

When citizens make policy proposals: has the economic crisis changed anything?

Graham Smith (University of Westminster),

Joan Font, Pau Alarcón and José Luis Fernández (Institute of Advanced Social Studies, IESA-CSIC)

Draft version

Abstract: The direct participation of lay citizens in policy-making is more the exception than the rule in most democracies. However, when this exception happens, which kind of policy proposals emerge? The goal of this paper is to examine a few characteristics of these policy proposals and their potential relationship to a series of variables, especially the presence of a context of economic crisis. The paper focuses on data that illuminates the characteristics of 246 policy proposals that emerged from 17 participatory processes developed in municipalities of three Spanish regions. The paper first describes the context and content of these proposals and then turns to an analysis of the effect of the emergence of the crisis on these characteristics, along with an analysis of their fate. The provisional results point towards a limited but visible effect, which is reflected in less costly proposals and in less responsive governments.

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1. Introduction¹

The direct participation of lay citizens in policy-making remains more the exception than the rule in most democracies. That said, we are witnessing more extensive use of participatory and deliberative institutions by public authorities. There are competing explanations for why this is the case: for example, the increasing complexity of political problems requires the input of lay knowledge from citizens; as public trust in traditional institutions drops, legitimacy can be (at least partially) restored through the direct engagement of citizens.

Our empirical knowledge base on citizen participation is weak. Beyond a few case studies, we remain relatively ignorant about the technologies (or methods) that are being used to engage citizens, the type of proposals that are emerging and the fate of these proposals within the political decision making process.

This lack of knowledge about this field of activity is compounded when we consider the impact of the economic crisis. We might reasonably expect that an external 'shock' of this magnitude to the context of participation will have a significant effect on the three dimensions of engagement: how citizens are engaged; the proposals they make; and the fate of those proposals.

This paper aims to extend our understanding of both the context of citizen participation and the impact of the economic crisis. It draws on an innovative database developed by the Cherrypicking project² that analyses the proposals emerging from participatory exercises organized by Spanish local authorities in three Spanish regions between 2007 and 2011. In Spain, local authorities have embraced the participatory and deliberative agenda to a greater or lesser extent (Font et al 2014). The Cherrypicking database has (at least) two key virtues in respect of our research questions. First, its unit of analysis is policy proposals that have emerged from participatory processes developed in municipalities. This paper will report on provisional data for 246 proposals emerging from 17 processes.

The second virtue is that the participatory processes analysed by the project cover the period when the economic crisis emerged most visibly. As such we are able to distinguish those processes that were developed during the period before the crisis (2007-2008) and those where the proposals were developed under obvious crisis conditions (2009-2011).

Participation: challenging enough without a crisis...

The Cherrypicking project is innovative in its attempt to understand the determinants of the fate of policy proposals from institutional modes of citizen participation. The project is focusing on a series of explanatory factors related to the political context, process design, content of proposals

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² <http://cherrypickingproject.wordpress.com>

and degree of support. The dependent variable (fate of each proposal) takes into account whether (and to what extent) a proposal is accepted, modified or rejected (Font and Smith 2014).

In this paper we limit our analysis to three particular realities: the process design or technology utilized to engage citizens, the type of proposals that emerge and the fate of these proposals. We unpack each of those variables in turn before considering the potential impact of the economic crisis.

- 1) There is a plethora of technologies that are used to engage citizens: for example, in his report *Beyond the Ballot*, Smith (2004) identifies over 57 different democratic innovations. To simplify a complex ecology, we categorize methods into 4 broad types: participatory budgeting (PB), strategic planning, other permanent mechanisms and other temporary processes. For reasons we will develop below, we expect that use of one or other participatory technology has a dramatic effect on the extent to which these proposals are incorporated.
- 2) Policy proposals that emerge from these different initiatives take a number of forms. First, we are able to discover the relative number of proposals that emerge from different process designs: for example, does PB generate more proposals than other technologies of participation? Second, we can ascertain the policy areas that proposals address: do participation exercises tend to focus on particular issues? There is some evidence that actors in particular policy areas have developed a more sustained commitment to participation, although this is context-dependent: for example, Cooper and Smith (2012) highlight how in the UK, health institutions have embraced participation in comparison to their reluctant German counterparts. Relatedly, a third consideration is the extent to which there is continuity with existing policy: how often do the proposals challenge the status quo? This will give us some indication of the extent to which the charge of skeptics (Newman et al, 2004) – that participation will be managed to reduce conflict – is appropriate. There is concern that public authorities exercise agenda-setting power, avoiding participation on critical areas of public policy and/or shaping the opportunities for participation so that it does not challenge institutional agendas (Hoppe 2011). Finally, we can provide insights into the relative costs of the demands made by citizens. Again critics of participation are concerned that demands of citizens will be excessive and unrealistic, placing unnecessary strain on the capacity of public authorities to govern effectively (Schumpeter 1976).
- 3) Finally, we consider the fate of policy proposals. Here we are interested in whether proposals are accepted; modified; or rejected. Part of the explanation of their fate will relate to the design of the participatory exercise: for some, compulsion to respond on the part of the public authority is built into the design of some of these processes. Our interest is not only in how many proposals are accepted, modified or rejected and how this relates to particular designs, but also whether citizens are offered an account of why this is the fate of their proposals? There is a well-worn argument that a significant aspect

of the legitimacy of participation rests on the responsiveness of public authorities: their willingness to give an account of their actions in response to public proposals.

This relatively descriptive account of the sample of proposals from the Cherrypicking database is itself a significant contribution to our understanding of citizen participation. In particular, it provides rigorous comparative data for a field in which much of our knowledge is based on a relatively small number of case studies, many of which can be defined as exemplary instances of participation (e.g. PB in Porto Alegre). Instead our data capture the more mundane: the everyday use of participation in Spanish municipalities, which previous analysis suggests that is quite different from those more well-known examples (Galais et al, 2012).

