Article

'Let the Citizens Fix This Mess!' Podemos' Claim for Participatory Democracy in Spain

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Abstract

The declining trust in the representative institutions of liberal democracy after the 2008 economic crisis has generated a rise in appeals to substitute the representative model in favor of a participatory democracy. Although political representation has been in crisis since its very inception, for the first time the new technologies of communication based in the Web 2.0, smartphones and social media make replacing the elites' intermediation in decision-making a real possibility. Aiming to critically address this issue, the article uses a political theory framework to analyze the role of political participation within the main models of democracy as a first step from where to question the viability and convenience of participatory democracy nowadays. Then, the article focuses on the case of Podemos in Spain, a left-wing populist party that advocates for instruments like referendums and citizen initiatives as a solution for the Spanish political crisis. Here, the article highlights the shortcomings of Podemos's participatory proposal, mainly focused on aggregating predetermined positions instead of addressing the dynamics that undermine the quality of political debate. Finally, we conclude that dealing with the citizens' political disaffection requires institutional innovations designed to increase the deliberative quality of our representative democracies.

Issue

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1. Introduction

The claim that representation is in crisis is certainly not a new statement. Opinion studies since at least the 1970s have been detecting a progressive decline in citizens' trust in the institutions that uphold the liberal democratic model (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975; Montero & Torcal, 2006; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). In this regard, the economic crisis that started in 2008 has magnified a pre-existing disaffection with the parties, governments and parliaments in most Western democracies (European Social Survey, 2013, p. 14; Latinobarómetro, 2018, pp. 34–43). Consequently, the consideration that democracy is the best possible form of governance compared to other alternatives has decreased significantly in recent studies, especially among the youngest citizens (Stefan & Mounk, 2016).

Like in previous crises, the current disaffection with representative democracy is accompanied by voices crying out to replace this model with a participatory democracy that grants greater influence to citizens in decision making. In this regard, the prevailing zeitgeist is a furious anti-elitism that denigrates any type of political intermediation as opposed to the popular sovereignty on which true democracy is based. This phenomenon can partly be explained by the combined effect of an increased self-perception of political competence and the revolution of communication technologies.

Increasingly more citizens perceive themselves as politically competent, which leads them to judge the authority of elites more critically and to seek unconventional participation formulas (Matsusaka, 2005, p. 163). In parallel, the widespread use of web-based technologies, smartphones and social media makes it easier for in-

dividuals and social groups to autonomously coordinate in order to present their demands in the public sphere. In cases as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 or the Arab Spring uprisings, digital technologies and especially the social media have been a key resource in the democratic struggle against authoritarian regimes (Howard & Hussain, 2011). In turn, a manifestation of the anti-elitist trend in democratic countries is the symbolic impact achieved in 2011 by the assembly-type protests of Spain's *Indignados Movement*, *Occupy Wall Street* in the United States and Greece's *Syntagma Square Movement*. Another example of this political mood is representatives turning increasingly to referendums to resolve dilemmas such as Scotland remaining in the United Kingdom in 2014 or Greece's acceptance of the EU economic bailout in 2015, to set out two recent cases. However, the unexpected outcome of the referendum on *Brexit* in 2016, or the rise of xenophobic and populist parties in many European countries have challenged the cognitive and moral virtues attributed to the citizenry as well as the trust on new technologies as an agent of democratic progress.

Is participatory democracy a good idea? To answer this question, we must first reflect on the normative value attributed to participation within democratic theory. Along with this, any alternative to liberal democracy must rely on the best empirical data available on citizens' attitudes and abilities and, further, specify the sustainability of its model under the structural conditions of mass society. Aiming to critically address these matters, this article first contextualises the debate on political participation within the complex balance between the liberal and democratic traditions that lay at the core of liberal democracy, pointing out the theoretical and empirical weaknesses that challenge the benefits attributed to citizen participation. Thus, the article presents three main shortcomings of the participatory model: its tendency to offer a monistic legitimation of political participation, the fallacy of the virtuous citizen, and its lack of institutional precision. These flaws undermine the appeal of participatory proposals as a solution to the democratic malaise.

