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"Nothing about politics": The political scope in rural participatory governance, a case-study in the Basque Country, Spain.

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Abstract

Participatory mechanisms are understood as settings for citizens' political engagement. However, participants frequently depict these institutions as nonpolitical. In this paper, the political scope of participatory institutions is examined through a case-study of town meetings (*concejos abiertos*) in the Basque Country (Spain). Through ethnographic observation and interviews with 53 participants, we analyze how participants deal with public issues, and how they limit or expand the political scope of their participation. In concejos, participants talk about "small deliberation" issues such as sewers or water installations. They reject partisan issues in their everyday engagement. However, they cultivate a culture of self-management, and embark on political campaigns on selective issues. The political scope of this institution is opened and closed by participants according to cultural and organizational conditions. In the end, small deliberation on community issues can be a basis for further engagement on broader political concerns. Small deliberation –if sustained over time- is not as small as it seemed initially.

Author Biography

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Keywords

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Introduction

"There is nothing, nothing, nothing about politics. … You don't know who strips to each [political] side. We never talk about that" (M. R., participant in a *concejo abierto*).[1] Maria Rosa is a farmer who was engaged in a town meeting in a rural community in Araba (Basque Country, Spain). Two years before, she started attending meetings and acquired such extensive knowledge of the rules and the daily procedures that she was elected to the administrative board by her neighbors. Like Maria Rosa, other participants in this participatory institution believe it to be strictly non-political. In other settings of community engagement such as participatory budgeting assemblies and neighborhood associations, participants also believe that they are not playing politics (Baiocchi, 2005; Ball, 2005; Talpin, 2012). At the core of this belief is the idea that broader political issues should not be addressed in settings dedicated to small deliberation on community problems (Ganuza & Francés, 2012).

The political scope of participation, like the range of issues which are addressed, is not something that can be deduced only from the institutional design and the list of powers formally attributed to the participatory institutions. It also depends on the cultural frame assumed by participants. As Baiocchi (2005) noted regarding Porto Alegre's participatory budget (PB) process, participants found it unacceptable to speak about political issues in assemblies, as they were committed to solving community problems in a practical sense. Talpin (2012) noticed the same thing in several European cases. In *concejos abiertos* (rural town meetings in Araba) most of the issues that come under the title of "politics" also sit uneasily with the participants. Like Maria Rosa, other participants think that politics should stay away.

Through a case-study in the *concejos abiertos* of Araba, we analyze the political scope of a community-based participatory institution. I will show how participants understand and confer meaning to this participatory setting, a highly empowered institution of rural governance. As we will observe, within the cultural framework of "politics-away," participants distinguish themselves from party politics, making space for their own decision-making; they limit potential conflict, divisions, and promote inclusiveness; and they sustain collective action, even on broader political issues such as environmental concerns. The focal point of the paper is that participants use selective depoliticization as the best approach to sustain community engagement.

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[1] This is a piece of an interview conducted in May 2015.

This argument is developed in four sections. First, it is situated in the literature of civic engagement and politicization. Second, the case-study (*concejos abiertos*) is described, along with the methods (ethnographic observation and interviews with 53 participants). Third, the findings section shows how participants draw up a framework based on the rejection of politics while, occasionally, politicizing selected issues. Finally, I explain how small deliberation can lead to collective action in broader public concerns.

Politics in Community-Based Institutions

Many participatory processes are set in neighborhoods and local communities. In many cases, the questions they address can be defined as "small deliberation": People discuss narrow community issues that do not affect the society in general (Ganuza & Francès, 2012, p. 171). Small deliberation is about tiny public works, minor reforms, sporadic cultural events, parks, pavements, public lighting, etc. It is not about general policies and reforms that affect the entire society. In many cases, such as participatory budgeting assemblies, the political scope has been called into question. Participation is limited to scarcely influential issues (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014; Polletta, 2014).

The political scope of participatory institutions refers to the issues which are discussed and addressed in that context.[2] It involves the spectrum of issues that participants engage in. The political scope does not depend only on formal attribution of powers, for participants perform a cultural framing as active agents of the process. Participants may define a participatory device, nominally, as something political (or not), establishing *cultural labels*. Also, they assume a *thematic spectrum* on which they can act and deliberate. This spectrum can be restricted to local issues affecting only themselves or to broader public issues.[3] Hirschman (1982, p. 79) talks about "first order" aims, which imply quotidian needs, and "second order" aims related to morals, justice, and the social order.

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[2] Politicization means transforming individual concerns into collective issues that can be discussed at a level of generality (Boltansky & Thèvenot, 1999). Public-spirited issues would be those "first, open to debate, and second, devoted to questions about the common, public good, without blindly excluding questions of oppressions and differences of opinion" (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 13). Participatory processes deal with public issues, even when they are restricted to community problems like public works, small infrastructures, or cultural or leisure activities.

[3] As Funes argues (1995, p. 308), state institutions are characterized by their attempt to reach universality, that is, the generality of issues concerning an entire community. In opposition, civil society groups are dedicated to specific problems, territorial zones, or temporary questions. This "universal" approach is a relevant standard in the definition of political institutions and organizations.

Baiocchi and Ganuza (2017) also talk about first-level concerns as immediate basic needs, and second-level concerns, which imply social justice, redistribution, or institutional arrangements.[4] The political scope of a participatory setting comprises cultural labels applied by participants and debatable issues assumed by them, which delineate the ambition of the institution.

Citizens assume ideas on participatory institutions and their political scope. They share ideas on already existing or imagined institutions (Font, Navarro, Woijzieszak & Alarcón, 2012; García-Espín, Ganuza & de Marco, 2017; Hibbings & Theiss Morse, 2002). They also evaluate the processes they have experienced (Font and Navarro, 2013). As Röcke (2014) shows, shared notions may constitute "cultural frames," defined as "specific combinations of ideas that, like a picture frame, includes certain elements, but leaves others out" (p. 20). These frames can be shared and promoted by policy-makers, practitioners, and scholars (being reflected in regulations, political manifestos, publications, institutional designs, etc.). But frames are also produced by ordinary participants, resulting from the combination of ideas they hold, assume, or accept on a given institution (Luhtakallio, 2012). These frames contain "styles of engagement," informal standards on how participation and deliberation should be practiced, which topics are acceptable, and which debates are not (Talpin, 2012).

