advocacy group or private organization is the driving force) or the public administration (*invited space*, where the government invites citizens to participate in a particular decision-making process)<sup>12</sup> (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). The pattern is very clear: Graph 1 shows that the *invited space* cases, where the initiative corresponds only to the government (mainly at the local level) with no kind of formal participation of civil society in its promotion, are an overwhelming majority in all the regions covered. In three of the five regions this percentage is higher than 90%<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Both of them have been developed by the public survey research institute (CIS) that carries out surveys for the Spanish public administration. The complete methodological details are available at [www.cis.es](http://www.cis.es).

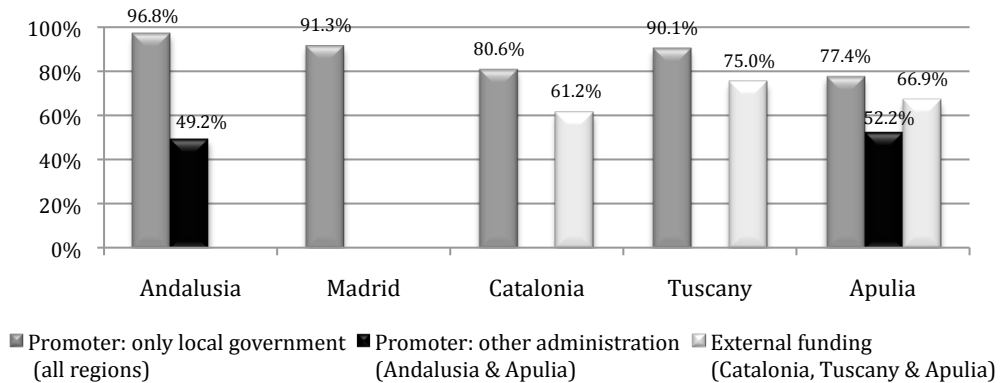
<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oidp.net/en/home/>

<sup>12</sup> The possible responses for the item “Initiative of the process” were: “local government only”, “mainly local government”, “mainly civil society” or “civil society only”. In our analysis, *invited spaces* correspond just with the first option: local government as the only driving force. Perhaps this category is underrepresented due to the fact that some indirect collaboration of civil society actors in the promotion of the processes has not been visible during the interviews or the Internet data mining.

<sup>13</sup> The smaller study made by the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) shows the same picture: the origin of 84% of European processes (27 of 32) lies in government and not civil society (Font et al., 2003).

Local governments are not isolated promoters of deliberation in public administrations. In the two regions where this information is available (Andalusia and Apulia), around half of the local participatory experiences have been promoted with the contribution of other public administrations (usually provincial or regional). This multilevel involvement is also reflected in relation to the financing of participative processes. In the three regions where data is available (Catalonia, Tuscany and Apulia), a clear majority of participatory processes has received financial support (usually a part of the total amount) from supralocal public administrations<sup>14</sup>. This dual role of public institutions, as promoters and funders of these experiences, gives them an important amount of control of the processes themselves, of their use and potentially of their contents and outcomes, which is quite different from the general situation in the US.

**Graph 1. Processes initiated by local Government only and presence of external funding by region**



Source: Our database.

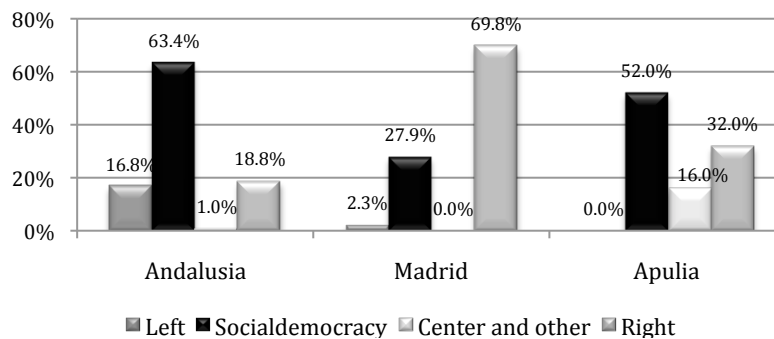
N<sup>15</sup> = 539 (promoter: local government only), 356 (promoter: other administrations) 276 (external funding).