From this theoretical framework, the article then analyses the specific case of Podemos (*We Can*), a left-wing populist party that presents several mechanisms of direct democracy as a route to deal with institutional disaffection in Spain. The interest of this study case is twofold. At the Spanish level, the irruption of Podemos in 2014 has completely transformed a party system (*imperfect bipartisanship*) that remained unchanged since the democratic restoration in 1977. Also, the discourse, proposals and organizational style of this party—openly populist according to the statements of its main leaders—has fostered the change in the Spanish political culture initiated with the *Indignados Movement* in May 15, 2011 (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014). On the other hand, the case of Podemos in Spain is representative of the left-wing populist challenge to liberal democracy that, at present, has similar manifestations in other European countries

such as France (*La France Insoumise*), Italy (*Movimento 5 Stelle*), Grece (*Syriza*) and Germany (*Die Linke*), among others. Therefore, the shortcomings in Podemos's participatory model allow us to present a broader critique to a certain type of democratic claims which ignore that the real dichotomy is not between direct or representative democracy but between aggregative and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Finally, the article concludes that citizen participation in liberal democracies should transcend the mere expression of predetermined positions to focus instead on the deliberative quality of the public sphere.

2. The Debate on Participatory Democracy

Evaluating the suitability of participatory democracy requires that we first contextualise this model within a broader discussion on the contemporary idea of democracy. Thus, the first thing to point out is that liberal democracy is the result of the union of two traditions—liberal and democratic—that were initially opposed. The liberal tradition, developed by enlightened figures such as Locke, Montesquieu, Constant and Mill, assumes that the best way to maximise collective happiness is to guarantee a private realm of autonomy that allows each individual to defend its own life project against any arbitrary meddling of power. On its part, democratic tradition draws inspiration from the *liberty of ancients* (Constant, 1819), understood as the capacity of every citizen to practice self-governance via an equal participation in the ruling of its community. This tradition lays at the core of Rousseau's republicanism, concerned about preventing the private interests of a small elite from prevailing over the common good. To secure self-rule, all citizens should be active in deciding what is best for the community, that is, in expressing the *general will*. Since sovereignty cannot be represented, both the deputies and the government are merely agents of the people's will (Rousseau, 1996, pp. 510–513).

Therefore, the representative government born out from the liberal revolutions of the late eighteenth century is more liberal than democratic (Manin, 1997). Its key institutions—Constitution, Rule of Law, separation of powers—set a counterweight to majorities in order to protect individual autonomy. On the other hand, the main democratic feature in this model is participation through electoral vote. Although the extension of suffrage since the late nineteenth century reinforces equality among citizens, political representation introduces an elitist bias that separates the electoral body from its deputies, which are entitled to 'refine and expand' public opinion (Madison, Hamilton, & Jay, 1987).

Pointing out the normative tension inside liberal democracy, the model of participatory democracy came about in the 1960s and 1970s based on thinkers close to the New Left, political ecology and social movements like Pateman (1970), Macpherson (1977) and Barber (1984). Highlighting Rousseau's ideal of freedom as self-

government, these authors argue that the asymmetries in power and resources in liberal democracies refute the formal consideration of individuals as free and equal (Held, 2006, p. 210). Since political representation introduces a clear imbalance in favour of liberal elitism, reviving democracy as 'government of the people' requires implementing mechanisms for citizens' direct involvement in decision making. The underlying idea here is that only by practicing virtues in the public sphere it will be possible to control the elite and achieve citizen excellence in terms of political judgement and orientation towards the common good (Pateman, 1970). Thus, among the benefits attributed to participation, two of them become essential: first, participation develops the cognitive skills needed to attain a competent political judgement; second, the involvement in public affairs favours respect, empathy and solidarity, which are necessary for putting the common good before individual interests.