First, participants are active agents, and they engage in the cultural definition of the political scope (see Townsend, 2006).[5] Participants can label an institution as nonpolitical because it is perceived far from the main state institutions in imaginary maps of politics (Hamidi, 2010). This labelling process implies "hard intersubjective work" (Eliasoph, 1997; 1998) for participants defending these labels in meetings, sharing them with neighbors and friends, explaining them to newcomers, etc. Labelling participatory devices as nonpolitical requires a lot of cultural work, taking into account that these places are closely attached to the local state. This happens particularly when popular definitions of the political are limited to partisan issues (Rosenberg, 1951; Vázquez, 2011). For example, this cultural labelling was observed by Baiocchi (2003; 2005) in his study of participatory budgeting (PB) in Porto Alegre. Participants stated that PB assemblies were not part of politics, but a piece of a separated "community

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[4] According to Baiocchi & Ganuza (2017), second-level concerns are addressed in "[t]he discussions about the general principles that guide more specific discussions" (p. 146).

[5] As Townsend argues in a case-study of a town meeting, "Agents can widen scenes only so far; each community draws the circumference of permissible symbolic action differently. Each community has discursive norms for interaction. In the land-use debate in Amherst, the performance of widening a scene indirectly orients listeners as being swept in a broad environmental movement."

engagement world." Participants draw a distinction between the self (participants) and the others (politicians and parties). Ordinary people were developing their identities as new decision-makers.

Negative conceptions of politics can also drive participants to separate their grassroots activity from that of governments and parties. Political disaffection is a major cultural trend in occidental countries like Spain (Klingemann, 2014; Torcal et al., 2003; Torcal & Montero, 2006). Citizens may embody these feelings and try to avoid identifying their participatory activity with party politics, thus justifying the different nature and possibly the superior aspect of their performance. For example, in some cases of community engagement, activists define themselves as nonpolitical because they hold critical views of mainstream political actors whom they consider corrupt (Baiocchi et al., 2015). However, this does not imply that these activists do not play politics. They develop etiquettes for self-identification that mark their boundaries with respect to other public actors (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003).

Second, participants can avoid political concerns due to organizational reasons. The political scope of participatory institutions might not be only a question of labels and cultural identity; it also may be related to practical problems of collective action. Some political debates can endanger the group's cohesion and solidarity. Dynamics of conflict, cost-benefit assessment, social inclusion, and group survival may influence which issues are raised and which are left aside.

On the one hand, the hypothesis of conflict says that people try to avoid political disagreement for the personal (emotional and material) costs it implies. In heterogeneous groups, political disagreement can be perceived as too expensive (emotionally and materially) because of the daily contact between rivals.[6] On the other hand, some individuals (and specific groups) can be more sensitive to political conflict depending on their resources and their political culture.[7] For example, in some civic groups in North America, participants make strong efforts to avoid political conversations, suppressing potential disagreement and preventing bitter discussions (Eliasoph, 1997; 1998).[8] Similarly, in a classical study of a town meeting in New England, Mansbridge (1983) showed that

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[6] For example, in social capital studies, it is observed that citizens are less willing to engage in political deliberation in heterogeneous networks because it can be a source of conflict (Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2011).

[7] Citizens who are more sensitive to conflict are less likely to prefer direct democracy (Alarcón & Woijcieszak, 2012; Hibbings & Theiss Morse, 2002), and to engage in some face-to-face political activities (Ulbing & Funk, 1999).

[8] The author specifies that this culture of avoiding politics is not only a problem of collective action in groups but a broader culture of political apathy.

neighbors avoided controversial issues in order to maintain a basic "friendship." The sustainability of a participatory setting may depend on the suppression of highly controversial issues that may jeopardize living (or engaging) together. However, other studies on town meetings (Bryan, 2010) argue that conflict may increase the stakes, making participation more attractive.[9]

Related to that, the inclusion of diverse (and unequal) citizens may also involve some work limiting controversial issues. The suppression of difficult debates can be productive if the institution is open to all citizens, with heterogeneous political backgrounds or no political backgrounds at all. As it has been found in cases of participatory budgeting in Europe, these settings can be formally inclusive (allowing the presence of all residents), but they also might include strong cultural barriers (Talpin, 2012, p. 100), such as identification with a specific partisan subculture. Practical strategies, including neutrality and avoiding partisan framings, can facilitate the mobilization of diverse citizens and the in-group cohabitation.

However, this can happen at the cost of avoiding relevant questions of social justice. For example, in a case of watershed councils in India, the political scope was limited to small technical problems in water management (Chhotray, 2004). "Neutral" technical solutions and consensual procedures adapted to small aseptic solutions. By avoiding conflict-producing issues, the wealthiest participants avoided the discussion on power relationships and land tenure, which was the main conflict in the area. To include diverse people from a class point of view, some political issues had to be avoided.

Overall, the political ambition of a participatory institution is not a simple question. It is not only the result of formal attributions of powers. As it has been noted, participants' cultural identifications might be relevant. Also, other organizational aspects (internal conflict, inclusion, and the sustainability of engagement) should be taken into account. This is especially relevant in community-based institutions since they are (normally) provided with limited powers. Their political ambition, however, might be more complex than the list of formal powers attributed to it.