In order to illustrate the progressive nature (or lack thereof) of the promoters of these experiences, Graph 2 shows the political party of the mayors promoting them by region. Basically, the distribution of the graph corresponds to the electoral situation in each of these regions: traditionally, Andalusia has been dominated by the left and Madrid has been dominated by the right wing, while Apulia is more equally balanced. In aggregate terms, 111 experiences have taken place under right-wing governments, 140 under social democracy, 19 under left-wing parties and 17 under centre and other parties. Thus, the main message of these results is that, at this point, participatory processes are not currently a democratic innovation that belongs exclusively to the political left<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Detailed results can be found in Font (2011) and Della Porta et al. (2014).

<sup>15</sup> The N of each item can vary, because there is information available for different numbers of regions or different levels of missing values.

<sup>16</sup> A similar conclusion about Participatory Budgeting in Ganuza and Baiocchi (2012). See also Font et al. (2014).

**Graph 2. Political party of the mayor at the time of the experience, by region**

Source: Our database.

N = 287.

Should it be concluded from this result that the promotion of participatory practices is not related to ideology? It is not; as other authors have shown (Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2012), these processes were historically introduced by the left, but now they are carried out by different political forces. This trend is partly the result of the existence of a more non-ideological discourse linked to the interest in more effective governing, with public administrations and communities working together in creating innovative institutions (Eversole, 2011; Sintomer et al., 2008). In some ways, the participatory democracy discourse represents a further extension of the basic principles that guide decentralization from national to local levels (Grindle, 2007; Montero & Samuels, 2004), a process that governments of almost all political colors have been supporting in the last decades.

But this common understanding about citizens' participation is also the product of certain institutionalization of deliberative politics that has favored its diffusion and maintenance beyond ideological borders. New right-wing governments have reached public administrations that had already developed a new participatory sector: regulations had been established and experienced professionals hired. In this situation, these new governments have decided to continue with these democratic innovations. Our data cannot fully confirm this pattern, but at least they are consistent with this hypothesis: the left is generating participatory mechanisms in municipalities where there is no prior institutionalization to a greater degree than the right, which has tended more to maintain already existing instruments. Participation departments and plans are key factors in this process of institutionalization, especially in scenarios of right-wing governments. Under right-wing governments, almost two thirds of participatory experiences were developed in municipalities with a participation department (91.5% in the Madrid region) and more than a half in municipalities with a participation plan (83.3% in Madrid). The difference with the lower presence of these departments under left-wing or social-democratic governments is statistically significant.

In any case, why would public administrations of any political ideology start or continue a process that limits their ability to make choices? This opening of

participatory processes generates concern about retaining strong state power among many of these institutions (Jessop, 2004; Newman et al., 2004; Taylor, 2007). As a consequence, this is a dual process where governments simultaneously embrace participation and resist it (Beresford, 2002). In fact, this embracement could be more apparent than real through two simultaneous paths. The first possibility is that these institutions only had limited choice, because bottom-up pressure to adapt these mechanisms was very strong. Clearly, it is difficult to establish for certain if a process has been created by institutions simply on their own initiative, or whether they were responding to certain pressures from below and to what degree, but both our set of 19 case studies (Font et al., 2014) as well as other research in the area using different types of methodologies point to a limited role of bottom-up pressure as a crucial explanation of why these experiences were developed in most of the cases (Bacqué & Sintomer, 2010; Font & Galais, 2011).

The second possibility would entail limiting the scope and the agenda of the processes (see section 7) and retaining administrative power over them, so that the outcomes could be at least conditioned. A public administration that opens participatory spaces shows an interest in deliberation. But, at the same time, the creation of *invited spaces* may produce a situation in which civil society engages in these processes from a less influential position, where the public administration retains more power and a cautious attitude towards the democratic innovative arena<sup>17</sup>. The following sections will continue to examine this possibility through the analysis of the agents and participants in these democratic practices.

### **Deliberative Professionals and Their Role**

The previous section dealt with those that are politically responsible for organizing local participatory processes. In the next sections we will analyze the role of two different sectors. First, we will discuss the characteristics of those in charge of the technical arrangements of the processes, i.e. local personnel, external consultants and facilitators. Then, in the following section, we will examine who the participants in these arenas are. These analyses will deal with two important debates: the degree of institutionalization and professionalization of these practices and the inequalities that emerge in their practice.