Despite sharing many values with the classic Athenian democracy, participatory democrats as Pateman and Macpherson move away from orthodox Marxism to question the viability of direct democracy as a complete alternative to representative democracy. Instead, they claim that the state must be democratized by extending citizen participation to the key dimensions in which most people spend their lives, such as the workplaces and the local level, but also to political parties, parliaments and state bureaucracies (Held, 2006, pp. 211–213; Pateman, 1970, p. 104). Here, it is possible to identify contemporary mechanisms that help to promote these ambitious goals: referendums, popular initiatives and town hall meetings are among the main resources for the citizens' direct involvement in our days (Matsusaka, 2005, p. 158). The common point in all of them is that citizens can bypass representatives and participate directly in drafting bills and voting on substantive political decisions. Specially, referendums and popular initiatives play a prominent role in countries like Switzerland and Italy, as well as in the American state of California (Budge, 1996, pp. 89–104). Also, the participatory model has inspired a wide range of experiences at the local level, with formulas like participatory budgeting, advisory councils and municipal consultations, to mention just a few examples.

However, the high normativity of this model makes it difficult to critically assess its viability under the less than ideal conditions of mass society (Held, 2006, pp. 214–216). In this regard, the debate between proponents and opponents of participatory democracy tend to confusingly mix theoretical-normative type arguments with others that are empirical-descriptive (Haller, 2017, p. 57). Concretely, participatory democracy faces three core problems: the tendency to offer a monistic legitimation of participation, the fallacy of the virtuous citizen and a lack of institutional precision. Let's take a look at them.

Firstly, we must reflect on the political legitimacy attributed to participation. The participatory ideal can be self-referential if, following Arendt (1958), we state that the citizen's mere capacity to express a political stance who affects the collective decision represents an intrinsic value regardless of its practical consequences (*expressive justification*). However, an instrumental legitimation can also be considered, via which participation would be desirable due to the benefits it provides, either generating empathetic citizens who are interested in the common good (*educational justification*); or providing an ideal method for reaching the best decisions in moral and technical terms (*epistemic justification*). Here, advocates of participatory democracy tend to omit the diversity of values associated with participation, ignoring empirical evidence that shows that the expressive, educational and epistemic values are extremely difficult to make compatible with each other in most of participatory experiences, which thus requires to sacrifice the monistic approach in order to set priorities among them. It would be unsustainable to state that the expressive value of participation justifies poor economic and social results. Also, emphasising its educational value involves recognising that citizens have previous civic shortcomings, which raises doubts about the epistemic quality of proposals that—like referendums—are based on the mere aggregation of their opinions.

Secondly, accrued empirical research challenges the ideal of the well informed, empathetic and tolerant individual on which the participatory model is based. Studies in recent decades repeatedly point out that a significant percentage of individuals have inconsistent opinions on substantial topics and do not know even basic details about their political systems (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1980; Converse, 1964; Shapiro, 1998; Somin, 2010; Zaller, 1992). The endurance of this phenomenon would confirm the theories of Schumpeter, who attribute lay citizens' political ignorance to a rational calculation of utility: in modern societies, individuals perceive political affairs as somewhat distant from their daily experiences and as competing with other demands in their private lives. This is the reason why they devote less attention and responsibility to them than other issues, reaching to poorly considered judgements (Schumpeter, 1976, pp. 259–264). Although the lack of substantive knowledge about many subjects could be compensated for with 'cognitive shortcuts' (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), the fact is that the utility of these heuristics depends on the individuals' skills to verify their reliability, what constitutes a circular argument (Hoffman, 1998). Moreover, the plummeting of information costs linked to new technologies has been achieved at the cost of introducing such a vast diversity of sources that they end up creating greater confusion, also making it possible to find information suitable for confirming any pre-existing biases that individuals want to keep (Rosenberg, 2007).