Concejos Abiertos in rural Araba

This research is focused on a case study of town meetings (*concejos abiertos*) in rural Araba (Basque Country). In Spain, participatory policies spread in the 1980s

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[9] In this study, contested issues work as a sort of "magnet" for participants, who feel more compelled to attend if such issues are on the agenda (Bryan, 2010).

and '90s mostly in urban contexts (Font, 2001; Navarro, 1999; Villasante, 1995). However, rural town meetings (*concejos abiertos*; *concejos* from now on) had existed for centuries as a traditional form of neighbors' self-management in small municipalities (Orduña, 1994). They are comparable to the Swiss *landsgemeinde* (Barber, 1974) and the *town meetings* in New England (Bryan, 2010; Mansbridge, 1983; Zimmermann, 1999). *Concejos* were transformed with the development of local autonomy and municipal democracy. They were regulated in 1995 as a participatory institution open to all adults in rural communities in Araba. They became a key institution for participatory governance and rural sustainability (Ajangiz, 2015; Ajangiz & Blas, 2008; Argote, 2009).

Concejos are especially widespread in Araba.[10] In this province, people are mainly concentrated in the head city of Vitoria, while the rest of the territory is mushroomed into small rural communities. Three hundred and twenty villages of various sizes (from several dozen to 200 people) form a rural network around the main city (Camarero & Oliva, 1999). This is not rural in a traditional sense, for many people travel for work or for leisure to the city, spending a substantial part of their lives there. This rural habitat is "mixed" (rural but urbanely connected) and the same can be said about the economy of Araba, which featuers a mixture of heavy industry, research and development-based business, agriculture and livestock (Ruiz & Galdós, 2002). It is the wealthiest and the most developed (in terms of HDI) province in Spain, with the most developed rural area as well. All in all, the region is considered a "small Switzerland."

Regarding the political context, Araba, like the Basque Country, has been marked by nationalism and a deep center-periphery tension with the Spanish State (Jeram & Conversi, 2014; Lecours, 2007; Zirakzadeh, 2009). After the *Transition*, the political arena has been characterized by a two-dimensional cleavage: Basque nationalism vs. Spanish constitutionalists/right vs. left wing (Leonisio, 2015). Four political parties have dominated[11] a scenario characterized by fragmentation and political polarization. In Araba, this tension has leaned slightly toward statewide constitutionalist parties with several electoral victories by the right-wing *Partido Popular* (Llera, Leonisio, García y Pérez, 2011). However, this trend is not uniform, and there is a political gap between the urban and the rural areas. As

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[10] The southern Basque province, which has a population of 323,600 (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, 2015).

[11] The main political parties, historically, have been *Partido Popular* (right-wing Spanish constitutionalism), *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (moderated left-wing constitutionalism), *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) (conservative and Basque nationalism), and *BILDU* (with different denominations over time, it is the main conglomerate of left-wing Basque nationalists). New parties have emerged in recent years.

seen in Table 1, in the urban area of Vitoria, statewide constitutionalist parties have prevailed by slight margins until now. By contrast, in rural areas (Zuia-Salvatierra-Añana, Ayala-Aira), right and left nationalists have been dominant.

Table 1. Local Vote in Municipal Elections (2011-2015)
(urban/rural areas)

	Vitoria-Gasteiz (urban)		Zuia-Salvatierra-Añana (rural)		Ayala-Aiara (rural)	
	2011	2015	2011	2015	2011	2015
PP*	30.0%	30.2%	19.7%	13.2%	11.0%	6.1%
PSOE*	19.3%	12.1%	10.2%	8.0%	9.8%	8.8%
PNV**	19.7%	16.9%	31.1%	37.5%	32.9%	33.6%
BILDU**	18.3%	19.8%	23.9%	24.8%	35.0%	31.4%
Other	12.8%	21.1%	15.1%	16.6%	11.4%	20.1%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Author's elaboration, data from the Security Department, Basque Government.

*Spanish state-wide constitutionalist parties/ **Nationalist parties.

Concejos are located in rural areas where left and right-wing Basque nationalists have strongholds. Basque nationalist culture is an unavoidable aspect of rural communities.

Political polarization around the national cleavage also has been a strong constraint. For 40 years, the insurrectionist organization ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, *Basque Homeland and Freedom*) has used violence to favor independence from Spain (Funes, 1999; Tejerina, 2001). Since 2011, political violence has ceased and ETA has demobilized, opening a totally new scenario defined by peace agreements and increasing social reconciliation (Jeram & Conversi, 2014). Apart from hundreds of victims, violence and repression has produced a highly polarized society, especially in rural areas, with neighbors standing on different sides of the conflict. Though my study was conducted at a time (2012-2015) when peace agreements were being consolidated, polarization was still felt in concejos.

Concejos are part of a strong local administration. Basque local administrations had, historically, relevant powers (Razquin, 2014). In Araba, concejos are the focal institution of rural governance (Ajangiz, 2015; Ajangiz & Blas, 2008; Argote, 2009), the maximum authority in small villages.[12] Each concejo consists of a neighbors' assembly (open to all adult residents) which meets once every three to four months. It is led by the administrative board (president, secretary, and two assistants), which officiates at the assemblies. Members of the board are chosen every four years in a special local election. Assemblies make binding decisions on all the local issues (except urban planning and new taxes), including public works, cultural activities, leisure facilities, any communal properties, public forests, basic services (water and electricity), economic activities (business licenses), land expropriations, management of public facilities, roads, and patrimony, etc.[13] Participants in assemblies make all decisions regarding those issues. Concejos are a fairly empowered participatory institution.

