

Participatory Democracy in Local Government: An Online Platform in the City of Madrid

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This article aims to show the current results of the experience of the participatory electronic democracy project, implemented from 2015 to 2019 by the local government of the city of Madrid. The project aimed to be an open and binding space for the formulation, debate, and approval of proposals for the design and implementation of local public policies. The empirical analysis is mainly based on

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data provided by the municipal government, triangulated with qualitative interviews with key political, bureaucratic, and civic stakeholders. The initial assessment shows that new technologies improve political participation in a rather meagre way, and may even erode the democratic process. Furthermore, participatory approaches, like the one studied here, tend to forget that participation depends above all on non-technological variables and, therefore, that the use of new technologies has to be matched with other innovative forms of political and administrative participation.

Keywords: e-democracy, local government, participatory democracy, Madrid, new social movements

1. Introduction

Democratic innovation in local government places many expectations in the use and potential of the internet to improve democratic quality. In this context, it is necessary to carry out empirical works that allow us to identify the opportunities offered by the internet with regards to fostering citizen participation, its influence on public decision-makers, as well as the assessment of its effects. With this in mind, the article aims to show the current results of the participatory e-democracy project experience. The project was implemented from 2015 to 2019 by the local government of the city of Madrid (numbering more than 3 million inhabitants), and aimed to be an open and binding space for the formulation, debate, and approval of proposals for the design and implementation of local public policies. More specifically, we will present the most striking features of Decide Madrid, the citizen participation model, and examine its current results, drawing conclusions regarding the effect of online participation as a means of democratic improvement. Among the specific objectives of this study we intend to identify the socio-political context in which the project started, the specific motivation driving its promoters and the references they took as a starting point, the resistance that it was put up against, participatory and decision-making mechanisms established in the model and, lastly, the results obtained. Other aspects of special interest that must be examined are the use of the digital platform by Madrilenian citizens, as well as the type and number of decisions that were eventually

made and implemented through this participatory system and open government.

Our analysis is essentially based on three types of available data: first, the information gathered by the platform as the process developed and whilst it existed; second, interviews with political and technical actors, as well as representatives of civic associations; third, the impact generated in the local written press. The assessment also includes the perception of the citizens who took part in the initiative, analysing both the socio-political factors and ICT-related skills, even though access to this data is slim to none. The article is divided into two sections. In the first section, based on some theoretical and empirical works we will allude to some of the explanatory factors in the implementation of new digital technologies to improve democracy. The second section will show the methodological strategy chosen to examine the case study. We will first address the specific political and administrative context that led to the development of the citizen participation and open government project, Decide Madrid, to then describe the functioning scheme, with particular attention to the participatory tools and the digital platform's setting. Finally, we will show the most relevant results that have been accessed in order to lastly, state some conclusions derived from this experience and aimed at contributing to the improvement of online participation in local governments.

2. Digital Technologies and Participatory Democracy in Theory and Practice

The emergence and generalization of the use of digital technologies since the 1990s have brought about a crucial change in the way we relate to and in the configuration of current societies (Dutton, 1999; Castells, 2004; Dahlgren, 2009). Since then, and even before (i.e., Dahl, 1989; Milward & Snyder, 1996; Katz, 1997; Tsagarousianou, Tambini & Bryan, 1998; Jordan, 1999), the possibility of using digital technologies to favour the democratic political process has been raised, either from the representative democracy approach or from that of direct (participatory) democracy (Hagen, 2000; Norris, 2001; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Vedel, 2003; Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Chadwick, 2006; Breindl & Franco, 2008; Breindl, 2010). The convenience of exploring the possibilities of digital technologies, in order to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness

of the democratic process through greater binding citizen participation in the decision-making process, is now more relevant because, in its current form, liberal representative democracy is strongly being questioned (Mair, 2013; Castells, 2018). Recent and very eloquent examples are the largest waves of social protests since the Second World War (Ortiz et al., 2013; Mason, 2013), and the proliferation of populist anti-system parties (Roberts-Miller, 2017). Both approaches denounce the open gap between the interests of the representatives and the interests of the represented, and the positions of both social protests and populists express the anger of broad social sectors because of the deterioration of living conditions that the economic crisis and the application of reform policies and structural cuts have contributed to intensify. Paradoxically, it can be presumed that the wide popular disaffection with politicians and representative democratic institutions feeds a major threat: the appeal to technocracy as a remedy against political corruption and against populism, presuming it to be more effective and, in the end, an adequate instrument to recover lost legitimacy (Ryan, 2018).

Interestingly, current democracies are also threatened by the use of a particular class of digital technologies: Big Data, that is, the processing of information on the browsing habits of users by large digital platforms (Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), thus acquiring the potential for social and political control proper to a genuine Big Brother, interfering intensely and covertly in the political process, as the Cambridge Analytics case suggests (O'Neil, 2016).

In this text, we focus on the possibilities of digital technologies for the direct participation of citizens in decision-making processes. This basic kind of democracy, normally linked to the notion of direct democracy, has a long theoretical and practical tradition, but its limitations in serving the needs of complex societies have also been repeatedly pointed out (Dahl, 1989; Schumpeter, 1942/2008). Nonetheless, in the last decades, there have been many practical attempts to develop forms of direct democracy, including participatory budgets, open to the greatest number of citizens, both in Europe and in the Americas and Oceania (Macintosh, 2004). However, many of these experiences are characterized by shortcomings, such as affecting a very limited number of issues subject to a decision; involving small portions of the population; not being binding; being the product of initiatives of non-governmental citizens; presenting a limited temporal continuity; and having scarce resources to implement the decisions adopted by the majority. Only in recent years have these experiences timidly incorporated digital technologies to overcome the obstacles that

physical distance and personal impediments exert on participation. Until recently, perhaps the most striking example of this online orientation of participatory democracy were the Helsinki and Reykjavik projects. The latter, named Better Reykjavik, was implemented in 2011 by the NGO, Citizens Foundation, and has since collaborated with its municipality to improve the direct political participation of its citizens.