On the other hand, advocates of the participatory model argue that representation undermines citizens' wishes to be involved more frequently in poli-

tics, as shown by their support to referendums and popular initiatives in the majority of surveys conducted in democratic countries (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2007, pp. 351–352; Donovan & Karp, 2006, pp. 673–674). Nonetheless, specific studies on this matter reveal a more complex reality. The research of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse in the United States, duplicated in several European countries, found that along with a significant number of citizens who want to participate, there are also many people who would prefer instead an increase in the technical and moral skills of their representatives (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2014; Font, Wojcieszak, & Navarro, 2015; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Webb, 2013). In this sense, behind the disaffected citizens there would not always be a greater desire to participate, but instead frustration about the poor functioning of political representation which leads them to support any alternative that promises more control over governing elites (Bowler et al., 2007, p. 360).

In line with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), data reveal that—beyond electoral participation—the actual involvement in initiatives such as protests, political rallies, referendums and the like tend to be limited and unequal (Budge, 1996, pp. 14, 95–96). This seems to indicate that both the attitudes towards citizen participation and the preference for a specific model of democracy depend on where individuals stand with regards to sociodemographics, education and ideology (Donovan & Karp, 2006; Font, Galais, Wojcieszak, & Alarcón, 2014). For this reason, direct democracy mechanisms such as referendums, popular initiatives, town hall meetings and participatory budgeting have the risk of over-representing the viewpoints of active individuals, thus ignoring a majority of population who does not take part in these processes (Ganuza & Francés, 2012). Along with this, the homogeneity of participants creates dynamics of 'groupthink' that end up generating cognitive biases and more radicalised positions than the original ones (Sunstein, 2002). As a result, a participation that does not represent the overall population ends up damaging the epistemic and educational quality of these mechanisms even on moral issues that, in principle, would not require expert knowledge.

Finally, the demand for more participation conflicts with the structural conditions of contemporary democracy, characterised by a large *demos*, division of labour and individuals' lack of time (Dahl, 1989; Dahl & Tufte, 1973). In this context, suggesting that all citizens should spend a substantial part of their lives studying information, debating and making decisions would entail putting participation above other important areas of modern life as family, leisure or work. This is why the relationship between representation and participation is better understood as a matter of degree and not as a dichotomy. From this stance, it would be about determining whether mechanisms like referendums and popular initiatives should serve as an occasional complement to representation or, conversely, should entail the core of decision making (Budge, 1996, pp. 43–46). How-

ever, many proposals for participatory democracy are not clear in this respect, so that many disputes around this model arise due to misunderstandings caused by its lack of institutional specificity (Held, 2006, pp. 214–216). Moreover, although many Western constitutions recognize some mechanisms of direct democracy and cases like Switzerland or California prove that referendums and citizen initiatives are a viable option in terms of time and effort, problems of ignorance and unequal participatory attitudes still have no cogent response.

Nevertheless, there is another democratic model that can fare better concerning inclusion, equality and epistemic quality. Emerged at the end of the last century, deliberative democracy grounds the self-government in the popular will generated after a collective reasoning between free and equal citizens (Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1994; Held, 2006). When people deliberate, 'they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view' (Gastil & Richards, 2013, p. 255). The deliberative citizen does not get involved in the political process to enforce given judgments and preferences, but to reevaluate his positions from the viewpoint of the common good and in the light of new arguments and better information (Manin, 1987).