However, the paper takes one step further in the analysis: attempting to understand the impact of the deep economic crisis experienced in Spain on the type and fate of proposals that emerge from participatory processes. As far as we know, there are no other comparable studies that take on the question of how such a significant shift in political and economic context impacts on what is a relatively novel aspect of our political practice. In other words, how does the financial crisis affect the impact of participatory governance on public authorities?

This is an innovative analysis at least for two reasons. First, in Southern Europe the effect of the crisis has been severe: most major policy areas have been substantially (sometimes radically) transformed. In the Spanish case in particular, this strong effect has been experienced both at the national and regional level. However, much less is known about the impact on the local level, where probably financial cuts have been more heterogeneous amongst the approximate 8000 municipalities. Our analysis contributes to this relatively unexplored field of the local effects of the crisis.

Second, we know more about governments' reactions to the economic crisis; however, does it also have an impact on citizens as contributors to policy-making? For those democratic theories that place a strong emphasis on the role of citizens in decision-making, it is important to know whether they incorporate such contextual concerns in making policy proposals. Even if our empirical evidence is limited in this regard, the question is significant and the existing evidence so limited that it is relevant to explore any data that might offer insights.

Towards tentative hypotheses on the impact of the economic crisis

There are (at least) two possible broad readings of the impact of the economic crisis on participatory governance. The first is that such a crisis intensifies the demand for participation by both authorities and citizens. For authorities, the crisis increases the complexity of governance and leads to further deterioration in trust in government as austerity measures reduce service delivery: complexity and legitimacy are two drivers of participation (Warren 2009). Similarly as citizens experience the effects of the economic crisis on their own prospects and cuts in public services, they will demand increased direct engagement in policy-making.

An alternative hypothesis runs in the opposite direction: as public authorities have to cut services, they are less inclined to engage citizens for two reasons. First, authorities will have less desire to engage more critical citizens, angered by losses in services. Second, they are likely to have less available resources to organize engagement: when there are significant cuts to budgets, the tendency is to protect front-line delivery and cut what are often seen as superfluous activities – participation being one such example. New institutionalists are quick to point to the significance of external shocks in punctuating the path dependency of institutions. As a relatively novel and poorly institutionalized form of political activity, we might reasonably expect organized participation to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of the fiscal crisis: public authorities will ‘hunker down’ in an attempt to protect core activities rather than peripheral participatory spaces.

There is also room for the null hypothesis. Probably, the strongest argument for no major change in participatory activity is that the proposals and funding requirements that emerge through participatory processes are so limited that they are not a relevant place to make substantial financial cuts. In this interpretation, it would be precisely the very limited policy role that these processes play in Spanish local policy making (Font, Della Porta and Sintomer 2014) that makes them less vulnerable to crisis effects.

1. Types of proposals

Where participation exercises do take place, the crisis might be expected to affect the type of demands from citizens. In relation to the data we have collected on the Cherrypicking project, we can think of this in three dimensions. First, the focus of proposals may change. Work on policy agendas and issue attention cycles suggests that when economic conditions are poor, public attention tends to be on issues relating to personal economic well-being and security (Witherspoon 1996: 54; Worcester 1997: 163-4). In other words we would expect proposals to focus on aspects of service delivery and economic development rather than self-transcending interests such as the environment). Second, we might expect more proposals to emerge that conflict with existing policy as citizens challenge public authority policy towards austerity. While recognizing that referendums are very different from most of the participatory exercises we are analysing, exploratory work on government-led referendums suggests that citizens use the opportunities to vote against government proposals, even where popular opinion supports the proposal. In other words, an opportunity to participate generates conflictual behaviour towards authorities on the part of citizens (Bedock 2014). Third, given the impact on economic well being, proposals can be expected to place increasing fiscal demands on public authorities.

This set of working hypotheses rests on a crude cost/benefit analysis on the part of citizens: a rational response on the part of citizens to losses in their utility. Any indication of the opposite direction of travel – with for example a reduction in costs of proposals and/or reduction in conflict – would indicate that citizens are adapting to the new context by reducing their expectations of public authorities; a self-censorship that recognizes the lack of capacity of public authorities to respond to demands. Most participatory technologies involve direct interaction between citizens and public servants and there is a line of argument that suggests that in such contexts, citizens become more sensitive to the needs of bureaucracy (rather than the other way

round): a form of *'incorporation of the lay public into official institutions'* (Newman et al 2004: 212).

II. Fate of policy proposals

To some extent, the fate of policy proposals post-crisis rests on whether the types of proposals have changed (tentative hypotheses I). A reasonable hypothesis in times of crisis is that public authorities will modify or reject more proposals as they have less capacity to respond to the demands of citizens. It is an open question as to whether they will offer an account of their actions: politics in a time of crisis arguably demands more legitimacy-enhancing actions on the part of authorities; at the same time, cuts in the budgets of authorities will reduce their capacity to respond.

A caveat – crisis as the only explanatory factor?

Even if we find a significant relationship between crisis and the type and fate of proposals, we need to be aware that this may not be the only factor explaining differences. Since we have identified elsewhere a quite large number of factors potentially affecting the fate of proposals (Font and Smith, 2014), it will be important to test also whether, for example, the cost of proposals is affected by size of the municipality, the process design or technology and the number of proposals. Similar factors may also explain any differences in the fate of proposals. However, in this paper, we offer only an initial exploratory analysis of the relative importance of such factors.

In sum, this rather vague, multi-directional and in places contradictory set of tentative hypotheses indicates the extent to which our knowledge of participation per se is limited, let alone our understanding of the impact of external shocks such as the recent economic crisis. Our empirical evidence can begin to offer insights as to the veracity of these claims and counter-claims.

