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Digital Models of Citizen Participation in Spain at Municipal Level

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Abstract. This contribution examines municipal digital platforms for citizens' participation (DPP) in Spain. Firstly, we contextualize DPP within a recent history of democratic participation in the country. Then, we discuss the design challenges besetting DPP from a socio-technical perspective. In the final part, we examine Spain's three main examples of functioning municipal DPP: Decide Madrid, Decidim Barcelona, and Decidim Valencia. From all of the above, we draw some conclusions that may help produce design and evaluation criteria for these digital tools supporting and furthering grassroots democracy.

Keywords: Online democracy, Municipal Politics, Spanish politics

1 Introducing Digital Platforms for Citizens' Political Participation at Municipal Level

This contribution offers a multidisciplinary approach to the design and evaluation of municipal digital platforms for citizens' participation (DPP) in Spain, from which we could draw some criteria to assess their effectiveness in terms of their democratic goals. To achieve this, we have combined a sociotechnical perspective with a historical contextualization of the country's grassroots municipal politics in terms of participative democracy. We have also paid attention to design issues arising from the specific urban environment where DPP operate, drawing on the theoretical framework of urban critical theory.

Unlike other examples in recent Spanish history, the grassroots mass political movements that shook the country's politics in the 2010s were originated by the utilization of interactive technologies and digital innovations [25]. Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and other improvised forums significantly empowered the 2015 *Indignados*. They also

played a central role in the foundation of the Podemos party in 2014, and the citizens' lists that won major Spanish cities in the 2015 municipal elections, such as Ganemos Madrid, Barcelona en Comú and Valencia en Comú.

E-democracy took a central role in the councils' agendas wherever these grassroots lists achieved some power sharing. Digitalization becoming the organizational basis of Spanish alternative politics over the 2010s had been a somewhat spontaneous occurrence. However, it soon evolved into a distinctive feature of the programmatic merging of the heterogeneous constellation from which these electoral lists were born. These myriad of groups and public figures, at first concerned with disparate demands -from housing problems to trade unionism, freedom of speech or the fight against corruption- ended up sharing a common perception of a widening gap between conventional politics and the democratic spirit that should inspire the Spanish political system. From their experience in online debates, voting, consensus building and organization of protests, they also learned that digitalization could help to regenerate Spanish democracy by multiplying the possibilities for citizens' initiatives and self-organization.

Between 2015 and 2019, Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, the three biggest Spanish cities, developed DPP largely inspired by those earlier experiences of activism. However, adapting digitalized grassroots practices to the pre-digital legal-institutional framework of municipalities became a twofold design challenge. In the first place, the digital versions of the different types and procedures of citizens' participation adequate to municipal politics should become integrated into a single resource to be used by a large number of citizens, highly diverse in terms of literacy, IT skills and political education. Furthermore, DPP, as new institutional decision-making agents, should become embedded in the wider context of the municipalities. This resulted in patterns and guidelines that have decisively shaped DPP at local level.

2 A Political History of Spanish Municipal DPP

The promulgation of the Spanish Constitution and the first post-Franco general elections of 1977 were followed by the municipal elections in 1979. In 1985, a Fundamental Law Regulating the Bases of the Local Government (LRBRL) was passed, culminating the democratic redesign of the country's municipal administration. The LRBRL

normalized citizen's participation against a backdrop of political effervescence, accelerated changes, and strong community organizations. However, the following twenty years of liberal democracy, economic growth, globalization, consumerism, and Europeanization went in hand with a generalized disinterest in politics and the decadence of the mass organizations of the *Transición*. Meanwhile, the political parties, both on the left and the right, were acquiring a “technical culture” suspicious of the unconscious naiveté and the perils of “political adventurers” that could arise from direct democracy. As a result, the framework for citizen’s participation conceived by the LRBRL became less and less relevant, with no real social support.