In this sense, citizen juries, consensus conferences or deliberative polls are good examples of deliberative *minipublics*, that is, 'groups small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic' (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p. 220). What distinguishes them from other participatory mechanisms is that they are focused on generating optimal conditions for an informed deliberation in small groups of lay citizens (for a detailed account see Gastil & Levine, 2005). Thus, for example, a Citizen Jury gathers a small group of citizens to debate face-to-face for several days on a specific topic with background materials and in-depth information. After deliberating and receiving further clarifications from a panel of experts, the participants reach a conclusion that is sent to public authorities (Smith & Wales, 2000). On the other hand, a Deliberative Poll selects a larger sample of citizens (often over a hundred) who take a survey both at the beginning and at the end of the process to check to what extent their opinions on the issue at stake changed as a result of in-depth discussion with rigorous information and expert clarifications (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). Unlike other participatory designs, deliberative polls look for the sociodemographic representativeness of the sample of citizens what, in turn, guarantees a plurality of viewpoints and avoids the problems of cognitive bias and group polarization. In addition, representativeness legitimizes the process's outcome, since it constitutes the reflective judgement reached by a miniature recreation of the population. Furthermore, it does so without asking for an unrealistic involvement of all citizens.

To sum up, in the less than ideal context described by the empirical research, the expressive value of participa-

tion can end up contradicting its supposed educational virtues and, above all, the efficiency required in making decisions. For this reason, those who prioritise epistemic considerations reject the high levels of citizen involvement in the participatory model, since it could lead to short-term and sectarian measures that are unable to evaluate the complexity of the issues at stake (Sartori, 1987, pp. 116–120). Deliberative *minipublics* as citizen juries or deliberative polls offer a cogent alternative to these weaknesses but advocates of participatory democracy tend to set aside these mechanisms in favor of referendums and other non-deliberative formulas. By focusing on the expressive value of participation as the sole or main moral justification, these proposals can end up producing dynamics far from the epistemic and civic benefits they presume will occur. Some recent cases highlight these risks: assembly type protests dominated by 'groupthink' that only recognise those who share radical postulates as 'the people' (Marangudakis, 2016, p. 791); referendums characterised by serious informational imbalances or false information, or where the initial question has been distorted (Gastil & Richards, 2013, pp. 262–263; Haller, 2017, pp. 67, 70–71). The next section analyses the case of Podemos, the party that has hoisted the flag of citizen participation in Spain.

3. From Theory to Practice of Participation: The Case of Podemos

The emergence of Podemos (*We Can*) in Spanish politics is closely connected to the protests of the *Indignados Movement* on May 15, 2011, the moment in which the effects of the economic crisis that started in 2008 were strongly felt in the country. The squares filling with thousands of demonstrators to the cry of 'They don't represent us!' and 'Real democracy now!' projected an egalitarian image of politics based on open assemblies, transparency and direct democracy (Díaz-Parra & Jover-Báez, 2016, p. 685; Kioupkiolis, 2016, p. 101; Maeckelbergh, 2012, p. 208). Thus, after the European elections in May 2014, Podemos appeared as the political force that wanted to institutionally channel the cultural change symbolised by the *indignados* (outraged). Consistent with the critical claims of 15-M, this party argued that the Spanish economic and institutional crisis was not only due to the poor management of the traditional parties—PP (*People's Party*, centre-right) and PSOE (*Spanish Workers Socialist Party*, centre-left)—but also to the lack of a genuine democracy. In Podemos's populist discourse, the crisis was used as an excuse by the neoliberal elite to undermine the institutions that allowed the people's sovereignty. Therefore, Spanish politics—claimed Podemos—was better understood by pitting the 'people' against a 'political caste' than relying on the traditional right and left division.

Assuming the anti-elitist framework of participatory democracy, Podemos centres its political proposal on the need for new forms of citizen involvement aimed at re-

generating public life and regaining the institutions for the people (Podemos, 2014, p. 6, 2017a, pp. 4–6). Thus, instruments like referendums, consultations and popular initiatives are recurrent features in Podemos's project. In short, Podemos's participatory 'medicine' is manifested via three broad areas: its internal organisation, its electoral programme and its participatory formulas at the local level. In all them, an innovative use of digital technologies helps this party to reduce the costs of engaging in political activities such as debating or voting.