The online participation project, Better Reykjavik, is a direct precedent of the case analysis presented in this article of the online model of citizen participation, Decide Madrid, which, as its stakeholders recognize, was developed in the city of Madrid uninterruptedly since September 2015 to May 2019. There are several reasons that lead us to select this particular case for analysing the limitations and possibilities of online political participation, either from the perspective of representative democracy or, above all, from the direct democracy approach. The first reason is its innovative character. The initiative of the project corresponds to the local government that emerged from the citizen candidacy *Ahora Madrid* (*Madrid Now*), which originated in the social protest movements that emerged on May 15, 2011, in the squares of many Spanish cities (generally called the movement of the *Indignados*, or 15-M movement). The movement was a response to austerity policies and structural reforms. Although many representatives of the new municipal government had previously been social activists, they were not linked to pre-existing representative organizations. Rather, they were political representatives who did not consider themselves professional politicians, but individual citizens with government responsibilities, convinced of the theoretical and practical convenience of direct participatory processes to improve the democratic process. Thus, the project was supported by an unequivocal popular mandate to favour citizen participation.

The second reason that lead to the selection of this unit of analysis is that Decide Madrid is an ambitious international citizen participation project with respect to the size of the population that has the right to participate (with a resident population of 16 years and older, this amounts to almost 3 million people); the breadth of issues under discussion; and the binding nature of the decisions made by the citizens.

Finally, it is a project that, in just three years of uninterrupted practice, has become a global reference for direct participatory practitioners. As indicated below, other cities and institutions around the world have adopted relevant elements of the Madrid participatory model, or use their free software (the CONSUL platform). In fact, the project was awarded the

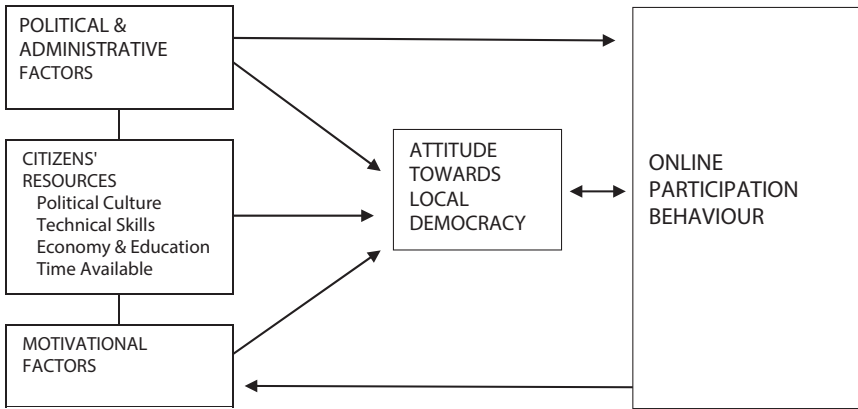
United Nations Public Service Award in 2018, and was selected to deliver the inaugural speech of the Open Government Partnership to the 72nd Assembly of the United Nations in 2017.

3. Theoretical Model and Hypothesis

Our general hypothesis is that the use of digital tools can improve participation and the quality of participation in the political decision-making process, especially if it receives strong political and administrative support. It also depends on the attitudes and perceptions of local political elites and officials concerning local democracy and the generation of new institutional forms, both for direct and representative democracy, that serve to channel social diversity, to provide adequate means for deliberation, and to establish binding decisions and effective results. Two complementary hypotheses are, first, that participation does not depend only on technological variables, and that the usefulness of digital tools depends on how other factors that affect participation, such as culture and economy, are resolved and, second, that, in addition to improving the participatory processes of direct democracy, digital tools can also be useful to explore new forms of representative democracy different from the current ones, although complementary. We assume, in any case, that larger local levels of government, such as the city of Madrid, constitute a focus of ideal analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of the mechanisms of online and offline participation, whether direct or representative.

With all this in mind, we have elaborated on the following model to explain the online participation in our case study, with the inclusion of the variables considered in our study with a powerful explanatory capacity.

Figure 1. *Explanatory Model of Citizens' Online Participation in the Local Government*



Source: Authors.

4. Research Method and Data

We have opted for a case study research strategy because, according to Ragin & Becker (1997), we assume that it is the suitable approach to exploratory analysis for our intention. It is also suitable for both qualitative and quantitative data collecting and analysis techniques, and even as the first step in implementing a future comparative analysis among a complete number of case studies. Under these premises, and in order to achieve the objectives and to contrast the hypotheses specified in the introduction, the following combination of strategies and sources has been chosen:

- a) A qualitative and quantitative analysis of the project's three official websites,¹ since it is the digital platform itself which gives access to the different participatory mechanisms, and also happens to be the most innovative part of the project. The main website was accessed during three specific periods: spring 2016, autumn 2018, and spring 2019. The websites were accessed again (in February 2020) to check the state they were in after the municipal elections and after the right-

¹ The main one <https://decide.madrid.es> and two complementary: <https://datos.madrid.es/portal/site/egob/>, and <https://transparencia.madrid.es/portal/site/transparencia>

wing coalition accessed the government. All three websites are still available, although their contents and resources are rather limited. The main website (<https://decide.madrid.es/>), the core of the digital platform, proves to have been unused since May 2019.