3. Methodology

3.1. From theory to operationalization

This section explains the operationalization strategy followed to test these ideas in the context of the overall Cherrypicking project, where the main objective is to explain the different fate of policy proposals. Thus, we need variation at three levels: polity, process and policy. Simultaneously, we want to have a controlled amount of contextual variation, since extremely diverse levels of socioeconomic development and very large differences in political and administration rules and routines could create too challenging a scenario where alternative explanations would be impossible to control. Trying to balance these two concerns, our choice

has been to limit our selection to a single polity having a constant legal scenario (Spain) and to introduce contextual variation through the selection of diverse municipalities and regions. Since a fully representative frame of participatory process does not exist and our goal is more to ensure diversity, our initial sampling frame is a quite diverse collection of participatory processes developed in three Spanish regions (Andalucía, Catalonia and Madrid)³.

We have selected a specific time frame, from one local election (2007) to the next (2011), trying to combine the possibility that there has been time enough for at least the initial implementation of these proposals, but also that memories and administrative records are recent enough to be tracked. Since our goal is to analyse what happens to policy proposals we focus only on those participatory processes that produce a list of recommendations⁴. Thus, **the universe for our study is participatory processes developed by municipalities in these three regions during the period 2007-2011⁵ that end up in specific or generic policy proposals.**

Our final unit of analysis is policy proposals. Since it is quite likely that different policy proposals emerging from the same participatory process are treated differently by local governments, we need to follow the evolution of each (or a sample) of them to see whether there are factors at the proposal level which are systematically associated with their fate (policy adoption).

3.2. Choosing participatory processes

We have two different databases as starting points. On the one hand, we have a database for Andalusia, Madrid and Catalonia collected by web content mining (N = 292). On the other hand, extra information was collected for Andalusia with a double survey strategy: an on-line questionnaire addressed to municipalities (CASI) and a follow-up (CATI) for those municipalities that had not answered our first online approach (N = 517). The most important difference for us was that data mining produced possibly a more reliable picture of the processes and their achievements, but one where processes developed in large cities are over-represented. We use processes from both of these databases for the final case selection⁶.

We aim to achieve a good representation of diverse types of participatory processes. We cannot make claims that we perfectly represent reality (the universe from which we start is not a representative sample – and the full range of participatory processes is not known), but that we analyze policy proposals in a quite varied setting of populations and processes. The first step is to undertake some depuration operations in order to adjust our initial databases to the criteria set

³ The details of the data collection process appear in Galais et al (2012) or in Font, Della Porta and Sintomer (2014). The three regions selected introduce substantial contextual variation since they include quite different levels of development as well as very different regional participation policies (Sintomer and Del Pino, 2014).

⁴ We will consider the following definition of policy proposal for the final selection of cases: “A participatory process has policy proposals when a clear list of recommendations is developed. This set of proposals can include general ideas like “Develop a more egalitarian city”, as well as specific policies or actions.

⁵ When checking information about permanent mechanisms (i.e. participatory budgeting) we will select proposals related to the 2010 cycle or the last cycle that ended before that time.

⁶ In this paper we provide sample selection details using only the comparative 3 region database. A similar selection procedure will be used to select the 10 cases coming out of the Andalusía survey.

out above⁷. Then, we used stratified sampling, to ensure a representation of potentially important independent variables through the different strata. To guarantee representation of crucial independent variables, we have selected three variables to create the strata for case selection:

1. Region/database is the first stratum: 10 processes from each⁸.
2. Process design: we create a new variable with these categories:
 - a) Participatory budgeting
 - b) Strategic planning (agenda 21, education, economy, participatory structures,..)
 - c) Other permanent mechanisms
 - d) Other temporary processes
3. As a proxy for organizational culture towards participatory governance (but also to see whether the same municipality has a similar approach to different processes), we use number of participatory processes enacted by the municipality. In each region we include two municipalities with three or more processes (strong organizational culture), taking three processes for each of them⁹. The remaining four cases will come from the weak organizational culture category (one/two experiences).

Whenever choice is possible¹⁰, the final selection of municipalities will be done through random selection¹¹. Table 1 shows the distribution of process types in our initial three region sampling frame and among the cases selected after applying these criteria.

Table 1 about here

Since the fieldwork has developed more slowly than expected, this paper includes results from only 17 participatory processes, meaning that their content should be taken with extreme caution and only as a provisional indication.

⁷ For example, elimination of processes not ending in policy proposals or which are clearly out of the temporal or territorial scope defined above.

⁸ This ensures 10 cases from each of the three regions with a similar data collection process plus an additional 10 Andalusia cases from small municipalities (survey database).

⁹ Since in Catalonia we have only two municipalities with three or more experiences, for this region we include three municipalities with two experiences each.

¹⁰ The Madrid case (and practically also the Catalan cases) offer no choice between processes: the number of actual processes in some of the strata is the same as the number we require.

¹¹ We substitute a participatory process when it becomes clear that we do not have enough cooperation to collect most of the information we are interested in. This is different from cases where we will have a lot of missing information, particularly where it is impossible to determine the final impact of the proposals. If the municipality itself cannot establish whether a proposal has been implemented we will consider that case. If lack of information is because of lack of cooperation on the part of the public authority and there is no other way of generating data, we (reluctantly) move to the substitute case (random selection in the same or most similar strata).

3.3. Selecting and coding policy proposals

The first step of the coding of proposals is to establish the list of policy proposals resulting from each participatory process. In some cases this list is readily available; in others it requires a careful reconstruction; and for others still, it does not exist. In this final situation we substitute the case since, lacking a list of proposals, our research questions cannot be tested¹².

The number of policy proposals from these processes is extremely diverse. An initial exploration using the information available on the local web sites shows variation ranging from a couple of proposals to hundreds (see section 4). Since we want as much proposal variation as possible (relative to available limited resources), we code each policy proposal when there are no more than 20 from a single process and select randomly 20 when the number is larger. Following the same logic of the previous section, whenever these proposals appear in a stratified format (e.g., by thematic issue packages as is often the case in Agenda 21 processes), we will choose (randomly) proposals from each of the strata.