With regards to internal organisation, Podemos fits within the category of 'ciber parties' which 'use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party' and also offer voters and supporters rights traditionally associated with formal membership (Margetts, 2006, p. 531). The intensive use of digital technologies sets Podemos substantially apart from all other Spanish parties, by ensuring that its supporters can participate in the party's organic life at a low cost in terms of time and effort. Podemos blurs the traditional political militancy by letting anybody registered on its website—515,304 citizens as by February 5, 2019—to participate in the party's internal decisions as a full-right member, which encompass everything from electing the party leaders and institutional candidates in open primaries to drafting the electoral programme through processes that alternate face-to-face debates with online discussions and voting. Podemos's online debating platform is *Plaza Podemos 2.0* (Podemos Square 2.0). Evolving from the original platform Reddit, it uses the free software Consul developed by the Madrid City Council. In this platform, the proposals that reach a 10% of support from the total census qualify for a referendum among the party's registered members (Plaza Podemos, n.d.-a).

Podemos also incorporates binding consultations about sensitive matters—either raised by the party elites or by a given number of registered members—such as the policy on pacts and electoral alliances, or the removal of the party's leaders and public offices (Mikola, 2017; Podemos, 2017b, art. 14, 2017c, p. 5). There is another online platform to vote on these consultations and in the internal primaries (https://participa.podemos.info/es). Podemos uses the Agora Voting technology, a web platform that provides services of safe online voting to public administrations, political parties and other civil society organizations. Voting requires a computer or other digital devices—like smartphones or tablets—connected to internet. It is also necessary to have a cell phone to receive a security code before casting the vote. Thus, for example, 107,488 people out of the 250,000 registered participated in the final vote on the party's founding principles, held in October 2014, while in the Second Podemos's Citizen Assembly, held in February 2017, 155,190 people voted out of the 450,072 registered (Alameda, Galán, & Abad, 2018).

However, Podemos's online participation manifests some flaws. In the first place, the digital divide—linked to age, education and income—generates differences be-

tween those able to participate via digital technologies and those unable to do it. Trying to balance this gap, Podemos presents its *círculos* (circles) as a space for face-to-face debating and voting. However, there is still an imbalance in favor of online participation. Thus, for example, in the 2018 primaries to elect Podemos's candidates for the local elections of 2019, the party rules established that in-person voting was only mandatory in municipalities with less than 50,000 inhabitants, while telematic voting would be the normal method in bigger cities (Podemos, 2018, pp. 7–8). To compensate for the digital divide in those cities, Podemos's rules only encourage the people in the territories where internal elections are held 'to put polling stations at street level or indoors'. Even in these cases, in-person voting should use telematic means instead of traditional paper ballots (Podemos, 2018, p. 20). In the second place, online voting systems are based on a complex software, which makes difficult for an average citizen to understand and check the key steps of the process. Hence, the trust on the process and its outcomes is undermined. In addition, apps like Appgree—initially used by Podemos to simplify debates and voting procedures—can store sensitive data about users. These dilemmas often go unnoticed due to the widespread technological enthusiasm.

Leaving aside the internal organization, Podemos proposes extending its organizational practices to the Spanish political system. To do so, its electoral programme, crafted via participatory means for the 2015 general elections, incorporates a wide range of measures aimed at strengthening citizen participation and controlling the elite. Along this line, it proposes institutionalising revocatory referendums to remove governments that have incurred a 'clear and substantial' noncompliance with its electoral programme, as well as the public offices 'in specific situations involving loss of legitimacy'. In parallel, it suggests to ease the procedures for popular legislative initiatives, as well as fostering new types of citizen initiatives, including those aimed at vetoing regulations approved by representatives that are considered detrimental (Podemos, 2015, measures 225 and 226). Also, the 'right to decide' includes 'the call for a referendum with guarantees in Catalonia so that its citizens can decide on the type of territorial relationship they want to establish with the rest of Spain' (Podemos, 2015, measure 277). In general, Podemos's programme makes referendums a regular procedure for taking decisions in areas as diverse as culture, education, public works or foreign policy, among many others.