- b) A qualitative and quantitative content analysis coming from reports, and preparatory and evaluative documents issued by the City Council during the project's lifespan and available on their official websites during that time. The use of a self-report on the participatory process, for the period from June 2015 (when it was being developed) until July 2017 (right after the first major citizen consultations), is of particular relevance.
- c) Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. From 2015 to late 2018, we held 15 interviews, each lasting 90 minutes, which included the councillor and the general director responsible for online political participation, two opposition party councillors, four local government officers most involved with the online participation platform, and eight leaders of the largest and most representative local civic associations. The interviews were conducted in two phases: the first one in the winter of 2015-2016, and the second one in autumn 2018. The third phase of interviews, programmed for spring 2019, was postponed due to the local elections and the subsequent change in the local government.

5. Case Study: The On-line Platform for Citizen Participation – Decide Madrid

5.1. A Specific Socio-Political Context: Austerity Policies and the 15-M Movement

The “Indignant” movement, or 15-M movement, whose most conspicuous expression was the large concentration of people and the setting up of assembly camps in the squares of the main Spanish cities beginning on May 15, 2011, is a striking example of the aspirations for democratic radicalism that current social movements host (Mason, 2013; Castells, 2015). The context of the Great Recession prompted by the financial crisis, and the cutback policies and structural and austerity reforms forced on some Mediterranean countries by the EU, Spain amongst them, helped catalyse the discomfort and indignation that a large part of the Spanish pop-

ulation entertained for the functioning of democracy. The gatherings in squares and neighbourhoods served the purpose of a civic school, acting as a laboratory in which different forms of direct democratic, inclusive and horizontal participation were experimented with. The intensive use of electronic means to send and receive personalised messages was used to organise the movement and keep it alive. The 15-M movement inspired the appearance of citizen candidacies, such as *Ahora Madrid*, which reached the institutions in May 2015 and, with a majority in the plenary, the governments and administrations of major Spanish cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona. The corollary of these electoral achievements was the frantic dissolution of the 15-M movement.

In the case of Madrid, the access of the citizen candidacy *Ahora Madrid* to the government and administration of the capital meant transferring to the city council the mechanisms of direct democracy, tested in the 15-M movement, into the field of digital platforms (Sánchez & Pastor 2016). These digital platforms were considered an essential tool to favour the participation of large or scattered populations and encourage participation throughout the population in terms of equality, without the intermediation of organisations, such as neighbourhood associations, which were settled in the districts and which were traditionally main actors in face-to-face participation. Transferring the digital experience of the streets and squares into the municipal institution was possible as long as the Spanish municipal government and policy system anticipated the existence of a strong mayor, allowing for a majority in the plenary with the capacity to designate not only political positions, but also bureaucratic posts. Otherwise, the political autonomy of the districts and the scope of action of traditional neighbourhood associations is rather limited, so citizen-participatory policies are forced upon by the city centre. As a matter of fact, many of the 15-M movement activists started filling political and management positions, which allowed for the implementation of the *Decide Madrid* platform, in accordance with existing ones in other cities and countries. According to its promoters and former activists in the 15-M movement, the *Decide Madrid* platform was more ambitious compared with other similar platforms, because only *Decide Madrid* allowed the possibility to pose absolutely any type of citizen proposal, hold a debate on it and abide by it; and no other platform targeted such a broad population, almost two and a half million potential users (citizens based in the city of Madrid over the age of 16).

5.2. Aims of the Project

According to the open information available on the *decidemadrid.es* website and to the local leaders interviewed, Decide Madrid is the first binding participative and open-government experience carried out in Spain, and the first initiative of direct participation undertaken by the Madrid City Council. Furthermore, it is the first participation project to be based on a digital platform, and the first one to reach more than the 6.000 participants of previous experiences. Also, the project originated with the desire to transfer to the municipal government the practices deployed by the movement of the *Indignados* (or 15-M movement) during the Spanish social protests of 2011-2014. As previously mentioned, some of the activists of this social movement were incorporated into the City Council and given both political and administrative influence. With such an approach, an especially striking feature of the project, as expressed in the *Puerta del Sol Manifesto* on the same day that the citizen movement emerged, was to democratize the City Council by opening the local government to individual citizens able to use the internet and not to civic associations. That is, it aimed to stimulate a new culture of participation centred on individuals, rather than on representative organizations, through horizontality and inclusiveness criteria; the keywords in the vocabulary of its promoters when interviewed, and displayed on the *decidemadrid.es* website. Initially, and with that in mind, the project was thought of as primarily an online tool, since digital technologies were thought to be the best way to break the barriers of participation imposed by distances in a large city, work, and family obligations, as well as physical impediments.

As seen in a previous analysis (Iglesias & Barbeito, 2016), both the participative approach and the project's digital design had a borne ideological motivation: the presumption that direct and individual participation, without intermediaries, is more democratic (better expresses the personal will). But it also had a practical motivation: the conviction that direct participatory processes obtain better practical results, which is personally more satisfying than the simple act of voting for representatives. These convictions were repeatedly voiced by the drivers of the project during the interviews, with a prominent mention of them on the *decidemadrid.es* website. A report funded by the municipal government to evaluate the project also asserts that this experience is an attempt to prove the viability of the techno-political approach (Padilla, 2018).