We need to capture quite diverse data, particularly for the independent variables, where we need information from three different levels of analysis: municipality, participatory process and policy proposal. Much of the information on the first two levels is available in the already-existing database that we used as the sampling frame or in other publically available sources (e.g. municipal budget information, electoral results). Our objective is to create a database where each policy proposal is a case, with 15 variables at the municipality level (e.g., population, budget, party of the mayor), about 20 variables at the process level (from issues covered to types of participants) and about 15 variables on the policy proposal itself and its outcomes.

To complete the coding the next step is to collect as much information as possible through the municipal web pages, where we have found extremely diverse levels of information. Following this step, we make an initial contact with the municipality, trying to obtain as many official documents and records that could provide relevant written official details. The third more costly step is to proceed with interviews, starting with employees of the local administration and continuing with other informants from civil society or the local political world. The reliability of the answers will be measured according to the source(s) (i.e., official records, idea appearing in more than one interview, idea appearing in just one interview) and incorporated into the data analysis in future papers. Figure 1 captures the most important steps in this research design.

Figure 1 about here

A team of three political scientists has undertaken the interviews and coding, meeting regularly to ensure the homogeneity of coding criteria. In addition to the fieldwork forms that capture the

¹² Among the 40 cases initially selected, only 3 had to be substituted due to lacking a list of proposals and 9 due to lack of cooperation. The final response rate among the cases contacted has been 82%.

information to be coded they keep a fieldwork journal record for each municipality to register all contacts, sources, problems or operational decisions.

In this paper we use only a small selection of these variables, whose main characteristics appear in table 2.

Table 2 about here

4. Preliminary findings

In this section we present and discuss the main results. To establish the context, we start with an overview of the participatory processes from which the set of proposals have emerged. Second, we move to our main focus of analysis – proposals – exploring characteristics of their content. Finally, we explore the extent to which the content of proposals has changed with the onset of the financial crisis.

4.1. The context of proposals

The first clear characteristic of the results is that scope for cherry-picking (i.e. accepting some of the proposals, but not all of them) certainly exists for most participatory processes. Referenda, with a single and straightforward outcome, are a clear exception; other types of participatory process with a small number of proposals are very rare, with only one process generating only a single proposal (and no other generated less than five proposals). In fact, a large minority of these participatory processes generates more than 50 (a few generate even more than 200) and almost 65 percent have more than 15 (figure 2). In some of these cases, the proposals are organized and presented as a coherent list of ideas. In others, the list of proposals is closer to a wish list that includes all sorts of independent ideas from which cherry-picking a few is quite clearly a real possibility.

Figure 2 about here

Second, as we can expect in a sample that has been stratified according to type of participatory mechanism, we have significant presence of the four types of mechanisms in our provisional results (figure 3). This figure, representing the number of processes, is not identical to the one that shows the distribution of proposals (figure 4), because the number of proposals is related to the type of participatory process. As figure 4 indicates, participatory budgeting commonly generates a long list of proposals (more than 50), whereas other types of permanent mechanism (e.g., sectorial consultation councils) show precisely the opposite pattern: none of them has

produced more than 50 proposals and two thirds of them have less than 15. In spite of these patterns, our provisional universe of proposals shows a quite diverse origin: 18 percent come from 'other permanent mechanisms' (lower end) through to 35 percent from processes of 'strategic planning' (higher end).

Figures 3 and 4 about here

Another important characteristic of these processes is how technical considerations are incorporated. A small number generate a 'wish list' where the only concern is to capture participants' preferences without recourse to constraints such as technical viability. However, as figure 5 shows, in most of the cases considerations of feasibility constraints are introduced into the participatory process, through two main strategies. In a majority of each type of participatory processes (except in 'other permanent mechanisms'), technical criteria are openly incorporated in the debate, requiring participants to take them into account such that only feasible proposals are generated. In other processes, two stages can be differentiated: participants provide a list of proposals that do not take into account feasibility constraints (or at least, not in a systematic manner); and in a second step technical specialists (i.e., local administration personnel or a professional external company) typically creates a final set of proposals that incorporates technical concerns¹³.

Figure 5 about here

Finally, figure 6 shows that our four types of mechanisms generate quite different expectations regarding the degree to which the proposals that are generated are incorporated into public policies. The figure includes three potentially important variables. First, the orientation of the public authority towards proposals varies: some designs include a duty on the part of the public authority to respond to proposals ('compulsory'). Second, the timing of a response to participatory outcomes varies: in some situations public authorities provide some kind of public response to the proposals shortly after their presentation ('immediate response by authority'). Third, there is diversity in the extent to which the local authority accepts proposals from citizens: 'general acceptance' means that the administration makes a general statement accepting the proposals in general terms, although whether it then implements them is another matter (technical or cost criteria, for example, may be applied at a later date).

From this perspective, participatory budgeting emerges at first view as the mechanism where responsiveness seems to be most institutionalized, rating first on all three indicators. Among the rest, strategic planning presents a quite different picture: the a priori commitment to respond is

¹³ For example, in one of the processes there were three independent groups of participants, each of which produced a list of proposals with no technical filter. Later on, a group of local administration professionals produced the final report of the event using the three lists and incorporating the viability of each proposal. In some cases, in this second stage, there may be several proposals which are merged or even disappear, often without providing explicit explanations.

particularly low, but the level of positive response once the process is complete is higher than in the remaining mechanisms. This different pattern will have to be confirmed once our data collection is finished and we can check final implementation of each specific proposal, but this initial picture provides a clear sign that institutions matter and that choosing one over others is likely to influence the final fate of policy proposals.

Figure 6 about here

4.1. The content of proposals

What is the content of citizens' proposals? At this point, we will limit our analysis to a few descriptive characteristics such as the issue areas covered, the extent to which they challenge existing policy and their cost.

Figure 7 shows the policy areas covered by these proposals. The diversity of policy areas should not be surprising since 1) it maps the agendas of the processes which are often very tight; 2) it maps the competences of local administrations; and 3) it is similar to the local policy agenda that has been observed in previous quantitative research on participatory governance in Spain (Font et al, 2011). Urban issues are by far the most common content of proposals (53%), followed by environmental ones (30%).