Graph 3 shows the presence of personnel devoted to supporting the public administration in the development of participatory processes. These include facilitators of the meetings<sup>18</sup>, experts<sup>19</sup> and external consultants<sup>20</sup>. In general, the

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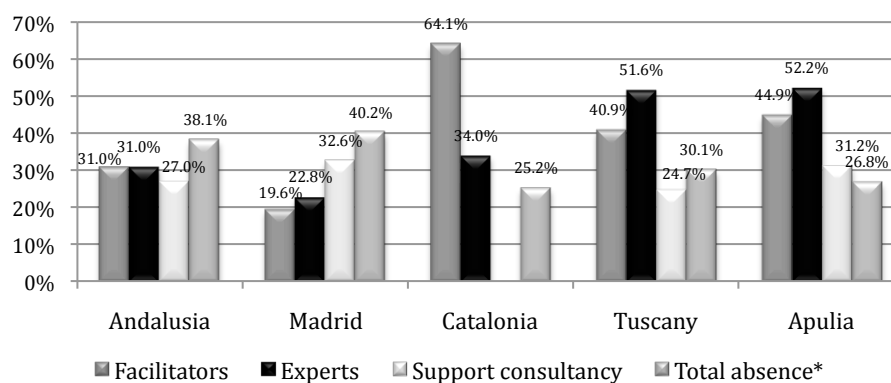
<sup>17</sup> Font and Galais (2011) have shown that participatory processes in Catalonia (Spain) have more clear democratic qualities when civil society is involved in the promotion and organization of the experiences.

<sup>18</sup> We consider a facilitator anyone providing help to set discussions, whether this person is a citizen playing this role, an external expert or a local employee.

<sup>19</sup> Experts participate to provide technical information about the substantive issues being discussed.

regions with less developed participation policies (Andalusia and Madrid) have a few more experiences where none of them has been used. The use of facilitators is a simple measure that corresponds with the degree of maturity of the deliberative trajectory in each region, with a maximum in Catalonia and a minimum in Madrid. On the other hand, these results reveal a general recognition that it is necessary to use specific resources in this field: Madrid compensates for its more moderate use of facilitators and experts using external consultants. In sum, we find an important presence of these actors but, at the same time, almost a third of experiences take place without any of them. This suggests that some participatory processes could have important methodological limitations, to the extent that “facilitators and the organizations that train and support them are critical to most processes” (Levine et al., 2005).

**Graph 3. Presence and absence of facilitators, experts and support consultancy, by region**



\*: Experiences lacking any presence of facilitators, experts or support consultants, except for Catalonia where data on support consultants is not available.

Source: Our database.

N = 552 (facilitators), 552 (experts), 449 (support consultants), 552 (total absence).

However, this is not necessarily the case, because these roles cooperate with another crucial one: personnel from the local council devoted to participatory issues. In the survey addressed to Andalusian local councils we find specific information about the shape of this sector. From the 322 participatory experiences reported, only 12.4% were developed in municipalities without personnel exclusively or partially devoted to participation; 41% of experiences counted only on part-time personnel (in most cases, just one person); the remaining cases had at least one person devoted exclusively to these tasks, with a few cases of medium and large cities having more than 10 people assigned to this policy area.

What is the profile of these personnel? Ramió and Salvador (2007) show that this group of professionals is made up of mostly young, university-educated women, with qualifications in psychology, law, pedagogy, political science and sociology,

<sup>20</sup> External consultants are usually hired by the local administration to contribute to designing the process, organizing the event, evaluating it, etc. In some cases, these external consultants can also play the facilitator role.

and journalism<sup>21</sup>. They constitute a motivated group of experienced professionals, since almost all of them have been previously linked to another professional occupation at the local level. Furthermore, the study has shown that this collective tends to acquire continuous high-level training through postgraduate degrees or specialist training in participation-related areas<sup>22</sup>.

While we lack sufficient information to fully understand their role in the development of participatory practices, all the existing evidence points to a crucial role of these local personnel, to the extent that they are the human resources associated with the institutionalization of participative dynamics at the local level. Our research has also shown that their interaction with elected politicians is richer than what their official roles would suggest, with local bureaucrats influencing how formal institutions work in practice, being real promoters of the continuation or development of participatory experiences. As street-level bureaucrats, those who manage participatory institutions use their previous knowledge and skills to play an important role in how these processes develop and how long they last far beyond their formal implementation role (Sintomer & Ganuza, 2011; Font et al., 2014).

### **The Participants: Is Deliberation Reproducing Social Inequalities?**

Even if the technical organizers are important, the central element for any participation process to be developed is the presence of participants. Deliberative innovations have been designed to engage civil society and individual citizens in the political process. Our data allows some discussion on the participants in these processes. Which are the different sectors targeted by these participatory processes?