5.3. Resistance and Collaboration

According to the municipal councillors who were interviewed, the main resistance to the project has come from the political opposition to the local government (conservative parties). It is a fundamentally ideological resistance, since the political opposition is contrary to direct citizen participation, based on the belief that citizens prefer to devote themselves to their own affairs and that political issues are to be resolved by professional politicians. This ideological resistance was later confirmed to the authors of this paper by the interviewed local leaders of the main conservative political party. The opposition leaders also denounced the cost of the platform and the participative processes as unnecessary, although this is a piece of information that the authors of this paper could not find.

The local political leaders responsible for the project recognized that civic associations also resisted in the beginning since the project did not give them preference in the participatory processes. However, with time, the associations observed that by being organized they were more likely to influence all the phases of the process. In consequence, more support led them to be more receptive and collaborating, especially the associations from the districts.

According to those responsible, once the initial suspicions were overcome, mainly due to a lack of participatory culture, the local public employees were a key factor for the success of the project. However, those very officers claimed that a continuous resistance came from the local and national media, aligned with the opposition and with a more traditional vision of representative democracy. Naturally, this claim should be contrasted by further research, which the authors of this work have not been able to locate nor elaborate upon. Should this alleged media resistance in the case of Madrid be confirmed, it would contrast with the support the media gave to one of the other most remarkable participative experiences in the past decade in Europe, i.e., the Irish Constitutional Convention (Arnold, Farrell & Suiter, 2019).

In any case, those responsible for the project argue that the greatest resistance to the project of online participation comes, in general, from the mental schemes of political representatives, whatever the ideological signs. This qualitative assertion appears consistent with the quantitative findings of a survey amongst Belgian citizens and politicians to assess the G1000 Belgian project of direct democracy, deliberation, and random democracy in 2012. The study showed that the resistance of politicians

against highly participative formulae (especially if they include elements of random selection) is a mainstream position, whatever their ideological alignment is (Vandamme et al., 2019).

According to those responsible for the project of participation, deliberation and decision-making, Decide Madrid, and based on the available information on the decidemadrid.es website, the design of the project was carried out in tight cooperation with Medialab-Prado. Medialab-Prado is an open cultural space, founded in 2000 with public funds from Madrid's local government, and intended as a citizen lab devoted to researching, producing, and disseminating culture and collaborative learning, especially that of a digital nature (<https://www.medialab-prado.es/>). During the 15-M movement (2011-2015), the space hosted the projects of social activists who, in May 2015, entered the city's new government within the citizen candidacy Ahora Madrid.

The participation of social activists that entered the local government in 2015 explains the immediate technical support that Medialab-Prado gave to the Decide Madrid project. Part of this alliance resulted in the digital platform CONSUL, which is a free software licensed under the AGPLv3. The Madrid City Council encouraged municipalities, regions and all types of institutions to use this code to promote citizen participation and direct decision-making in the world, and to support its use. In fact, the decidemadrid.es website sustains that institutions from more than 50 cities and regions are replicating the model of Decide Madrid, in places such as Buenos Aires, Paris, Turin, Jalisco, Valencia, or A Coruña. This very alliance between Medialab-Prado and the new local government resulted in the creation of the Laboratory of Collective Intelligence for Democratic Participation (Participalab). The Lab was designed as a thrust of collaborative work focused on hybrid processes of participation by means of designing the technology for direct and deliberative democracy involving new digital tools. Some examples are the International Conference of Democratic Cities (CONSULCon17), hosted in Madrid in November 2017; the Collective Intelligence for Democracy programme; and the Hybrid Democracy project (participation, deliberation, and random democracy), which implied the constitution of the G1000 Madrid, inspired by the Belgian experience in 2012.

Along with the collaboration of Medialab-Prado, the Decide Madrid project benefited from the EU-funded project D-CENT (Decentralised Citizens ENGagement Technologies), in which, between October 2013 and May 2016, different Madrilenian activists worked with both activists and

later politicians from Barcelona, Reykjavik, and Helsinki. Indeed, when interviewed, the Decide Madrid developers mentioned the participation models of Helsinki (Open Ministry) and Reykjavik (Better Reykjavik and Better Neighbourhood) as the closest references to the Madrilenian project, although they argued the former to be much more ambitious than its predecessors, regarding both the population concerned, as well as the extent of openness to citizen initiatives and the binding nature of the decisions. These assertions are consistent with the history of the project displayed on their website.

5.4. Tools and Participatory Channels

According to the interviews, the official websites and the local government's report of the two first years of the project's performance, once the Decide Madrid platform was set up and implemented, a wide digital diffusion and a just as wide conventional diffusion of the project started: advertising and press conferences, posters on the main city's streets, flyers in municipal buildings, and postal consignments. This diffusion reached its tipping point in January and February 2017, when the large-scale citizen consultations mentioned in the results section were conducted. Even though the entire population of Madrid was potentially exposed to the information campaigns, only those over 16 had the right to take part in the project, thus reducing the minimum age that the law in Spain allows for taking part in official elections by two years.

The project had four participatory tools, all of which were digitally accessible: debates, citizen proposals, participatory budgets, and consultations with citizens. A few months before the project was concluded, due to the change in local government, a fifth tool was set in motion, radically different from the previous ones, because it was a consultative body selected by a random sample, named the City Observatory. However, this tool was never included on the main website as a tool of open participation.