Figure 7 about here

Finally, figure 8 relates the presence of the most prevalent of these issues (urban) with one important characteristic of the proposals, whether they can be considered as representing only marginal change or a challenge to prevailing policy. The figure presents each of the processes (identified through type of mechanism and having been developed before or after the crisis) and their average position on the extent to which they are "urban" and 'challenging'. The regression line shows that a relationship exists: there is a negative relationship between being more urban and more challenging¹⁴. This is suggestive of patterns recorded in previous studies¹⁵: agenda-setting by governments ensures that either participatory processes are focused on relatively marginal or trivial topics or are structured in such a way that challenging proposals are unlikely to emerge.

Figure 8 about here

¹⁴ The correlation between the challenging' variable and each issue is only statistically significant for urban planning (negative correlation) and sports, youth and leisure (positive correlation).

¹⁵ For example, the previous study of participatory mechanisms in Southern Europe partially shows this relationship between empowerment with trivial public matters (Della Porta, Reiter and Alarcón, 2014). See also Nez (2012) for some French examples on the same direction.

4.2. The crisis effects

Has the economic crisis changed the content of the proposals produced by citizens and implemented by local authorities? Analysis of early data from the Cherrypicking project may offer us insights into whether proposals have become more challenging to prevailing policy (depends mostly on citizens, but also on the agenda-setting of the participatory exercise) and the fate of proposals: the degree of acceptance (with or without modification), implementation, and explanation in cases of modification or rejection (all of which depend on the actions of local administrations). We also have data on whether the cost of proposals has changed over time. However, this is estimated final cost rather than the original cost of the proposal when generated by citizens. As such it can include modifications introduced in planning and implementation stages by the administration.

With our current data, we find no significant effect in relation to whether proposals become more or less challenging in the context of the crisis. We also find that the topic of proposals in the crisis context is in the opposite direction to that expected: less social welfare and more environment (both statistically significant). However, this may be explained by the presence of the only three mechanisms dedicated to environmental issues (two Agenda 21 initiatives and one energy savings roundtable) in the crisis period, with nothing similar pre-crisis. This is almost certainly an effect of the relatively small sample size of participatory processes that we are working with in this paper.

Further, when our attention turns to the fate of proposals (Figure 9), we do not find any significant relationship in relation to whether proposals have been modified by the local administration. The same is true for the dichotomous implementation variable, although there are indications that a more nuanced 'degree of implementation' shows some significance.¹⁶

Figure 9 about here

However, other aspects of the fate of proposals are suggestive of a possible 'crisis effect'. Figure 9 suggests two potentially interesting findings. First, there is a large increase in the number of proposals that are rejected in the crisis context: 46.5 percent as compared to 36.5 percent before the crisis. Additionally, there are also significant differences in the extent to which explanations are offered for these rejected proposals. Public authorities are rejecting more proposals and not offering as extensive accounts of their actions. What is particularly striking about this finding is that in the sample we are working with for this paper, participatory budgeting is totally absent in the pre-crisis context: we have already suggested that administrations commit to implement the outcomes from such processes. As such, the effect size is likely suppressed and we can expect it

¹⁶ In the case of degree of implementation, the scale variable is significant (Cramer's V 0.277**) as compared to the non-significant dichotomous variable presented here.

to increase as we increase the coverage of participatory processes before and during the crisis context.

Finally, Figure 10 indicates that there is a crisis effect on the cost of proposals, with the crisis context reducing costs significantly. What we cannot tell from our analysis is whether this is because the agendas of participatory processes are limited to choices to cheaper outcomes (structured by local administrations) or citizens are modifying their demands (making them less costly) in light of the fiscal crisis. But it does indicate a changed context for participatory governance.

In fact, this finding on costs of proposals also reminds us that we must be sensitive to the impact of other factors beyond the financial crisis. Figure 11 introduces a note of caution: the crisis is not the only variable which is associated with less costly proposals: city size, the number of proposals and the type of participatory process also have significant effect, reminding us that only a more careful quantitative and qualitative analysis will enable disentangling whether this apparent relationship has a solid empirical and a meaningful causal basis.

Figures 10 and 11 about here

5. Conclusion

This paper represents a first step towards a systematic analysis of the effect of the financial crisis on participatory governance in Spanish municipalities. While the Cherrypicking project has a broader aim of understanding the determinants of the fate of policy proposals from participatory processes more generally, the emergence of the financial crisis in the middle of our data collection period provides an occasion for an analysis of the impact of this significant external shock on the reception of policy proposals from citizens. Both areas of research are under-theorized and lacking in empirical evidence.

Our initial findings paint a potentially intriguing picture. It does appear as if the financial crisis has had an effect on the way that public authorities respond to proposals: fewer implemented, less explanation when rejected and less costly proposals taken forward. But our findings must be treated with caution: they will be confirmed (or otherwise) when our data collection and subsequent analysis is complete.

In any case, compared to other policy areas or to other political arenas (national or regional), participatory policy-making has probably suffered less of a radical transformation in this period. This may be a very peculiar finding which does not travel outside the small world of participatory governance or it may remind us, that beyond the dramatic effects that the financial crisis has had in some areas, there are other policy realms where continuity has been much larger.