We have information about the different types of participants in 354 experiences carried out in three of our regions (Andalusia, Madrid & Apulia). The different targets are not exclusive; one initiative can address different actors. The data reflect that most of these processes are open spaces, where citizens in general are one of the main targets (65.1% of the cases). Individual citizens are the main target of participatory processes across all regions. This is more clearly apparent if we consider that those processes addressed to a specific social sector (22.3%) are also addressed to individual citizens (with a particular socio-demographic characteristic). At the same time, the data indicate the on-going relevance of one of the traditional engagement institutions –associations– (52.3% of the processes

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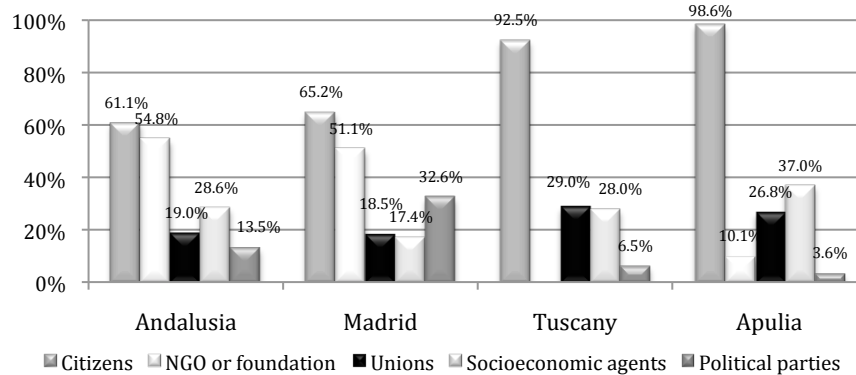
<sup>21</sup> The picture that Lee (2010) shows for the US also presents a dynamic collective of practitioners, with experience in many fields but more specifically focused on deliberation itself (in accordance with the strongest tradition of deliberative practices): conflict resolution, adoption of new technologies from other fields (particularly the use of online technologies and stakeholder engagement software), social activism, adult education, social work or therapy-related fields.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, the earlier development of participatory practices in the Barcelona area municipalities has been linked to the active training and diffusion activities of the provincial government, as well as to the role played by the postgraduate degree in participatory methodologies offered since the mid-nineties by one of the universities in the area (UAB).

are addressed to association members). The other actors that are also main targets are quite a bit less frequent: 9.4% for other already functioning participatory institutions of the city council, or relevant individuals as experts or leaders (12.6%).

However, these are just the collectives that were the main targets of the experiences, not the real participants. Graph 4 presents the effective participation of individual citizens and members of different types of organizations. A brief assessment of the graph tells us that the presence of citizens in participative mechanisms is in fact in accordance with the initial purpose of promoters. But a deeper analysis reveals a slightly different story. Processes addressed to citizens (individuals or those belonging to a particular social sector) were overwhelmingly more numerous than processes addressed to other actors. In practice, especially in the case of the Spanish regions, even if citizens are the main participants in each region, their predominant role declines with respect to the other organizations considered together: organized actors are present in 59.5% of cases in Andalusia, and 59.8% in Madrid. This suggests that the growing movement of public administrations towards involving individual citizens too is still operating in a reality marked by the mediation of associations and other collective actors. This is not the case in the Italian regions, where the dominant role of individual citizens as effective participants is clearer. Assuming that directly involving individual citizens is a process, this higher relevance of an assembly-based participatory model in Italy could be related with its more established tradition of democratic innovations and the larger role played by bottom-up pressures compared with Spain.

**Graph 4. Breakdown of participants in participative experiences, by region**



Source: Our database.

N = 449 (citizens), 356 (NGO or foundation), 552 (unions), 449 (socioeconomic agents), 449 (political parties).

The 2006 CIS survey allows us to analyze the different characteristics of Spanish citizens who have participated in at least one of a list of six different kinds of participatory mechanisms which correspond with the main participatory possibilities existing in Spain: Agenda 21, Participatory Budgeting, sectorial or



neighborhood-based consultation councils, citizen juries or attendance at a local council plenary meeting<sup>23</sup>.

Table 2 shows the main socio-demographic and political features of the participants. Participatory mechanisms clearly involve a greater presence of men, citizens between 30 and 44 years of age, people belonging to the upper class and people with a secondary or university level of education. In other words, women, youth, the elderly, the lower classes and citizens with basic or no education are relatively less present among the attendants at participatory processes. Even if some of the processes precisely aim to incorporate some of the traditionally more excluded sectors, the existing inequalities are partially reproduced in these mechanisms.