The administrative board (and specifically the president) lead assemblies. The presidents mediate in frequent negotiations with other institutions (see Graph 1), such as the provincial government and the municipal governments.[14] In areas like public works, concejos are dependent on the funding of the province and the municipality. Once a year, for example, the provincial government (*Diputación Foral*) issues calls for projects through different funding programs (FOFEL, minor works fund, promotion of neighborhood relationships fund), and assemblies discuss projects in a sort of participatory budget at the regional level. They are assisted by the *Asociación de Concejos de Araba* (ACOA) and the *Asociación de Concejos de Vitoria* (ACOVI), which are two associations established to defend and support participants in concejos in their daily work.
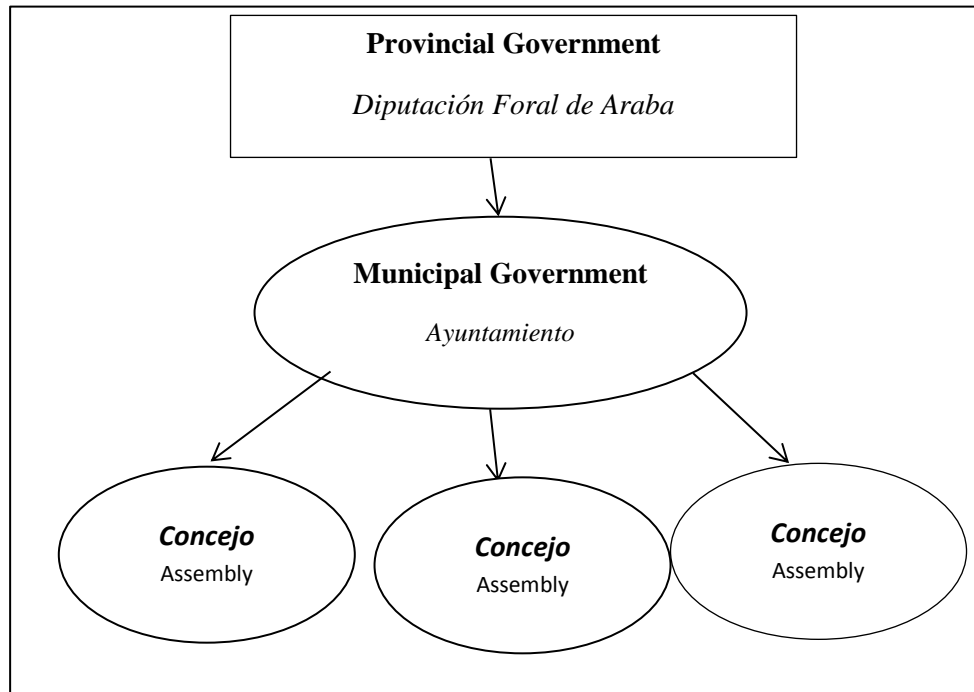
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[12] Concejos are regulated by the Spanish Constitution (CE 1978, art. 140), and the *Ley de Bases de Regimen Local* (LBRL, art. 29). They have a special regulation in the Province of Araba (Norma Foral 11/1995).

[13] In some cases, they support NGOs and they contribute to efforts related to solidarity and environmental issues, like campaigns against nuclear plants. Currently, some powers are delegated to superior institutions (province and municipal governments) to implement better services due to economies of scale. Financial activities are also supervised by the provincial government.

[14] A number of concejos form bigger municipalities. At the level of the municipality, there is a council with a chamber of political representatives and a mayor. When the mayor intends to modify any local regulation such as urban planning or taxes, they start a process of negotiation with presidents.

Graph 1. Concejos and local institutions in Araba

Source: Author's elaboration

In many regards, this is an exceptional case of town meetings in rural neighborhoods. In other Spanish provinces, there are also rural concejos, but they are not so empowered as the Basque ones, and their socioeconomic context is more typically agrarian, subject to strong processes of depopulation. The exceptionality of Araba's concejos is what makes the case so interesting from a theoretical point of view. It is an "extreme case" (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 302). Concejos represent an empowered institution of participatory democracy that has existed for decades (in its current state), holding relevant powers in a context of vivid rurality and increasing socio-economic dynamism.

Methods and Data

There are 324 concejos in Araba. This study is based on ethnographic interviews and observation in a selection of communities. Relevant methodological decisions were made to compose the case. First, observation of assemblies provided limited information, since meetings are a formal event happening normally three to four times per year. Being essentially a public ritual (Goffman, 1979), meetings show

practices and relationships whose meanings are not evident to external observers.[15] Ethnographic interviews (Beaud, 1996),[16] which were nondirective and loosely structured, complemented the observation of meetings, together with the analysis of formal documents, news and magazine reports. Second, actual participants were interviewed as informants, that is, as privileged observers who are asked about their personal experience ("I"), but also about the context and social dispositions ("we think", "they understand", "people do") (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 21). This approach to interviews was accurate in reconstructing the frame of participation across villages. Third, interviews with participants were complemented by other public speakers' reports, including those of political representatives, lawyers, a historian, the speakers, and workers of the concejos' associations. They contributed with more general and historical accounts beyond the day-to-day perspective of ordinary participants.

Fieldwork was conducted in three phases: two brief periods in 2012 (starting) and 2015 (final, complementary fieldwork), and a longer stay in the region from December 2013 to April 2014. Twenty-one communities of different sizes were approached.[17] Fifty-three informants were interviewed.[18] This strategy was inspired by multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which aims at the production of dense information on a given institution which is located in multiple interconnected sites, comparing how it works across contexts. The analysis rests mainly on ethnographic interviews which were guided by a script with questions on participation, deliberation and social life.[19] Contacts were made through the mailing list of the Association of Concejos of Araba (ACOA) and through the informants' personal contacts (snowball strategy). Interviews were conducted in

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[15] For example, public disputes between neighbors need to be reconstructed taking into account story-telling on past and recent events.

[16] According to Beaud (1996), ethnographic interviews are a good tool to "get information and the perspectives about an object which cannot be easily captured by direct observation in situ.

This is the case for example of work institutions where it is often difficult to get installed as an investigator (prisons, etc.): long conversations, sometimes, repeated over the time with people who work inside, are useful" (originally in French).

[17] Locations were selected to cover a variety of communities (closer to/farther from the main city) and also a variety of sizes (from 20 to 180 inhabitants).

[18] In each community, interviews were conducted with at least two different participant profiles (not only board members) to access contrasting views and positions. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is the dominant language in the area though many people speak Basque language or *Euskera*. Quotes have been translated into English by the author.