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Table 1. Types of participatory processes in the three region sampling frame and among cases selected

	Universe		Selected cases	
	n	%	n	%
Participatory budgeting	26	12,1	6	20,0
Strategic planning	101	47,2	8	26,7
Other permanent mechanism	50	23,4	10	33,3
Other temporary experiences	36	16,8	6	20,0
DK/NA	1	,5	-	-
Total	214	100,0	30	100,0

Source: Cherry-picking 3 region database

Figure 1. Methodological design: main steps

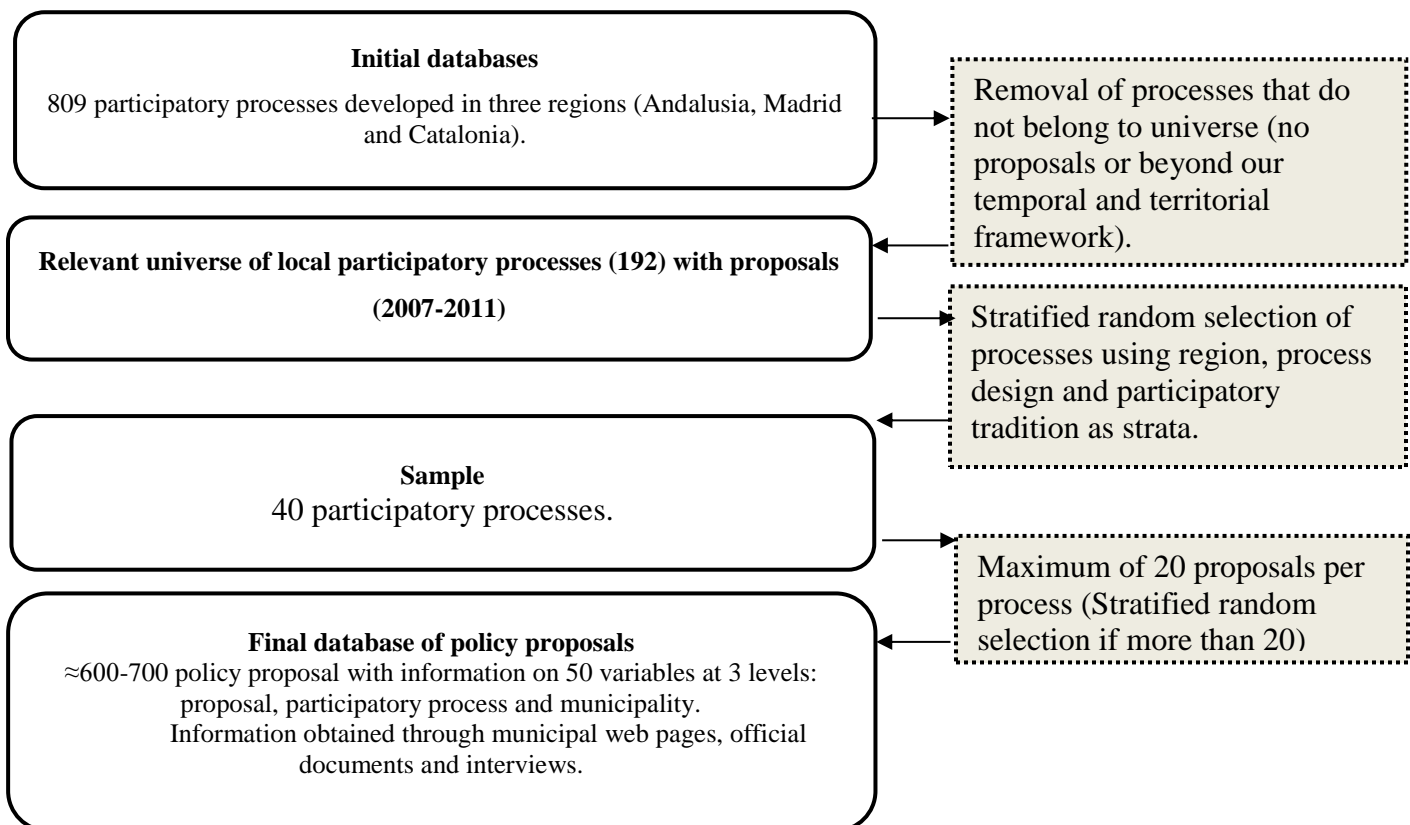


Table 2. Description of the variables analysed.

Variables Analysed		Variable categories or ranges
Type of participatory mechanisms		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participatory Budgeting - Strategic planning - Other temporary experiences - Other permanent mechanism
Introduction of technical criteria during the participatory process: moments of the incorporation of the technical considerations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No technical criteria - During the writing of the final document - During the process
Responsiveness: the orientation of the public authority towards proposals	Requirement of local authority to respond.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compulsory - Recommendation - No obligation at all - Not specified
	Immediate response/compromise of the organizing authority.	- Yes or No
	General acceptance of proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes, some proposals accepted - Yes, all proposals accepted - No
Policy areas covered by the proposals		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urban planning - Budget - Development - Mobility - Welfare - Participation - Environment - Immigration - Culture - ICTs
Challenging character of the proposals according to prevailing policy action		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not challenge existing policy positions - Challenges existing policies and practices
Degree of acceptance/implementation of the proposal: the final fate of the proposals		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rejected / ignored - Formal acceptance - Appears in department's policy documentation - Appears in department's programme of work - Implementing (work in progress) - Implemented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Significant modification of the proposals -Explanation of the reasons for the modification of the proposals 		-Yes or No
Estimated costs of proposals, differentiating whether they are construction work (CW) or not		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No cost - Low (<50.000 € for CW and < 18.000 €) - Intermediate (50.000 to 200.000 CW and from 18.000 to 60.000) - High (>200.000 € for CW and more than 60.000)

Figure 2. Number of proposals presented by each mechanism (N 17)

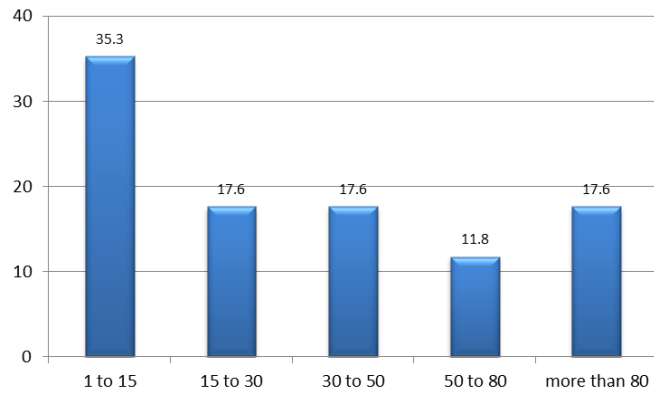


Figure 3. Types of participatory mechanism (N 17)