The Spanish CIS survey also shows a clearly differentiated attitudinal profile of participants, who tend to be more left wing, vote in local elections and, in particular, be more involved in associations. Also, participants are more politicized: they discuss politics and local issues more frequently. At the same time, they are more critical both of political institutions and of the real efficacy of participatory mechanisms (Font & Navarro, 2013).

**Table 2. Socio-political characteristics of participants and total of the sample (%)**

Characteristic	Participants	Total sample
Men	62.6	47.9
30-44 years	40.7	31.6
Upper class	25.6	18.5
Secondary or university education	62.2	50.6
Left wing	45.2	30.9
Vote in local elections	85.1	69.6
Member of associations	35.8	15.8
Often/sometimes discuss politics	61.9	42.5
Often/sometimes discuss local issues	70.6	54.9

Source: CIS 2661.

N = 3,994.

The two elements examined above, who organizes and who participates in these processes, are two central aspects in determining the quality of participatory processes. In these five Southern European regions there is a majority of processes that fit the description of the asymmetrical deliberation type, the worst

<sup>23</sup> Survey 2661 includes 3,994 interviews, in which 405 citizens declared that they had taken part in any of these participatory possibilities. Roughly 66% of the 405 had participated only in local council meetings and the rest had experienced other participatory processes. Excluding participants in local council meetings (the less participatory and deliberative of all these processes) does not change the main conclusions reached in this article. A more exhaustive analysis of this data can be read in Navarro et al (2009).

configuration for Bobbio (2010). The best deliberative setting in his opinion, i.e. keeping separated stakeholders from ordinary citizens and using facilitators, is used only in 11.8% (just citizens as participants and facilitation) and 6.5% (only stakeholders as participants and facilitation) of the experiences. In sum, while certain deliberative features have been introduced into these processes, the conditions that most of them created for a free and equal exchange of opinions and information are quite far from being an ideal setting.

### **Goals: Why Do We Want Participation?**

What do we know about the objectives of participatory processes in the Southern European context? At least three main groups of goals have been considered to be important in comparative research. First, these mechanisms could be an answer to a growing demand for participatory opportunities by citizens. As such, they would become an instrument to fight the high levels of distrust of existing institutions and to establish new ties between citizens and their communities. Second, they could be instruments for policy inputs that would allow more efficient policy-making or, at least, policies that are more similar to those desired by a majority of citizens. Third, these processes could be an instrument for social change. They could contribute to a larger social equality or other positive societal outcomes like a more sustainable planet. Up to which point do these motivations appear among the declared goals or the apparent objectives of Southern European participatory practices?

The IOPD study shows that citizenship building and efficiency were the main goals explicitly pursued (especially in Europe), followed by equality (only among Latin-American experiences)<sup>24</sup>. This study is a first sign that the goals of these processes may be significantly different in each world area: Participatory Budgeting has travelled from Latin America to Europe but has changed its main objectives dramatically in the transatlantic journey, with the European experiences quite a bit less interested in reducing social inequalities. Lee (2011) pointed at a similar situation in the USA, but this seems to be even more the case in Europe, where none of the IOPD experiences was directly linked to the objective of achieving equality. Also, in the US the problem seems to be rather the limitations for dealing effectively with inequalities, viewed as an important concern by the actors in the field, at least at the discourse level.

The mapping of participation experiences in Catalonia shows a picture of a single region, but provides a more complete picture of different types of mechanisms<sup>25</sup>. Again, the dominant category is that of experiences whose main objective was to

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<sup>24</sup> The experiences were classified using the official objectives declared by their promoters. Sometimes there were clear contradictions between the established goals and the mechanisms used to achieve them. For example, while the citizenship development objective involves granting new rights to citizens, more than half of the experiences purportedly pursuing this goal failed to transfer decisive capabilities to participants (Font et al., 2003).

<sup>25</sup> The variable discussed here is only available for the Catalan case.

improve participatory opportunities (mentioned in 94.2% of the experiences)<sup>26</sup>, followed by policy efficiency, which was mentioned in more than half of the experiences. Equality was not even considered as a coding category since the preliminary examination had showed it was virtually absent. On the basis of these data we cannot determine if establishing these objectives is a response to a social demand or an attempt to increase legitimacy by local authorities. But as an approximation, the objective of improving participatory opportunities is quite common among experiences promoted with and without the participation of civil society. In turn, a considerable difference emerges in relation to the objective of policy efficiency: it is present in 57.8% of the experiences promoted without civil society and in 25% of the experiences where civil society was present in the promotion of the process. This difference suggests that this objective is more exclusive to local authorities and more concerned about improving governability.