Finally, local politics represents an ideal arena to show the virtues of Podemos's participatory model. Thus, after the municipal elections in 2015, cities like Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia—in which Podemos is part of the governing coalition—have implemented ambitious policies for citizen participation based on digital technologies, especially with regards to participatory budgeting and citizen consultations. In Madrid, for example, all registered residents can freely pose their expenditure pro-

posals within the annual participatory budget, which go through successive stages of collecting endorsements from other citizens, an evaluation of cost and technical viability by the pertinent municipal department and, finally, an open vote—in-person or online—for those of legal age 16 and older registered in the municipality (Madrid City Council, n.d.). Again, replicating Podemos's organizational model, digital technologies play a key role in the stages of proposal, endorsement and final voting. Similarly, citizen consultations allow those at least 16 years old to vote electronically to decide on matters submitted for consideration by the city council or by citizens themselves in the municipal website for citizen participation (https://decide.madrid.es) after achieving the endorsement of at least 1% of the local census. Thus, the first consultations took place in 2017 and were focused on topics related to remodelling public spaces, transport and urban facilities (Madrid City Council, n.d.).

At this point, the critical analysis of Podemos's proposals makes the contrast clear between the theory and practice of participatory democracy. The first thing that draws our attention is the great importance given to the direct aggregation of citizens' preferences, as compared to the lack of concern about the quality of the debate that should illustrate these positions. For example, in the case of the consultations organised by the Madrid City Council in 2017, 94% of participants voted in favour of 'integrating public transport in a single ticket', while 89% voted for the proposal of 'making Madrid 100% sustainable' (Madrid City Council, n.d.). This result was to be expected, if we bear in mind that the proposals never detailed the costs or possible negative consequences of these decisions and there was no public debate about other alternatives (Pérez Colomé & Llaneras, 2017). Nothing in the logic of these consultations guarantees that the final decision will be the outcome of a reflective debate with an exchange of diverse arguments and the best information available (Rico Motos, 2019, p. 176).

Further, the issue, date and terms of the consultation are strategic decisions in the hands of those who plan the referendum, which can favour a specific result in advance, or make participants end up responding to a different issue than that which is apparently formulated. That was the case of the internal consultation called by Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero, both prominent leaders of Podemos, to face the criticism caused by their purchase of a luxurious villa outside Madrid. Due to the literal wording of the question—not addressing the purchase but the continuity of Iglesias and Montero at the forefront of the party—those registered in Podemos were forced to consider the party's stability above any moral judgement about the possible incoherence between the lifestyles of both leaders and their anti-elitist rhetoric (Marcos, 2018). In addition, practically all the consultations posed by Podemos have ended with percentages close to 80% of support to the option defended by the party elite who raised the consult, which warns about the

plebiscitary tendency of this mechanism (Plaza Podemos, n.d.-b).

Going more in depth on Podemos's internal activities, despite the low costs in terms of time and effort involved in online voting, participation of those registered in the primaries and internal consultations has never surpassed the 43% obtained in October 2014, with the approval of the party's initial rules, and even dropped by 4% in voting for the 2015 electoral programme or by 9.7% for electing the party candidates to the 2019 European elections. At best, the most successful participation percentages are some 38% of active registered members (Alameda et al., 2018; Piña, 2018). These data question the claim of a general desire for political involvement, even among the supporters of a party that defends participatory democracy.