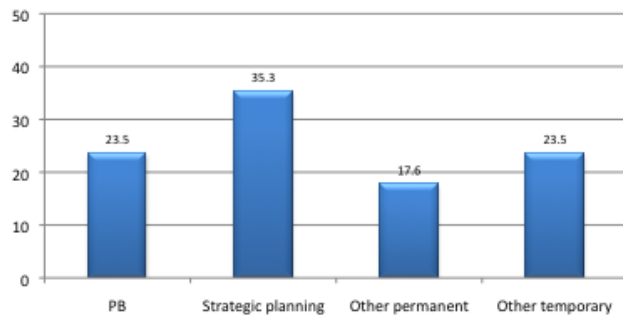


Figure 4. Number of proposals presented by each kind of mechanism (N 17)

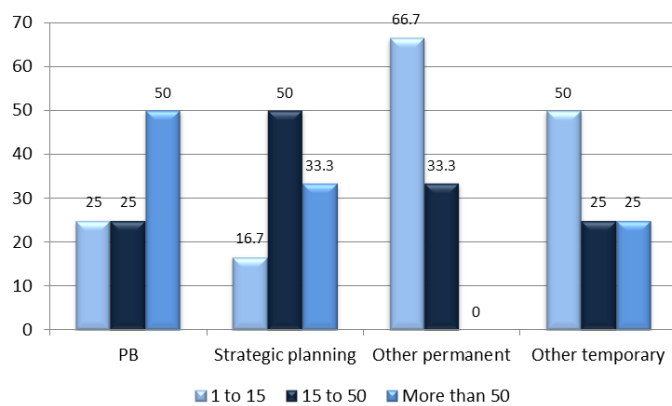


Figure 5: Introduction of technical criteria by kind of mechanism (N 17)

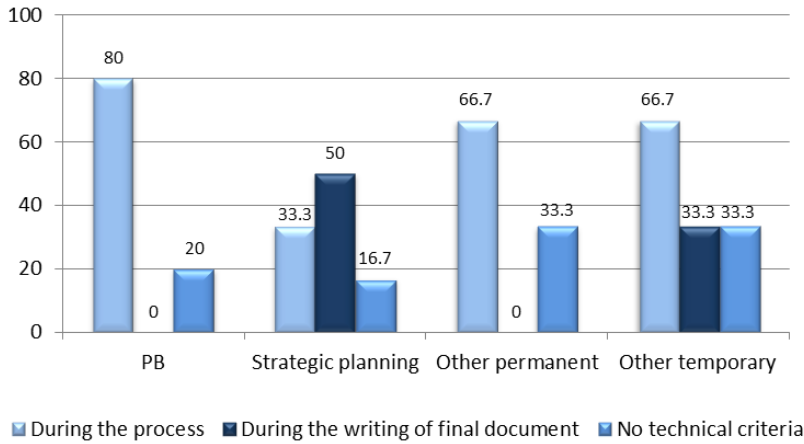
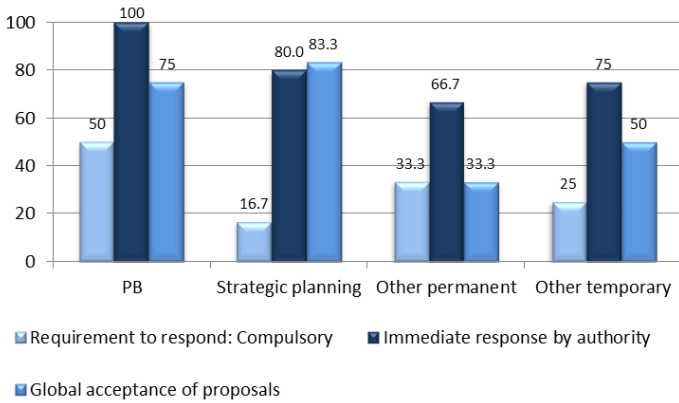


Figure 6. Three indicators of potential government responsiveness by kind of mechanism (N=17) (Requirement of the authority to respond, immediate response and global acceptance of proposals)



Note: For requirement to respond, figure shows percentage of “compulsory”; immediate response is a dichotomous variable “yes/no”; general acceptance of proposals shows percentage of “yes, all proposals accepted” plus “yes, some proposals accepted”.

Figure 7. Issues covered in policy proposals (N 246)