Similarly, our regional mappings included information about the instrumental advantages produced by participatory experiences in Catalonia, Tuscany and Apulia. The two most highlighted advantages directly related to deliberation are the education of citizens (civic abilities or ability to build consensus, present in 74.3% of the experiences) and the process of taking into account popular perceptions and suggestions (present in 41.0% of the processes) to improve policy-making. Once again, looking at different cases and slightly different types of information we always reach a similar conclusion: civic/educational goals tend to prevail, policy-making is also important, but specific societal changes (beyond the cultural/attitudinal realm) are not expected outcomes of these processes.

Two additional pieces of information provide some additional insights. First, we have information about the policy stages the participatory process aimed to influence. In Catalonia and the Italian regions there is a clear dominance of diagnosis and programming phases, while in Andalusia and Madrid the main phase is decision-making. It would be possible to think that intervention in the initial phases of policy-making (diagnose and programming) may indicate that politicians are the ones who make the final decision, limiting citizen participation and empowerment. This would be a surprising result since we would find more citizen input in those regions with a less developed participatory culture. However, this assertion depends on other factors; for example, citizen participation could focus just on informing decision making but not on making decisions. And the issue that has been the object of citizen participation is also relevant. For instance, using a couple of real examples, participation in diagnosis or programming to discuss the future urban planning criteria of the city would involve more empowerment than a decision to choose the name for a new square.

Then, which are the substantive contents of these participatory processes? Considering all regions together, almost half of the experiences are related to urban planning, followed by environmental issues (in part because of the impact

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<sup>26</sup> Up to three main objectives were coded for each experience.

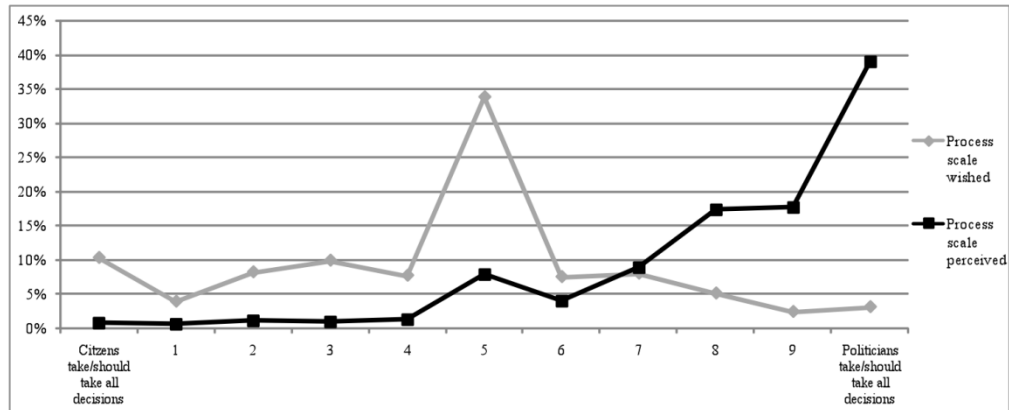
of the Agenda 21 program). Other relevant subject areas are economic development and social welfare. However, this agenda of issues, many of which are strategically important for local administrations, is quite different depending on the regions. Here, those regions with a stronger participatory tradition (and with governments where different families of the left participate) often have a new advantage, since they deal more often with matters like urban issues, whereas in other regions like Andalusian municipalities devote more participatory efforts to issues where they often only have limited intervention powers, like social welfare or cultural issues (Font, 2011).

In sum, policies are there as a relevant concern, but the explicit goal of these policies is not necessarily related to equality, but to other concerns of the policy-makers (e.g., it may be more citizen satisfaction or more efficient policies). The evidence provided by these different sources suggests that equality is an absolutely marginal explicit concern, even if policy making is important, and offering new participatory opportunities and fighting citizen distrust appear as central. Can anything else be said about these two relevant motivations?

Citizen distrust is there for relevant reasons that can be traced to Southern European attitudes and behaviors. In the Spanish case, the “indignados movement” burst onto the political scene in 2011 and pushed new and different questions onto the table, including the demand for “real democracy” and citizen participation. Graph 5 shows the results of the CIS survey that took place just before the first demonstration of this citizen movement started in May 2011<sup>27</sup>. It shows an important discrepancy very clearly: interviewees perceive a reality where politicians and not citizens are making all the decisions, while most would like a new balance where decisions are made not only by representatives but also directly by citizens themselves. However, a situation where politicians dominate all or almost all decisions is the perceived reality. Empirical research will have to establish whether these processes have been at least a partial cure for these problems (Font & Blanco, 2007), but at the very least we can see that there are reasons for concern, and they constitute a likely basis for action having in mind the goal of reducing this cultural malaise.