[19] Questions were about participation (who participates, who doesn't, moments of extraordinary participation, motives to engage, etc.), deliberation (how people deliberate, conflict, the main topics, changes in the form of speaking, etc.), context (the political life of the community, elections, political families, conflict, socio-economic situation, inequalities, etc.), and possible reforms.

the informants' homes and also in the Community Centers. Normally, these were accompanied by a walk around the village, "guided" visits around the main facilities and informal conversation with other neighbors. Interviews were taped, transcribed and coded with NVIVO®, paying attention to how informants represented and framed the participation.

In the next sections, I will show how participants understand and confer meaning to this participatory institution. This is not, however, a comprehensive study of concejos in Araba; but a study on how lay citizens frame their participation in a highly empowered institution of rural governance, using selective depoliticization as the best approach to sustain their engagement.

Only Community Matters

Concejos are a space for the engagement of adult residents. They deliberate on community issues following a "small deliberation" style (Ganuza & Francés, 2012). In a typical meeting, participants revise the previous minutes, talk about the annual budget, arrange new public works (new roads or sewers, for example), talk about water installations and tariffs, leisure activities such as trekking and hiking, make decisions on construction permits or business licenses, review the new regional public transport plan and, eventually, participants discuss new tensions with the municipal government.

As previously noted, concejos have a broad spectrum of powers, and neighbors can decide on almost all community problems (except urbanism and new taxes). However, participants assume a division of labor in which deliberation and decision-making are restricted to those aspects that directly affect the small-scale and that can be solved by the community itself, despite any concerns affecting the region, the country or the wider world. The issues discussed in those meetings are considered simple community matters by participants. For them, these issues are completely non-political: They are embedded in the territory, scarcely controversial and technical.

Acceptable concerns are "close-to-home" and "do-able" issues (Eliasoph, 1997). For example, in a concejo located in an industrial zone, Iñaki and Patxi explained this rule during the interview. They were speaking as *experts*, for they have been engaging in their community for most of their lives. They work in the city, but they develop the rest of their lives in the town. They explained the political scope with certain displeasure, assuming that it is an obvious question:

Patxi: "The neighbors are very attached to the territory (...) Political motions are not normally brought to assemblies. It is rare. Now, for example, with the [intended law for the] suppression of concejos, yes, we we're going to bring a motion… but other issues that happen out there ... No, we don't address it. We won't make any political position. It is just issues happening in the village. For example, a toxic factory was going to be installed out there. …"

Iñaki: "Yes, there, a factory and it was highly polluting, it was just there [pointing with his finger to the street]. ... We were going to present a motion; we would have taken a position, but just because we are directly affected. …"

Only topics that are "attached to the territory," happening "in the village," "just there," and affecting inhabitants "directly" are appropriate for deliberation and action in assemblies. Iñaki argues further, "They are basic things, we are not looking at the regional deputy. … They are basic issues; water management, for example, affects all of us." Appropriate issues are "basics" directly affecting the neighborhood. The "nexus of equivalence" (Boltansky & Thèvenot, 1999) among participants, the bond binding them[20] is community matters like water management, which affect their homes or the proximity of their homes.

It is, however, quite significant that, occasionally, assemblies can deal with some supra-local issues that directly affect the community. Patxi and Iñaki comment on a factory project which was going to be installed in the area, and they also report on the *Reform of Local Government Act*.[21] These supra-local topics are also submitted to *a close sight*. They are relevant as far as they affect directly the community.

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[20] Participants also define themselves as neighbors who, having political preferences and ascriptions, leave them outside when they engage in meetings. For example, for Felipe, an IT worker in his 50s, the assemblies are limited to neighbors who do not follow any party strategy: "We are not subject to any political party. What I vote or not in a general election … it has nothing to do with concejos." Party disciplines are not even acceptable for party militants, who assume this rule with no apparent problem. They also participate as neighbors, leaving their party issues outside. For example, Joseba, a proud PNV member, remarks that he does not talk about politics in the meetings (nor in other community events like popular lunches or hiking).

[21] There was an attempt by the Spanish central government to suppress concejos and other structures of local government in an attempt to "rationalize" local administrations. This measure was part of austerity reforms; however, this reform ultimately did not have any effect in concejos.

Appropriate community matters are also considered technical and uncontroversial, in opposition to contested political subjects. Patxo, a nurse who is very engaged in left activism, compares what would be the typical issues discussed in meetings to an inappropriate topic, "Everything here is much glued to the ground. 'What do we do?' Water installation, for example, … this has nothing to do with political colors and *ikurriñas* [the Basque national flag]." The issues are "glued to the ground," like water management and installations, and normally have a straightforward technical solution, unconnected to other polemic aspects of living together like the Basque national cleavage (represented by the national flag).

Participants assume a division of labor in which neighbors discuss and act on small-scale, close-sight, technically achievable and uncontroversial community matters. They accept that this is their job. As in cases of participatory budgeting, participants assume a division of labor, a separation of worlds (Baiocchi, 2005) in which concejos are parts of the community arena formed by neighbors deliberating and acting on first-order issues like water management. Participants in concejos make space for themselves, preserving a historical culture of local self-management (Ajángiz, 2015). They practice a small deliberation style (Ganuza & Francés, 2012). And the political scope of participation is, at first sight, limited to that.

Conflict, Politics, and Engagement in the Community

In concejos, the frame of participation is also based on the premise that politics must remain outside. This frame was at work in every meeting I attended and in all the interviews I conducted across villages and personal profiles. As Maria Rosa stated with satisfaction, "There is nothing, nothing political, nothing about politics" while reflecting on her town meeting. She makes clear that politics should stay away from deliberation. Further, participants make this claim, departing from the idea that politics refers mainly to partisan politics. Party politics, issues and practices (like party disciplines) should be avoided because they can be a source of conflict. Participants hold the classical argument that partisanship may increase conflict among neighbors in face-to-face groups (Dahl & Tufte, 1972; Mansbridge, 1983). Personal and daily contact augments the feelings of vulnerability.