During almost four years of the project's operation, the first four tools were adapted to the practical problems arising in their application, and all the participatory mechanisms already had clear support in local legislation, since it was developed for that express purpose. Specifically, municipal legislation guaranteed the right of initiative of each citizen, as well as the right of the audience by the local administration to consult citizens when it deemed appropriate, as well as to enable them to contribute to defining projects drawn up at the initiative of the municipality.

The four tools that were developed had three channels of participation: a web platform (<https://decide.madrid.es/>), face-to-face spaces (permanent and mobile), and postal mail, with the web platform representing the nucleus of the participatory model in its original design. Excluding the debates tool, which was simply a discussion forum open to any registered user, the other participation tools required the user to be a resident of Madrid and to have reached the age of 16 (it was not necessary to be a Spanish citizen). Consequently, around 2,700,000 residents in Madrid had the right to participate in the participatory processes (out of a total population of about 3,170,000). In all the cases participation was individual, not collective (that is, each person was only represented as themselves). As such, even the members of the civic associations participated as individuals, never as social representatives, except in the evaluation phases if the municipal government considered it useful to consult their opinion. For that same reason, although the experts could be consulted for technical reports, at the time of formulating proposals or voting, their opinion weighed the same as that of any citizen. A common feature of the *citizen proposals*, *participatory budgets*, and *citizen consultations* was that the decisions were binding, so the municipal government was committed to defending them before the municipal plenary as if they were their own. All three channels allowed either the entire city to participate as a whole, or the different districts separately. To enable the participation of the districts, a new website (<https://foroslocales.madrid.es/>) was created along with physical spaces within the municipal buildings in every district. Citizen decisions were linked to the existence of reports on the technical viability of the proposals and budgets in different phases of the process, which were usually prepared in coordination with the proponents.

The *citizen proposals* were developed in three phases: formulation of the proposal and search for support (12 months maximum); specification of the proposal and technical feasibility report of the proposals accepted in coordination with the person making the proposal (3-5 months); public information and voting (1 week). For a proposal to be accepted in the first phase, it was necessary to overcome a threshold of 1% of residents aged 16 and over supporting it. This meant a proposal needed to gather at least 27,000 individual supports so that it could subsequently be defined and voted on (initially, a minimum threshold of 2% had been established, equivalent to 55,000 supports, but this was modified in 2016).

The *participatory budgets* were part of the right of audience reserved by the municipality, which decided to devote part of the municipal budget to be allocated according to the majority preference of those who participated

in the process (in the first year of the project, 1.5% of the total budget of the city of Madrid could be used for a wider kind of investment, but only for consolidate investments; subsequently, it was increased to 3% of the total budget). A part of the participatory budget was assigned to initiatives related to the whole city, and another part (the main part) to initiatives destined for the districts. The process consisted of five phases: collection of proposals through the web and face-to-face spaces; proposal support (no minimum threshold was necessary for a proposal to be accepted), each citizen with the right to participate could choose up to a maximum of 10 proposals for the whole city, and another 10 for the districts; selection of the most supported proposals by evaluating their viability through technical reports and until the total budget allocated to the process was completed; voting on accepted proposals (subsequently, only through the web platform); inclusion of the winning proposals in the budget project of the municipal government, which would defend them as their own.

The *citizen consultations* were initiatives of the municipal government, when it deemed appropriate, for the participation of the citizens to define or approve certain public policies, especially when they affected the urban space. They involved a phase of public information and another phase of voting, using indistinctly, in both cases, digital media and face-to-face media.

As stated before, these participation tools were digitally accessible via the website created with the open software CONSUL. Even though the website is still available, participative processes have lost continuity. The rather modern layout and the availability in different languages, made the website quite visual and comprehensible, and very easy to use. It was accessible on mobile devices and had a version accessible to people with visual or hearing impairments. Anyone could sign up as a user, although only those who met the requirements of residence and age (over 16 years of age) had the right to participate in all the processes. The area of citizen participation of the municipal government was shown as the website administrator, without specifying any names. Different channels of participation were displayed in the top horizontal area of the screen. There were shortcuts to other sites both in the top and bottom areas of the screen related to the Madrid City Council's Open Government (data and transparency), as well as their blog and best-known social networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram). The interface also allowed the sharing of proposals via WhatsApp, Telegram, and LinkedIn. Each process was briefly, yet completely explained, and a quick scan allowed one to easily identify certain basic details about the participative process: the

date of the comments, the support received and the number of people participating, the documents to be discussed, the votes, and the results. The data was available for both the whole city and the different districts. The interface also provided a link to freely access the CONSUL software and request technical support for those who would like to implement the system in other participative processes.

Figure 2. *Institutional Advertising on the Street, through Posters, about the February 2017 General Consultation*



Source: Authors (Feb. 2017).

Notice that the publicity encouraged voting with an attempt at remaining neutral, so that the posters suggested both Yes (*Si*) and No (*No*) to the proposals being voted on.