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<sup>27</sup> The question in graph 5 is what Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) called “process scale,” referring to who should make decisions, either citizens or politicians. The same discrepancy between the perceived reality and the desired situation (citizens prefer political processes where decisions are taken by them in a higher degree than in the perceived situation) also exists among the US population, but the difference between positions in both scales is even larger in the Spanish case (Font et al., 2012).

**Graph 5: Demanded and perceived political processes in Spain**

Source: CIS 2860.  
N = 2,500.

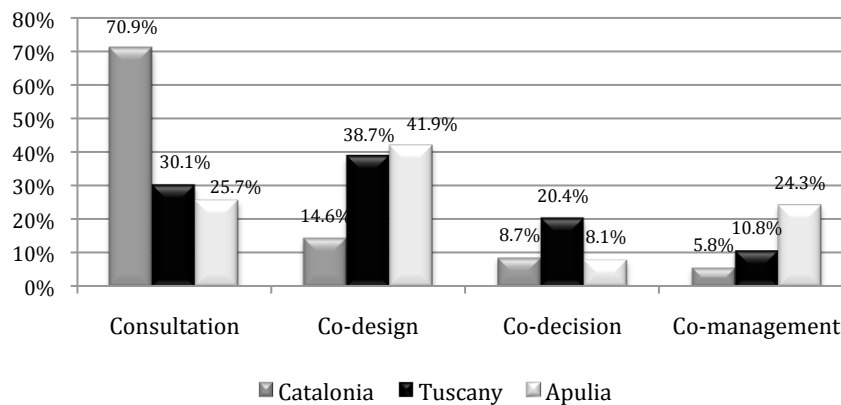
Policies are a second important motivation. However, many of these processes entail a substantial level of citizen discussion, but a quite limited level of real decision-making power. This is more easily assumed in a context where citizen organizations are promoting these processes, but becomes a larger problem when those institutions that are organizing the processes openly ignore their results. In these cases, when participation is perceived as an insubstantial mechanism without impact on public policies, the result may be disillusionment amongst the citizenry (Font & Navarro, 2013).

In graph 6, a proxy index of empowerment is represented in relation to three Southern European regions where this information is available. This variable measures the higher level of citizen influence that each process is intended to have: consultation, design/co-design, decision/co-decision and management/co-management<sup>28</sup>. In Catalonia more than 70% of experiences are limited to consultation. In the Italian regions, almost 70% of experiences are focused on consultation and design/co-design. Therefore, most experiences in the Southern European regions do not engage citizens in the decision and management process, which still remains under the sole influence of public administration.

As seen in the literature review, this picture suggests that limited empowerment and limited connection to final policy making are the main challenges that participatory processes must confront. This danger appears to be even clearer in Southern European regions, where the risk that lack of empowerment could increase citizens' frustration and sense of powerlessness<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> We do not have information about the real degree of implementation of the process proposals, but only about the intended level of political influence that the process was designed to have, coded in these four categories. If a process was intended to have influence in different categories we have only noted the highest one, i.e. the one closer to implementation.

<sup>29</sup> The research developed up to now has only limited empirical information about this question. At the time of writing this article we are developing a new project to explore the degree of real impact on policies of participatory processes. See <http://cherrypickingproject.wordpress.com/home/>

**Graph 6. Level of intended influence of participatory processes, by region**

Source: Our database.  
N = 332.

## Conclusion

Lee (2011) suggested that some of the assumptions that public deliberation scholars often make should be revised. We have contributed to discuss a few of them, as well as to other debates about the characteristics and qualities of these practices through the analysis of new empirical information from the Southern European context. Our contribution was new in at least two senses. First, it comes from a region whose participatory experiences are much less known by the international community and in which, as we have shown throughout the article, the set of common deliberative practices are quite different from those in other world areas. Second, our empirical basis was quite different from most previous research, since it is based on a quite diverse mapping of local experiences developed in five regions. This strategy has made it possible to overcome the problem of generalizing too many findings from the best and most well-known experiences that are quite far from the more common and modest practices developed in most municipalities daily.