Participants depict community conflict as a *perfect storm* in which private interests become public in meetings and political cleavages become intermingled, provoking hard discussions, walk-outs by participants, and, in the most extreme situations, even physical violence. The frame of politics-away is intended to

prevent that perfect storm. As an example, one of the first communities I visited in 2014 was indicative of this. As a researcher, I was invited by the concejo's president, Raquel, to attend a meeting on a Sunday morning in the Council House. Around 50 neighbors attended (out of 180). This was an exceptional meeting.[22] Board members and participants were in a bitter fight during the whole session, shouting and insulting each other. Bitter discussions on the minutes, the recording of sessions, the annual budget, land expropriations, the renting of public housing, etc., provoked strong reactions. This assembly showed a perfect storm situation.

The conflictive situation in this concejo was the result of a process of blending private interests with polarized partisan positions. For example, daily conflicts over the use of roads, the garbage around work installations, or the state of public facilities mixed up with tight partisan identities, which amplified the significance and the feelings of the group affected by the initial dispute. Andrés, a participant in his 50s and a history teacher at the local school, said in an interview that he was used to that. He contends that most of the conflicts in that concejo start because of a clash of private interests among neighbors. A recent conflict happened around land expropriation to build new community sewers. The clash of interests emerged in the meetings because some neighbors were in disagreement with the plans; some of them were going to be expropriated. According to Andrés, behind this, there were also political "families." Most citizens are supposed to be aligned with "families" sharing political sympathies (mainly, Spanish or Basque nationalists). These political alignments come from historical events.[23] Actually, Andrés argues that neighbors carry "heavy historical backpacks" which make their political identities (and differences) relevant bonds of familiarity and relationship in that scenario. These political bonds are expressed in meetings usually in subtle and indirect ways: "That backpack consciously or unconsciously drives us to adopt one way or another, to support an idea or another, a person or another." "You're already predisposed to think that what 'that guy' will say is wrong. ..." Strong political identities produce predispositions to judge a proposal even when it is about community sewers.[24] Everyday disagreements on community facilities are also interpreted in terms of partisan traditions,

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[22] "The meeting begins with the president reading a letter accusing publicly one of the members of the administrative board for the disappearance of formal documents. 'You'll have to prove it' - says the board member. The president says that she will talk to her lawyer and she will solve the issue judicially" (Field Note, 02/22/2014 in a community near the city of Amurrio).

[23] For example, the family experience of the Spanish Civil War (1936), Francoism (1939-1975), the national cleavage, and the later experience of armed violence and repression.

[24] Studies on media use, for example, show how we select information according to ideological beliefs and previous identities (Jomini, 2007). In an ethnographic study, Walsh (2004) shows how citizens build, filter, and interpret political news and political events from their political identities.

amplifying the salience of disputes and the group of (indirectly) affected neighbors.

Effectively, deliberation on these everyday disputes and the polarized partisan culture produce tensions. However, partisan topics produce even more tensions. In the very same concejo, occasionally participants have brought proposals which directly refer to the national cleavage, party politics *par excellence*. For example, some time ago, some participants brought to the meeting a public manifesto asking for the liberation of an ETA prisoner because he was suffering a terminal disease. For Andrés, who supported that manifesto, "this is a political decision," but "it is humanitarian, so most people voted for it." He and other neighbors report how polemic that decision was.

Reflecting on that, Lorentzo, a factory worker living in a nearby village, rejects that type of decision-making in concejos. For him, it is not appropriate. He argues that the deepest cause of tension is, in fact, participants inappropriately bringing those partisan issues to the meetings. He believes that the contested situation in the neighboring concejo started because the PNV party (moderated nationalists) split up in 1986, producing confrontation among two nationalist families: "It was then that politics got into meetings. They've had bad times; but now it is even worse." According to Lorentzo, the clash over community facilities is not a minor everyday subject anymore; it has become a dispute among party adversaries. For him, partisan issues (like the Basque national question) are inappropriate in that context because they amplify everyday conflicts.

Partisan disciplines are also understood as a source of tension. They produce strong and fixed disagreement in assemblies, making deliberation a frustrating experience and, as a result, making people withdraw. From a pragmatic point of view, some participants defend the frame of politics-away because strong party disciplines make deliberations hard, long-lasting, and frustrating. For example, Idoia, a school pedagogue recently elected president of her concejo, is clear about that. She explains that parties, occasionally, promote disciplined "blocks" of neighbors for and against community proposals, rendering decision-making a too-difficult process. Though she is militant of a local party, she rejects partisan behavior in meetings. As Idoia says, "In my village, we had a moment of strong blocks, people on two sides. ... I mean, here you normally discuss and look for the common good of the village. If you need to fix something like a road, you just try to reach agreements on that." She believes that parties favor strong disagreements, which make deliberations useless and prolonged. The construction of agreements becomes too difficult. The assembly gets blocked and problems are not resolved, producing frustration and, eventually, the exit of participants. Pragmatically, Idoia

and other participants support the idea that parties should keep their hands away. Partisan disciplines should be avoided to make assemblies a more peaceful, secure and dynamic space.

Inclusiveness

The other side of the coin is that most party issues are considered exclusive because of the required quantity and diversity of participants. It is necessary to include enough participants to make legitimate decisions and to implement these. Making engagement sustainable over time requires participants to resist getting frustrated and leaving. Limiting the discussion on party issues (and, consequently, limiting a significant portion of potential conflict and deliberative frustration) makes sense in order to promote inclusiveness.