6. Results and Findings

In a very provisional way, the content analysis of the web platform Decide Madrid, the analysis of the documentation prepared by the municipality (Madrid, 2018), and the interviews held with the key stakeholders allow us to extract a series of relevant findings. The main data on the participation reached in the different processes is summarized in Tables 1 and 2. The first fact that draws attention is that the cumulative number of registered

users on the web platform for all participatory processes reached 400,000 in the summer of 2018 (out of a total of 2,700,000 entitled to take part in the participative processes), which is approximately 15% of the residents entitled to participate. The year before (in June 2017), 330,000 users had already been reached (Madrid, 2018). Unfortunately, there is no other available data on the users' profiles or their surfing habits, and it is rather difficult to build it through ulterior research since the project is stuck at the moment due to the change of local government. An exploratory review of the website allows us to see a very low number of comments and supports in relation to the number of registered users, as indicated below. It can also be observed that there are sequences of comments amongst a scarce variety of users, although this is common with any digital platform. What we can confirm is that, in our interviews, opposition leaders expressed their suspicions (albeit, without providing the data to support these suspicions), that the users make up a rather reduced group of very active people, who are akin to social movements and the very project of citizen participation itself.

Table 1. *Citizens' Participation through the Main Participatory Tools (09/2015 – 09/2018)*

Main tools and features	Absolute Participation / Base	%
Registered Web-users	400.000 / 2.700.000*	15
Citizens' proposals	20.000 / 2.700.00*	0,0001
Citizens' proposals for voting	2 / 20.000	0,007
General Consultation Feb 2017 (voters)	214.000 / 2.700.000*	8
Participated budget 2018 (mill. €)	100 / 4.769	2
Proposals for voting	700 / 3.300	21
Participants	91.000 / 2.700.000*	4
Participated budget 2017 (mill. €)	100 / 4.700	2
Proposals for voting	700 / 3.200	22
Participants	67.000 / 2.700.000*	2,5
Participated budget 2016 (mill. €)	60 / 4.500	1,3
Proposals for voting	600 / 5.200	12
Participants	46.000 / 2.700.000*	1,7

Sources: Authors, adapted from *decidemadrid.es*, Madrid (2018), and from interviews with local government leaders.

*Base: Residents in the municipality of Madrid aged 16 and over.

Included are the three participatory channels: Web, ballot boxes, and mail post.

Table 2. *Channels Used for Voting at the General Consultation (13-19 February 2017)*

% of the total number of voters		
Mail post	Website	Ballot boxes
55	36	11

Sources: Authors, adapted from *decidemadrid.es* and Madrid (2018).

As for the *citizen proposals*, more than 20,000 had been issued, both through the Web and in person. However, only two proposals received the support required to move to the next phase of analysis and voting (1% of the population with the right to participate). In addition, few proposals reached 0.5% of support, and most of them barely reached 0.1% of the population with the right to participate.

The two proposals that exceeded the required threshold of support were voted on with astonishing majority support during the 13-19 February 2017 General Consultation (9 out of 10 voters accepted them), together with another 32 proposals, whose initiative fell to the city council in the form of *citizen consultations*. In the votes of February 2017, 8% of the residents over 16 participated (214,000 out of a total of 2,700,000). Surprisingly, as shown in table 2, the channel most used to vote was the postal mail (55% of emitted votes), followed by the Web (36%) and, lastly, the ballot boxes installed in the streets and in some municipal offices (11%). Of the 34 proposals voted on (2, at the initiative of the citizens, and 32 at the initiative of the municipal government), 30 affected the districts and only 4 the whole city.

The voting process counted on the collaboration of 1,100 volunteers for the ballot boxes, wide diffusion by the digital media (social media, the local government *madridiario.es* and *decidemadrid.es* websites), as well as traditional channels (posters on the main streets, press advertisements, postal consignments and ballots sent out to the entire population based in the city who were over 16 years of age). The local leaders who were interviewed, affirmed that all of it had cost roughly €1.1m, with the postal consignments being the costliest part.

The profile of the voters is quite heterogeneous. As Tables 3 and 4 show, in the few registered variables it can be observed that there are hardly any differences in gender. According to their age, most voters are in their middle ages, between 35 and 45 years old, although these differences cor-

respond quite a bit to the structure of the population. The findings show an unequal use of the three established channels of participation, with the digital one being preferred by men, and the postal one being somewhat more used by women. This last fact may be explained by the larger proportion of older female users, who are less accustomed to the use of digital technologies, and with a lower level of education. The age factor is more interesting: the digital channel is most preferred amongst those of an intermediate age (30 to 44 years old), and least amongst young people (16 to 29 years old). The use of on-the-street ballot boxes and, particularly, postal mail, is the most preferred option for older people, more evidently those over 45 years old.

Table 5 indicates the participation in the General Consultation by districts, contrasting it to the 2019 electoral participation. A very interesting finding suggests that participation in such a consultation did not depend so much on being akin to a political party as on the social structure of the district. Indeed, the most participative districts in the 2017 General Consultation are well-known for having a higher population ratio of intermediate age, with a higher level of education and an upper-middle-income. That is the case of Centro and Arganzuela (who in the 2019 elections voted in the majority for the citizen candidacy, whose name had changed to Más Madrid); and it is also the case of Retiro, Chamberí, and Moncloa, where Partido Popular, the main local opposition conservative party (PP) was voted for by a majority in 2019. In contrast, in the districts with a predominantly working class population of lower income, with a lower level of education, and consisting of slightly older people, participation was notably the lowest. That was the case of districts such as Carabanchel, Vallecas, Villaverde, and Usera. These same districts also show very low levels of voter turnout, although the most voted for political party in those districts in the 2019 elections was also the citizen candidacy Más Madrid, promoter of the participation project, Decide Madrid.