However, the ebbs and flows of the Latin American left attracted great interest and were echoed in Spain through widely read websites in left-wing academic and extra-parliamentary circles, such as [rebelion.org](#) (since 1996) or [lamarea.org](#) (since 2012). In comparison to the primarily oppositional nature of the massive demonstrations against globalization held in Seattle (1999), Prague (2000), or Genoa (2001), the Latin American experiences of grassroots politics showed a more purposeful approach to the social imbalances caused by globalization, amid electoral successes that brought Hugo Chávez to power in Venezuela first (1999), and later other left-wing Latin American leaders. In 1996, the Mexican Zapatista guerrilla organized the 1st Intercontinental Meeting against Neoliberalism and for Humanity with 3,000 participants -half of them were international guests invited through the internet- and a clear intent to transcend mere oppositional activism. In 2001, the first World Social Forum was held in Porto Alegre as an alternative to the Davos Forum, with 20,000 participants and 13 editions. The 2003 summit included a “Life after Capitalism” workshop on participatory economy, politics, and media [28-29] with presentations on participative budget plans for local governments (the allocation of portions of the council's budget to a citizens' body), drawing on the earlier experience of the Porto Alegre municipality in Brazil, which had been running participatory budget schemes since 1989 [27]. In the 2004 Mumbai meeting, participants expanded to 75,000. There, issues such as censorship and copyright, the neutrality of the web, were discussed. Still, the Forum's concern with ICT didn't merge with earlier debates on direct democracy, and some critical commentators [22]

complained that the gigantism of the event led to many organizational issues, eventually undermining democratic deliberation and the ability to achieve clear conclusions.

The politicization of the Spanish citizenry grew back in intensity after the 2008 economic crisis amidst tax rises, budget cuts, soaring unemployment, and widespread criticism of the establishment. The government measures to counteract the crisis included a controversial Sustainable Economy Law (2009) that created an Intellectual Property Commission with the authority to close web pages without judicial intervention if presumed to unlawfully distribute copyrighted content. Critical Internet users' groups (such as Exgae), strongly opposed the law, accusing the government of abuse of power and a tendency to censorship. They vindicated the neutrality of the web and coordinated with other online groups such as the Facebook page Democracia Real Ya or Huelgageneral.net.

Soon, solidarity and mutual support against "the establishment" evolved into converging demands such as democratic regeneration, improvements in the standard of living and protection of individual liberties. Iceland and Greece had already held massive protests in 2008. In 2011, the Arab Spring had started. On May 15, 2011, Democracia Real Ya called for demonstrations all over the country, followed by the occupation of the city centers for weeks, where debates and cultural activities attended by hundreds of thousands of people were held. Social media became improvised political forums with a crucial role in organizing protests. Many people acquired, in the process, the basic digital skills needed to be informed and participate.

In the same year, 2011, elections were held, and the socialists (center-left) were ousted from power by the conservatives, who quickly dispersed the protesters by force. A new National Security Law was passed, the so-called "gag Rule," which gave the police unprecedented executive powers and dramatically restricted the rights to demonstrate and speak. As a result, the Indignados vanished from Spanish politics. In 2014, however, a group of academics and activists founded the Podemos party with the intention of resurrecting their spirit. In a backdrop of long-lasting unresolved problems and the immobilism of the traditional parties, an unexpected success in the European elections, with 5 MEPs, set off a new wave of mass activism.

Podemos had yet to evolve into conventional politics. Unable to organize the 2015 municipal elections (with more than 8,000 cities and towns in Spain), the interregnum

was filled by a myriad of independent lists that, like the *Indignados*, combined public face-to-face meetings with an extensive use of social media, messaging apps, among other digital channels. Many of these lists, such as Ganemos Madrid, Barcelona en Comú, Valencia en Comú, incorporated in their electoral programs experimental proposals for digitalized direct democracy. These included participative budget initiatives, citizen juries, and a sophisticated array of democratic decision-making procedures such as election by lottery, assemblies, conventional voting, petitions to the councils' authorities. The Madrid and Barcelona lists ended up running their cities, and the Valencian one supported a socialist mayor, enabling the introduction of online participatory policies in their councils, some of which are still in place today. However, with the collapse of those grassroots candidacies in the subsequent municipal elections of 2019, a period of uncertainty and decline in DPP began. The new conservative mayor in Madrid maintained the platform, although significantly limiting its functionalities and the resources allocated to be managed through it. Barcelona and Valencia retained their respective governments, albeit with similar effects, as they gradually transitioned to a more institutional and technically administrative tone. Ultimately, neither these governments nor the use of DPP had decisively altered the basic indicators and trends of their cities' local life in comparison to conventionally run cities, such as access to housing, levels of gentrification, traffic, pollution, unemployment.