Participants limit the political scope to increase the quantity and the plurality of participants (Mutz, 2006). In this sense, Patxo, the leftist nurse, explains the participants' approach to inclusiveness: "Most of [the] assemblies are free from politics. You can find people of all political 'colors' and political factions. The assembly is independent of political parties. That is pure and simple." Patxo is very engaged in the Basque national question. He is a militant member of a left-nationalist party (*Bildu*), and he was regional deputy in the past. However, he voices clearly the rule that the national cleavage should be addressed in a different arena. A more impersonal and detached arena is perceived as more appropriate. Concejos' assemblies have acquired an independent and party-free character, so meetings are seemingly open for all neighbors or, at least, do not exclude anyone from the point of view of party identity ("colors"). This was also probed in many cases by administrative boards, which were formed by neighbors with different party affiliations.[25] Inclusiveness entails leaving these party issues aside.

Overlooking party identities is also necessary to form inclusive majorities in everyday decision-making, that is, inclusion in terms of collective choice. This is explained by Buenaventura, a retired public officer in his 60s, who presents himself as politically neutral. He explains the process of acquiring a local majority so that decisions have wide support. The fact that party ascriptions do not divide assemblies into blocks contributes to aggregating the neighbors' preferences:

> "Let's see, if someone is affiliated to a political party, for example Bildu [left nationalists]; he is not the president because he is in that, which is not at stake. He is just a neighbor, with his personal features. In the partisan

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[25] For example, in Patxo's concejo, the president is a conservative militant and one of the assistants is a left-wing nationalist (Bildu).

model, in this village, seven people will vote for him, another seven guys to other party, and other seven to another candidate. None of them would obtain enough votes to have a solid representation, sufficient support. When I was a candidate, I wasn't in any party, and I got 29 votes out of 35. And you know you have 29 people backing you. Of course, that's a big advantage. You have real support."

The "partisan model" implies a division of neighbors into blocks. In contrast, participants make decisions tending to consensus and large majorities, which is a meaningful condition for decision-making in that context. This consensual condition is typical of small-size direct democracy (Mansbridge, 1983). The frame of politics-away makes possible the sum, the inclusion of neighbors overcoming the contextual political polarization.

In the end, participants in concejos do not label the participatory settings as non-political as a matter of prejudice. They exclude deliberation and action on party grounds (especially those related to the Basque national cleavage) because it is too divisive and exclusive for community-based collective action. Excluding party issues is the participants' way of dealing with the very adversarial and polarized context of the region, maintaining a peaceful and inclusive environment at home.

Community Matters become Political

Despite all standards and practices to exclude partisan issues, occasionally concejos become platforms for neighbors to embark on collective action. Small deliberation leads, sometimes, to wider collective action for or against governments' decisions. In specific circumstances, neighbors use concejos to question some policies. Previously stable engagement on community issues makes it possible for participants to have an accessible platform from which to organize and boost their campaigns. For example, they get organized against toxic factory projects or against the *Reform of Local Government Act*, an austerity measure passed by the Spanish government in 2013. The frame of politics-away makes possible sustainable and inclusive engagement. This also facilitates neighbors occasionally going beyond pragmatic and technical self-management, and embarking on wider battles for or against state measures, expanding their political scope.

In this sense, concejos are a platform for neighbors' collective action in situations of environmental risk or perceived challenges to the environmental richness of their territory. They perform *reactive collective action* (Tilly, 1976, p. 1). During fieldwork, participants mentioned several cases of concejos that had been

involved in contentious processes opposing the establishment of new extractive companies or factory projects for perceived environmental risks, representing classical "NIMBY" reactions.[26] A good example was a concejo in which participants opposed the installation of a calcite mine in a nearby mountain after the project was approved by the Basque Department of Industry. Buenaventura, the public servant now retired (who appeared in the previous section), describes how it was a hard process of volunteer self-training with the support of an environmentalist group. Some neighbors joined together and studied the potential risks for the water supply in the community, and they decided to bring the issue to the concejo.[27] It took eight meetings to arrange a solution because not all the neighbors were against the mining project. Finally, they held a secret-ballot referendum that supported the opposition to the mining project, and they voted against the initial resolution of the Basque government.[28] They argued that the quality of life in the area was in danger, so the regional government had to consult neighbors before approving any plan. In this case, the concejo, which is normally dedicated to first-order matters (fixing public works, for example), was the space to discuss and organize the resistance against what most of neighbors perceived as a too-risky project. The case acquired a broader public acknowledgement by involving the regional government, other public agencies, the mining company, the Association of Concejos of Araba (ACOA), environmental groups, and the regional media. Similar conflicts had occurred in the area, leaving certain impact in terms of environmental consciousness (Palacios & Barcena, 2012).

Reactive collective action is also identified in other cases. Participants in some concejos have approved manifestos against *fracking gas extractions*, echoing a regional campaign promoted by the ACOA and ACOVI (the two concejos' associations).[29] While these environmental concerns are community-connected,

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[26] As Kraft & Clary (1991, p. 300) define: "NIMBY (Not in my back yard) refers to intense, sometimes emotional, and often clamorous local opposition to siting proposals that residents believe will result in adverse impacts. Project costs and risks, such as effects on human health, environmental quality, or property values, are geographically concentrated while the benefits accrue to a larger, more dispersed population."

[27] In a meeting celebrated in 2002, before the conflict, participants in this concejo evaluated the official report of the calcite mine. Many participants showed their concerns. Their claims were communicated to the regional government. This was the starting point for collective action (new official claims, media news, contact with environmental groups, etc.). This issue (the calcite mine and the model of local development) was discussed in meetings together with small deliberation issues (for example, building permits, collective works, a festival, repairing a public fountain, etc.).

[28] In this referendum, 88% of the neighbors participated, and 80% (36 votes out of 51) opposed the mining project.

[29] For a further example of this environmental campaign: https://issuu.com/acoa-ake/docs/herrian_14_web/4 [Consulted 04/04/2016].

they become "political" because they do not turn internally polarizing and divisive[30] and they involve external actors. They are also connected to the broader political arena. For example, Koldo, a participant and kindergarten teacher, explains that "those topics that come from ACOVI or ACOA, the case of the nuclear central of Garoña or the issue of fracking [which] … are political decisions. They are supported ... by an association that also represents us. So, we had a debate and made a decision. And the result usually coincides with the position defended by the association." So, the fact that these campaigns have support from external organizations that enjoy acknowledgement in concejos can be a certificate of adequacy to make these issues debatable in assemblies.