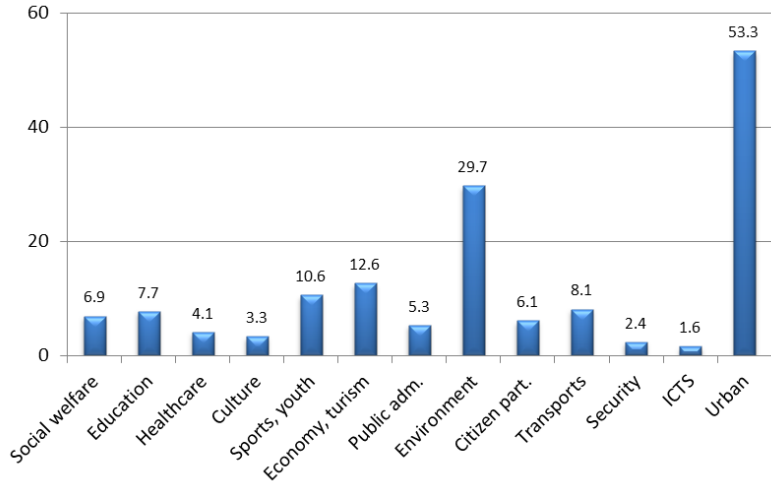
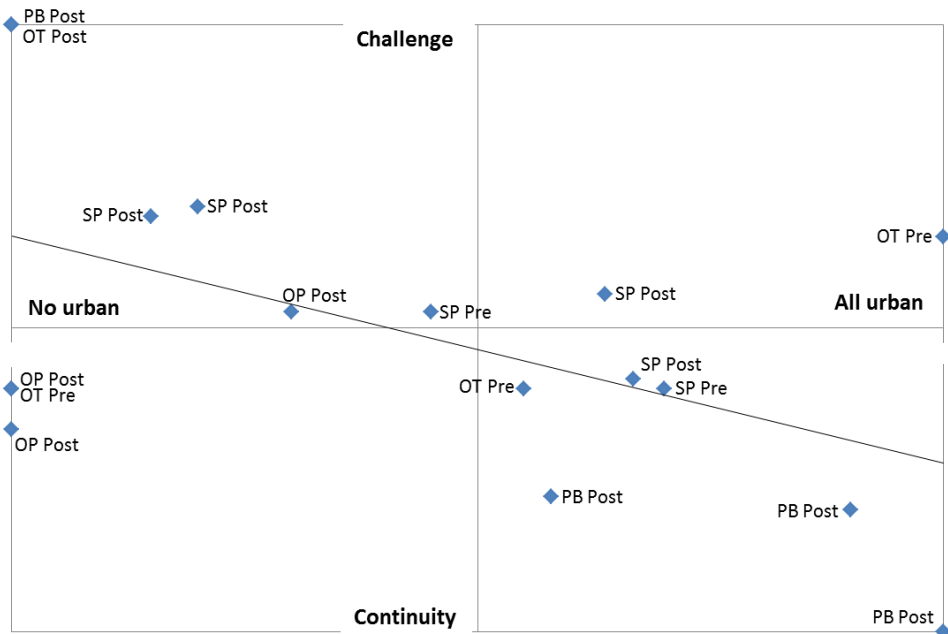
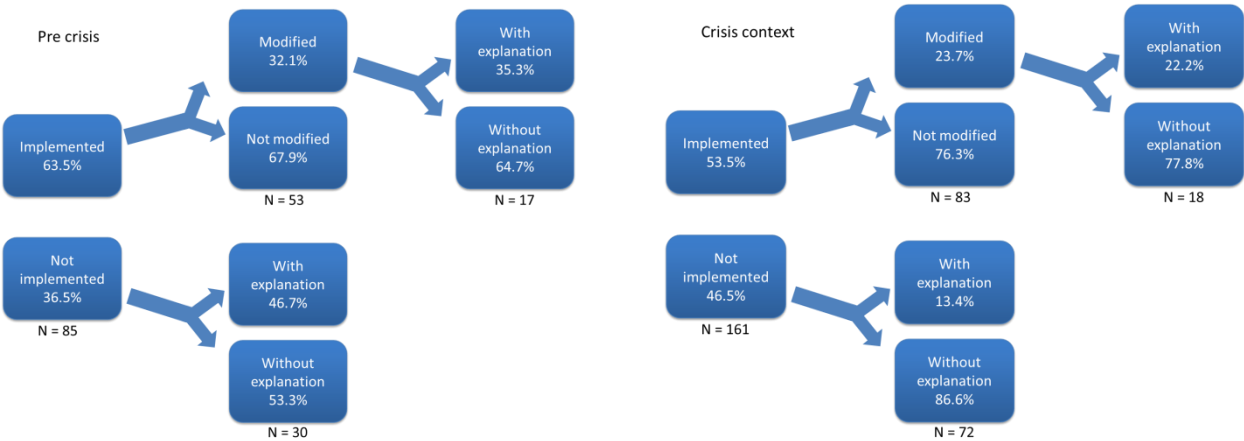


Figure 8. Subject: Urban issues and Continuity character of the policy (N=240)



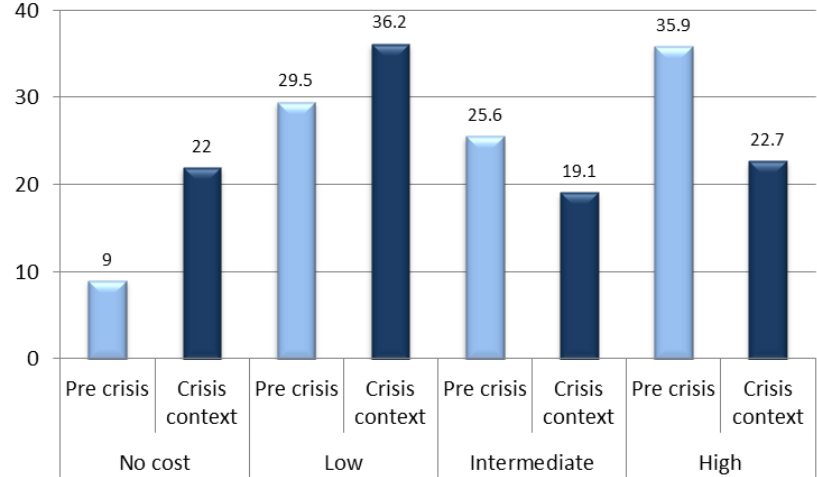
Note: PB = Participative Budgeting; SP = Strategic Planning; OP = Other Permanent; OT = Other temporary. Pre = previous to the crisis impact; Post = crisis context

Figure 9. Percentage of policy proposals being implemented, modified and explained, before and during crisis context



Note: Differences between the pre-crisis and crisis context are statistically significant for the explanation of rejection/modification (Phi -0.210**).

Figure 10. Estimated cost of proposals before and during crisis context



Note: Includes the estimated cost of all proposals, including those not accepted by local authorities. Differences of cost level between pre-crisis and post-crisis context are statistically significant at 0.05 level (Cramer's V = 0.211).

Figure 11. Percentage of proposals of an intermediate and high cost by crisis context, city size, process design, number of policy areas and number of policy proposals (N 246 for all variables)