No other citizen proposal approached the 1% threshold after this General Consultation, and, consequently, no new voting was held. However, there were numerous citizen consultations, on the initiative of the council, being supported or voted on through the Web or in ballot boxes, but without the dissemination or the public presence that the great (until now) voting process of 2017 enjoyed. However, it should be underlined that the promoters of the project expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the results when interviewed, and when comparing this experience to others undertaken in Spain and other countries. Before the 2019 elections (where they got the best results, though not good enough to reach an ab-

solute majority), they were indeed determined to proceed with the project and expand it into stochastic formulas of direct participation. As has been stated before, the experience was held back due to the coalition of right-wing and far-right parties that formed the new government.

Table 3. *Participation (in %) by Voting Channel and by Gender in the February 2017 General Consultation*

Gender	Voting channel			Total
	Web	Ballots boxes	Mail post	
Males	38,41	10,13	51,46	49,23
Females	31,93	11,61	56,46	50,77

Sources: Authors, adapted from decidemadrid.es and Madrid (2018).

Table 4. *Participation (in %) by Voting Channel and by Age in the February 2017 General Consultation*

Age	Voting channel			Total
	Web	Ballot boxes	Mail post	
16-19	1,06	0,27	1,98	3,30
20-24	2,59	0,42	2,77	5,78
25-29	3,89	0,58	3,38	7,85
30-34	5,40	0,79	4,32	10,51
35-39	5,48	0,97	4,54	10,98
40-44	4,43	0,98	4,55	9,96
45-49	3,23	0,87	4,68	8,77
50-54	3,04	1,08	5,39	9,50
55-59	2,55	1,18	5,53	9,26
60-64	1,79	1,18	4,72	7,69
65+	1,67	2,57	12,16	16,39

Source: Authors, adapted from decidemadrid.es and Madrid (2018).

Table 5. *Participation (in %) by District in the 2017 General Consultation and in the 2019 Local Elections (in Descending Order, in the General Consultation)*

District	General Consultation 2017	Local elections 2019	Party winner 2019
Centro	10,49	67,12	Más Madrid
Arganzuela	9,49	74,42	Más Madrid
Retiro	8,32	76,51	PP
Chamberí	8,29	74,31	PP
Moncloa	7,86	74,82	PP
Barajas	7,79	73,10	Más Madrid
Moratalaz	7,41	69,76	Más Madrid
Latina	7,04	66,76	Más Madrid
Hortaleza	6,99	71,85	Más Madrid
San Blas	6,98	65,82	Más Madrid
Ciudad Lineal	6,71	67,47	Más Madrid
Vicálvaro	6,47	67,96	Más Madrid
Fuencarral	6,43	73,09	PP
Tetuán	6,36	64,68	Más Madrid
Salamanca	6,23	73,22	PP
Puente Vallecas	6,23	58,91	Más Madrid
Chamartín	6	75,48	PP
Carabanchel	5,75	61,39	Más Madrid
Vallecas	5,72	65,09	Más Madrid
Villaverde	5,31	60,20	Más Madrid
Usera	5,15	57,75	Más Madrid

Sources: Authors, adapted from decidemadrid.es, and www.madrid.es/portales/munimadrid/es/Inicio/

PP: Partido Popular (main local opposition conservative party).

Más Madrid: Local ruling citizen candidacy (formerly named Ahora Madrid).

Between 2016 and 2018, the participatory budgets reached the figure of 260 million euros. Specifically, in 2018, 100 million euros (about 2% of the total budget of the municipality) were distributed as follows: 30 million for projects that would benefit the entire city and 70 million for projects that would benefit the districts. So far, the participation of more than 90,000 residents over 16 years (about 50,000 through the web platform) is estimated, with some 3,300 projects submitted, and about 300 proposals accepted for voting (this time, only through the Web). The highest participation was again by middle aged voters (30-54 years), with the peak around 30-45 years, which is quite consistent with the social structure of the population in Madrid.

By way of comparison, the results of the participatory budgets of Madrid resemble those achieved by Paris (100 million euros distributed, 160,000 participants), while it is far ahead of other emblematic cities, such as New York (38 million, 70,000 participants) or Chicago (6.5 million, 5,000 participants), according to the information provided by the project leaders interviewed and the *decidemadrid.es* website.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations of our study, we would argue that the examination carried out on the citizen participation project, Decide Madrid, has enough internal validity and is a useful case study for discussion and from which to draw a conclusion, even if it shows weak ecological and external validity, and would require a more longitudinal and comparative research. As regards our case study, it is appreciably a huge effort of transparency on the part of those responsible for providing information about their motivations and results, through all the means at their disposal, in particular the digital ones: the platform website, the news blog, the search engine of raw data on participatory processes, and a technical report on the period 2015-2018.

A big surprise resulting from the implementation of this case study, and especially as regards the voting phase of *citizen proposals*, was that the channel most used to cast a vote was not the Web, as had been expected, but the postal mail (each address received an envelope with extensive information, in addition to the ballot paper in pre-filled envelopes). So, a mixture of electronic with face-to-face processes is more likely to provide participatory success.