3 Design Challenges in DPP: Scale, Usability, Context

Sociotechnical traditions in Information Systems research support the promotion of democracy and citizenship rights as embodied in usability and user experience definitions and design methods [3]. These focus on design goals aiming to fulfill the needs of end-users, enhancing their interaction with technology while minimizing the digital divide to support electronically enabled participation [4].

The design and evaluation of digital participation platforms (DPP) pose interdisciplinary challenges encompassing the user, technology, and context [11-19]. Designers should take as a starting point a clear understanding of the functionalities needed to make complex deliberation, content creation, and decision-making processes more democratic. DPP must incorporate ease of use (simplicity, ease of learning,

intuitiveness), without requiring technical knowledge, and must function with basic, affordable technologies [2]. They must also include information repositories, serving as a means of formal learning or informal self-learning, while ensuring transparency and trust. Additionally, their design must be flexible enough to enable users to adapt the DPP to their effective practice, needs, and expectations, allowing the platform to continuously enhance itself and adjust to the inherent evolution that the community of users will undergo. High reliability is also crucial. To ensure the trust of users, security in terms of software reliability, consensual acceptance of rules, legal certainty, information access, and transparency are essential.

In contrast to conventional methods of citizen participation, DPP encompass many elements of democracy within a unified resource to enable meaningful regulated decision-making. This includes information delivery, campaign and communication management, awareness generation, deliberation, consultation, and community development. Additionally, they usually include an array of tools and procedures, such as those employed in online or discussion forums, social media, combined with secure voting systems and information repositories, to form a single platform acting as a distinct political stakeholder within a wider, highly regulated municipal institution run by a mayor and a group of councilors elected by universal suffrage.

Assessment criteria for the sociotechnical impact of DPP depends on their goal: to support e-democracy processes. For instance, in terms of complexity of usability, digital divide, privacy, imbalances in representativeness among population segments, or lack of trust in technology [20]. Furthermore, in DPP design, specific sociotechnical issues intertwine with institutional and political ones, such as legal consistency, political consensus on the platforms as a legitimate decision-making instance. Success indicators must consider all these, including accessibility and equality, data protection, access to information, quality of discussions, and participation metrics. These should be closely related to the potential of the initiative for social empowerment and the level of citizen participation (number of users, frequency of participation, or range of activities).

We notice a sociotechnical gap in the design of DPP, meaning “the divide between what we know we must support socially and what we can support technically” [1]. This divide is largely expressed in terms of scale. DPP are more effective when supporting smaller user groups. There is a qualitative shift between effective bottom-to-top digital

democracy as exercised by reduced groups, and digital politics, usually taking place at a massive scale in terms of top-to-bottom computer-assisted political campaigning. The greater user groups are, the less autonomy and initiative participants can have, and the more regulatory bodies appear overlapping them. In other words, the design goal of participatory democracy (as distinct from representative democracy) implies horizontal relationships that are only manageable in a manner directly proportional to the number of participants. Digital democracy initiatives in larger organizations pose enormous risks of manipulation, whereas attempts to distort the system become more noticeable in smaller communities. In towns, however, DPP, and other regulated means of participation, may be redundant and even rejected, for citizens-councils' relationships are usually exercised in more informal ways, such as face-to-face interviews, email, messaging apps.

Cities are the political units where the sociotechnical gap becomes narrower. However, their specific nature poses further design challenges. Not only that almost two thirds of the world's population already live in cities. Contemporary postindustrial economies are also characterized by the centrality of cities [24] while their increasing social diversity (in terms, for instance, of migration trends, center-periphery division, income disparities) raise specific governance issues [15-25] that must be translated into design decisions related to usability and inclusion. In municipal DPP, users are defined by their standard status as those enabled to participate regardless of their individual profiles. Therefore, they must be equalized in capabilities. Furthermore, decision-making processes must be regulated to ensure subjective legitimacy and legal certainty.