Other concerns perceived as political are discussed in concejos because they impact directly on the community and they generate some consensus within (Tilly, 1973). The pre-test of this potential consensus is that the campaign is being supported by diverse associative and political actors. In this respect, in 2013, members of ACOA were campaigning against the state reform of local governments. The *Reform of the Local Government Act* was intended to suppress small local authorities (affecting concejos, too) with the argument that they were too costly and inefficient to provide basic services. That was part of the austerity policies adopted by the (conservative) *Partido Popular* in the central government. In the context of this public debate, in some concejos, participants discussed this political issue in their meetings and adopted resolutions and manifestos against it. For example, in an open meeting organized by ACOA,[31] two participants encouraged engagement in this campaign, "We cannot keep quiet!"/ "We are in the hands of the Spanish government!" They decided to create a commission to follow up the development of the reform, how it affected the Basque concejos, and how the campaign would be proposed to town meetings. The local reform raised by the Spanish central government gathered the opposition of all the nationalist parties and concejos' associations.[32] It was an austerity pack boosted solely by the *Popular Party*, an organization with limited support in rural areas.

These cases show that participants in concejos selectively politicize some concerns. The characteristics of those issues are, first, the direct effect upon the rural communities. Second, these issues normally receive wide support among

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[30] For example, regarding fracking, all nationalist parties are against this, and they are dominant in the rural areas. PNV party has developed anti-fracking campaigns in Araba with the argument that it would dramatically break down the rural landscape and the lifestyle. Left-nationalist parties have a strong environmentalist profile.

[31] This meeting was held February 13, 2014, in the *Casa de Juntas* de Elorriaga.

[32] Finally, PNV negotiated with the Spanish government that Basque concejos were out of this reform.

participants (for example, the rejection of the mine project gathered 88% of the votes, and the rejection of the local government reform gained the support of the majority of regional parties and associations). Third, the political issues that are discussed in assemblies have the external support of a varied spectrum of actors, such as regional associations, mass media, local and regional authorities, other concejos, and political parties. ACOA and ACOVI, as concejos' associations, are the key actors in the broadening of the scope. Participants in concejos, although specializing in small deliberation, sometimes engage in broader discussions and broader processes of collective action reacting to policy measures. Though the role of participants tends to be reactive, the political scope, in these situations, becomes greater. It gets expanded.

Conclusions

Practices of avoiding politics have different meanings according to the contexts (Eliasoph, 1998; Luhtakallio & Eliasoph, 2014). In participatory democracy settings, participants frequently reject the presence of partisan politics, as it happens in concejos. For example, in Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting, Baiocchi (2005) showed that "it was absolutely unacceptable to talk politics" in assemblies. And "this is not an accidental rule," for activists and participants found that it was a separated "world of the community" (p. 113). A similar distinction can be observed in concejos, which are culturally framed as separate and distinct from partisan politics. Participants elaborate discourses on the neutral communitarian character of issues, making space for themselves as legitimate decision-makers in that space. They create space for themselves, defending a historical culture of self-management (Ajangiz, 2015).

In addition, participants face typical problems of collective action in heterogeneous groups. This is quite relevant in concejos, since they are located in small communities where face-to-face contact is frequent. Concejos have settled around a polarized regional scenario that has a lengthy record of political violence around the national cleavage. Participants make clear that discussions on this problem (the partisan issue *par excellence*) do not fit their local participatory setting. It is not the appropriate place. For them, broader partisan issues are, in general, better addressed in other arenas. So the frame of politics-away is useful to avoid partisan issues. It is intended to exclude problems which are too far, harmful, and divisive for living and engaging together. As studies of social networks indicate, heterogeneous groups find it difficult to deal with polarizing political issues (Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2011). Reducing the political scope of concejos seems to work quite well to promote inclusiveness and sustainable engagement.

The political scope of participation is flexible and culturally defined (Townsend, 2006). It is not only a matter of formal powers. The main contribution of this paper has been to demonstrate that politicization practices are selective, and they respond to cultural and organizational demands. In concejos, participants exclude all those problems that are not community-centered, practical and technically fixable. They exclude partisan issues which are too divisive and exclusive. However, participants also open the political scope with issues like environmental problems or austerity plans which produce internal cohesion and external alliances. Regional associations of concejos play a relevant role broadening the scope of action. In the end, participants limit or open the political scope with flexibility, according to an inherited culture of self-management, the polarized regional context, and the problems of collective action imposed by both.[33] Thus, we cannot say that they have a depoliticizing style of engagement; rather, they are selective, which is the way they manage to sustain their engagement. The political scope of participatory institutions is not totally fixed. It is constructed culturally, during the practice of engagement.

Therefore, the political scope of participatory institutions should be analyzed carefully from a cultural point of view, not only focusing on formal powers. In participatory settings that are sustained over time, small deliberation can offer an opportunity for further engagement with broader political issues. As concejos demonstrate, participants normally deliberate on water installations or sewers (first-order issues); but they also use this platform to engage politically (even if it is in a reactive way). Indeed, they are influential in some public policies. Practitioners of deliberative democracy, facilitators and activists should highlight the value of small deliberation. These enclaves can foster political engagement and collective action which, otherwise, would be difficult to facilitate. Though small deliberation is frequently underestimated as too limited, it can be an open door to further engagement. Small deliberation—if sustained over time—is not as small as it seemed initially.

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[33] In her study of politicization of gender issues in social movements in Helsinki and Lyon, Luhtakallio (2012) showed the reasons why gender becomes a debate. It depends on internal organizational issues (for example, if it is too polemic for the members); but it also depends on the broader culture on the topic.

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