This analysis is coherent with our hypothesis that the greatest difficulties in implementing participatory processes do not reside in technology, but in the will of those who can put them into operation, as well as in their capacity to identify other non-technological factors that condition participation. Of course, our examination of the evidence leads us to conclude that digital technologies are really useful tools that favour processes of direct, binding participation, and that large cities are an optimal arena for the experimentation of this kind of process. However, our case study also shows that even despite reaching relatively high levels of participation (considering, in addition, the enormous cost involved in terms of time and intellectual preparation), most of the population that could participate did not feel concerned by these processes. In our opinion, that is a great challenge, to which, however, the promoters of the project do not pay much attention. If the participatory tools deployed (both digital and non-digital) fail to include more than 15% of the population with the right to participate in the processes, it is obvious that this project does not solve the fundamental problem of inclusiveness. Therefore, it is still necessary to try to identify non-technological factors that affect participation in the process of making democratic decisions. Moreover, citizens' perceptions of and feelings towards e-democracy should be analysed before the use of digital platforms as such. Surprisingly, Decide Madrid did not include a continuous evaluation system of its progress and difficulties. After being paralysed by the new governing parties, it will no longer be possible to get a final report, or a half-term report, as was usually the case. For that reason, this experience avails the recommendation that future innovative projects should foresee a complete diagnose system, continuous and independent, that allows real-time assessment of the expected results, as well as the positions and position shifting that parties in conflict and citizens might show, both the participants and non-participants of the project. Accordingly, it may be deemed necessary to include public opinion surveys on the knowledge about the project, as well as quantitative and qualitative surveys about usage habits and user satisfaction.

The experience of Madrid, just like other equally remarkable projects, such as the aforementioned Irish Citizens' Assembly, show a basic weakness of these democratic innovations: they are rather unstable, for they depend on the ideological alignment of the government, and they usually expire after a change or a coalition of ruling parties. The lack of the institutionalisation of innovations could have an unexpected effect of citizens becoming more sceptical, not only of participatory electronic innovations but of local democracy in general.

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PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: AN ONLINE PLATFORM IN THE CITY OF MADRID

Summary

In 2015, the local government of the city of Madrid (Spain) introduced an electronic participation system. This initiative stemmed mainly from the social movements that had occupied the squares of many Spanish cities since 2011. As a result of the local elections in 2015, many of those same activists gained institutional power, took citizens' participation very seriously, and decided to use the possibilities offered by the internet for political and administrative participation. In this article, we seek to assess the impacts of the Madrid city government with the e-democracy experiment – based mainly on establishing an online platform to facilitate citizen participation in political and administrative decision processes. Drawing on qualitative and documental data, our research indicates that whereas the overall aim of the project was to give citizens a say in local policy and decision making, our case study shows that participation was very low since most of the population does not feel concerned by these processes. Indeed, one of our findings showed that citizens' involvement offline surpassed in some cases their online participation. To identify who is politically active online and offline is a great challenge, to which the promoters of the project did not pay much attention. Although e-participation was meagre in relation to the electoral turnout, the case study also shows that many proposals from the public were incorporated into the local policies, indicating that from a qualitative point of view, e-participation influences decision-making processes. Perhaps local governments should use a more strategic and integrated approach towards the use of electronic technologies to foster and motivate citizens' involvement in local politics and administration. This more integrated approach should be less dependent on ideological incentives, more institutionalized, and must incorporate citizens' perceptions and inputs before the introduction of new technologies.

Keywords: e-democracy, local government, participatory democracy, Madrid, new social movements

SUDIONIČKA DEMOKRACIJA NA LOKALNOJ RAZINI: ONLINE PLATFORMA U GRADU MADRIDU

Sažetak

Lokalna vlast Grada Madrida (Španjolska) uvela je 2015. elektronički sustav sudjelovanja građana. Inicijativa za to proizašla je uglavnom iz društvenih pokreta koji su u razdoblju poslije 2011. okupirali trgove brojnih španjolskih gradova. Na lokalnim izborima održanima 2015. mnogi su aktivisti stekli institucionalnu moć te odlučili iskoristiti mogućnosti interneta za političku i upravnu participaciju građana. U ovom se radu ocjenjuju učinci eksperimenta s elektroničkom demokracijom u madridskoj lokalnoj samoupravi koji se uglavnom temelji na uspostavi online platforme za olakšanje sudjelovanja građana u postupcima političkog i upravnog odlučivanja. Istraživanje se temelji na kvalitativnim podacima i dokumentaciji. Premda je cilj čitavog projekta bio dati građanima pravo odlučivanja o lokalnim politikama i drugim pitanjima, ova studija slučaja pokazuje da je sudjelovanje ostalo slabo budući da većina građana ne osjeća da ih se ti procesi tiču. Pokazalo se da u nekim slučajevima građani više sudjeluju putem tradicionalnih institucija nego online. Zagovaratelji projekta nisu se bavili pitanjem tko više sudjeluje kojim od ta dva oblika. Dok su građani slabo koristili elektroničko glasanje, pokazalo se da su njihovi prijedlozi podneseni online utjecali na donošenje političkih odluka, što se zaključuje iz činjenice da su mnogi prijedlozi podneseni online uključeni u lokalne politike. Lokalne bi vlasti trebale koristiti strateški i integrirani pristup korištenju elektroničke tehnologije kako bi potaknule i motivirale građansko uključivanje u lokalnu politiku i upravljanje. Takav integrirani pristup treba biti manje ovisan o ideološkim argumentima, čvršće institucionaliziran te se zasnivati na očekivanjima građana i njihovim informacijama prikupljenim prije uvođenja novih tehnologija.

Ključne riječi: e-demokracija, lokalna samouprava, sudionička demokracija, Madrid, novi društveni pokreti