4 Decidim VLC, Decide Madrid, Decidim Barcelona

Spanish municipal DPP are embedded in an institutional framework regulated by the LRBRL. Yet the normative development of design and operational standards for these platforms has not gone beyond municipal ordinances, making their functioning and capabilities largely dependent on the uneven width and scope of the councils' agenda. Citizens' participation in Spanish municipal politics has an overall consultative nature subordinated to a council elected by universal suffrage. Apart from the rights to vote,

of information, to take up public employment, among others, the Spanish Constitution recognizes the right of petition. Individuals or groups of citizens are entitled to make proposals to be discussed by the councilors, if supported by a given number of voters. Councils can also hold consultative referendums with the government's permission, and the LRBRL encourages participation by favoring the use of IT and the support of community groups. In the practice, this allows many locally designed means of bottom-to-top democracy. However, the adaptation of these to DPP requires complex legal developments and broad consensus, compared to other measures to simply optimize public administration by digital means.

The main shared feature of the Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia's DPP is their focus on participatory budget: citizens decide on the use of funding previously allocated by the city council and fragmented in many small projects.¹ In 2022, Decidim València had 16 million euros (out of a 1,4 billion municipal budget); Madrid had 50 million (out of 5.7 billion) and Barcelona had 30 million (out of 2,5 billion). DPP may include many other types of democracy, such as polls and referendums, a petition system to the municipal authorities and the possibility to initiate debates on the website on wider issues of municipal politics. They may also support collaborative writing, conferences, election by lottery of citizens' juries, and they can become symbiotic to face-to-face participative bodies.

Voting, candidacies and decision-making processes are usually accompanied by accessibility to relevant information. DPP often include a transparency repository for public consultations of regulations, ordinances, plans, among others. In Valencia, the proposals are voted on and then submitted to municipal officials that evaluate their feasibility and give the final approval. Decide Madrid includes a petition system. Citizens can make proposals to be discussed and voted by the councilors if they are supported by at least 1% of the electorate. They can also initiate informal debates on the website, which enables public consultations of regulations, ordinances, plans or any other initiative.

¹ As an indicator of the overall impact of these programs, these councils assign to participatory budgets roughly 1% of their total budget, whereas the Municipality of Porto Alegre assigns between 15% and 25%. (cf. CF+S Library).

Barcelona has a consultative body on general policies (Consejo de la ciudad, there are other sectoral and territorial ones) with community groups, elected individuals and citizens designated by lottery among those registered with the website. Like in Madrid, in Decidim Barcelona citizens' can make contributions to ordinance through webpages with relevant technical information. There is also a space for a digital version of the right to petition, e.g., including calls for a referendum or taking initiatives to the plenary of the council, if the petition is signed by a given number of voters (between 88,000 in Madrid to about 3700 in Barcelona). In Decidim Barcelona, the support of democratic processes also matches an interest to wide usability (the DPP works in a wide range of devices), free software and security. This platform also integrates the richest range of different democratic participation models (assemblies, sortition, suffrage, etc.). Decidim is managed by the Metadecidim Association, which was established in 2019 by a participatory budget initiative. Its design is based on a 2022 ordinance by the Council regulating participation.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of Spanish municipal DPP shows that their design points out to wider issues on the furtherance of democracy against a backdrop of institutional stagnation. Approaching them from a multidisciplinary perspective involving political science, contemporary history and sociotechnical design can help us to better understand the challenges we face from the perspective of their design goal.

In this respect, there is an enormous room for improvement that may led to further research in areas such as legal certainty and design standards, privacy, the characteristics of public software, etc. Municipal DPP incorporate a sophisticated understanding of grassroots democratic politics involving many forms of practices. However, the pre-digital institutional framework in which these operate within may turn them into alien bodies withing the wider context of elected councils. Despite their rich variety of procedures and functions, DPP are highly dependent on unstable political wills and have not yet evolved into proper institutional agencies.

Finally, size is an important element of design. As we have argued, the current technical state-of the art does not allow for reliable DPP in metropolitan, regional or State-

size communities. However, we have deliberately renounced to adventure the ideal number of participants that may ensure an effective functioning of DPP because they also depend on the specific characteristics of the community, including social cohesion, level of literacy, access to digital devices, among other factors.

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