Our findings give credence to the idea that these assumptions need to be rethought to travel outside the English-speaking world. Our data cannot provide definitive answers to all of them, but we have shown that several of them are actually quite far, at least, from the prevailing Southern European reality. Our results clearly confirm one of Lee's assumptions, the heterogeneity of the participatory landscape. Indeed, in this aspect our results provide an even more heterogeneous picture than some of the previous literature, with hundreds of very diverse experiences, using all types of methodologies and covering a very diverse set of issues. In that sense, referring to Participatory Budgeting, Wampler and Hartz-Karp (2012: 1) argued that "[...] there is no standardized set of "best practices" that governments are adopting, but there are a broader set of principles that are adapted by local governments to meet local circumstances". This is

clearly the case in the Southern European context, where these “local circumstances”, either due to political will or to the available resources, seem to place most participatory processes quite far from the famous “best practices”.

In most other aspects we argue that these “assumptions” should be questioned in the Southern European context. In this area, participatory experiences do not start from below: they are mostly commissioned by public authorities that maintain a significant control over their development and that, in many cases, carry out these experiences by themselves, mostly using workers from the administrations. However, some concern about deliberative logics and practices is present in them, and the most traditional picture of a public speech from local authorities followed by a few questions from the audience is not the most common practice anymore: most of these experiences tend to have a facilitator and a significant number of them use experts who provide substantive information and external support to organize the processes. This use of external support should not necessarily be interpreted as a guarantee of further methodological rigor or independence: their presence is more frequent precisely in the region where these experiences are less developed, suggesting that it may be the solution adopted when the local administrations lack sufficiently trained personnel.

This central role of public administrations could be a limitation and entail a potential control of these processes, but apparently it should facilitate the connection between participatory processes and policy-making, which should be easier than in cases where the process is completely promoted and organized from below. However, even if improving policy-making was one of the main motives why these processes were ever promoted, their real influence seems to be rather limited. Our research has not made a full analysis of the final implementation of these processes, but even focusing on their intended objectives, their connection to policy-making seems to be rather limited. At the same time, we have argued that this connection cannot be the only aspect to be considered. First, because the range of issues debated is quite broad. Second, because the trade-off that involves giving a more final say to citizens in those processes where the issue at hand is less central in the local political agenda may be present quite often (Nez, 2010).

Finally, we have also found that a limited concern for using these processes as instruments to build a larger social equity is not exclusive to the US. To begin with, participation in these processes is far from universal. People with more resources and with certain attitudinal and organizational backgrounds, are the ones who more often make their way towards the participatory setting. If equality is not a central concern in the inputs of the process, it is not central among the outputs either: most of them have been organized just to provide more participatory opportunities, and building a more equal society is not a central concern in most of them.

The Southern European area shows signs of homogeneity as well as signs of significant heterogeneity. We cannot make a definitive assessment of how

particular this region is in the participatory domain without developing a similar comparative research that covers other world areas systematically, but the dialogue of these findings with the comparative literature points to the existence of some region-specific traits. For example, the central role played by public administrations in a region with a relatively weak civil society, the larger strength of the participatory over the deliberative tradition or the importance of providing additional participatory opportunities as an important motivation in itself for process organizers. At the same time, the internal diversity of the area has also come up, pointing to the idea that active regional participation policies pay off and have contributed to (and simultaneously mirrored) a more developed participatory culture. Differences have appeared between regions in the same country, but also some of them have emerged between the Italian and the Spanish case.

Overall, this article is a plea to continue an international dialogue about what the boundaries of public deliberation are. Regional realities and traditions are quite strong and influence our way of thinking and our conceptualizations of the issue. If we want to have truly comparative concepts that can incorporate the analysis of different regional realities, we must address these issues and devote particular emphasis to how the participatory and deliberative traditions fit in (or not) with each other, and in which specific aspects matching both traditions becomes particularly stimulating or particularly problematic. Perhaps a broad and not restrictive definition of what an institutionalized participative mechanism is could encompass part of the existing diversity in the participatory and deliberative traditions<sup>30</sup>. However, up to now, not even the most influential contributions have been able to establish a universally accepted definition of the field<sup>31</sup>. Lacking it means clear advantages (e.g., adapting our universe to our research questions), but also some difficulties to progress, compare and accumulate knowledge.

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<sup>30</sup> The definition used in our research is “any at least loosely formalised activity that attempts to involve the citizenry in the discussion of or making of decisions about public policies” (Font et al., 2014: 2).

<sup>31</sup> This is partially due to the existence of competing categories, which partially refer to the same concepts and realities like “democratic innovations” (Smith, 2009), “empowered participatory governance” (Fung, 2004) or “deliberative democracy” (Carson and Hartz-Karp, 2005) to mention just a few of them.



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