Moving the focus towards local politics, the low participation in Madrid's 2017 consultations highlights the problem of the actual representativeness of these experiences. By posing representation and participation as dichotomous alternatives, Podemos omits that referendums, participatory budgeting and open assemblies are an indirect type of representation, in so far as the citizens who take part in them become *de facto* representatives of those absent (Rico Motos, 2019, pp. 174–175). Thus, in consultations on reforming Gran Vía and Plaza de España—two iconic areas in the centre of Madrid—only 8% of the municipal census voted, so that the remodelling of these spaces was decided by a small percentage of participants, replacing a local corporation that represented the 68% of Madrid residents who voted in the 2015 municipal elections (Pérez Colomé & Llaneras, 2017). Further, since the citizens who get involved in these mechanisms tend to share an ideological and sociodemographic profile, bias problems arise that could explain—for example—the controversial result of another consultation, in which the favourable vote of 2,528 residents out of 176,000 people registered in the district (1.7% of the census) ended up removing the name of king Felipe VI, Head of State, from the park in this district. As we explained previously, these biases can be addressed by statistically representing the plurality of population and securing in-depth debates in a respectful environment, as it is the case in deliberative polls. However, this participatory mechanism is marginal in Podemos's proposal.

Finally, Podemos's project manifests the lack of institutional definition that is often associated to the participatory model. Despite its mythification of direct democracy, no political document of the party openly poses a complete alternative to representative democracy, but instead advocates an imprecise mix of representative institutions and direct mechanisms that cause conceptual confusions such as proposing at the same time a 'real, representative, egalitarian and participatory democracy' (Iglesias, 2015). Instead of clarifying the respective role of participation and representation in a non-dichotomous proposal, Podemos seems to prefer a discursive ambiguity around its claim for participatory

democracy, since it allows this party to circumvent the model's practical problems.

However, when delving deeper into Podemos's organisational model—presented as a reference for Spanish politics—we find that the participatory rhetoric conflicts with a vertical and centralised organisational reality, based on the hyper-leadership of the general secretary (Díaz-Parra & Jover-Báez, 2016, p. 690; Kioupkiolis, 2016, pp. 111–113). Although online primaries are potentially more inclusive than offline ballots, the specific design of the voting procedure becomes a key factor, since it can also 'strengthen the party leadership vis-à-vis the party intermediary elites and thus foster anti-democratic tendencies' (Mikola, 2017, p. 39). That seems to be the case of the controversial voting procedure in the 2015 Podemos's primaries, which adopted a system of closed lists and the possibility of approving a whole list without expressing any individual preference. In this sense 'only three of the 65 selected candidates following Pablo Iglesias were not identical to the ones on his list', which underscores the party leader's dominance of the candidate selection process (Mikola, 2017, pp. 44–45).

Moreover, Podemos's internal documents recognize the abandonment of its 'circles', the assembly participation mechanism that was called upon to become the 'guarantee for the control and critical evaluation of Podemos's representative bodies and public offices' (Podemos, 2017a, pp. 11, 48). Once again, the anti-elite rhetoric clashes with the structural imperatives in any complex organisation, which is obliged to become bureaucratic and delegate functions to an elite in exchange for efficiency (Michels, 1959). Thus, while Podemos has implemented an innovative system of internal participation, the online consultations—and, to a lesser extent, the primaries—often end up as a complement to the leadership of party elites or, at worst, as a strategic resource at their hands. From a 'movement party' close to social movements Podemos has evolved towards a more hierarchical structure (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017).

In summary, relying on an idealised vision of citizen participation by which any decision that arises from the popular will is intrinsically virtuous, Podemos turns to either a self-referential justification of participation regardless of its concrete results, or the monistic fallacy that upholds that referendums, open assemblies and citizen initiatives are capable of simultaneously maximising the expressive, educational and epistemic values of participation. The analysis of the participatory formulas implemented by this party shows that the reality of participation is more complex than the ideal picture projected in Podemos's discourse.

4. Participation: Aggregative or Deliberative?

The irruption of Podemos in Spanish politics is framed within a generalised wave of disaffection that—especially after 2008—blames elites and liberal demo-

cratic institutions for the lack of effective response to the uncertainties generated by globalisation. In parallel, the case of Podemos also illustrates the contradictions of participatory democracy, which calls for citizen empowerment without offering a viable alternative to representative democracy (Kioupkiolis, 2016, p. 106). Thus, the leaders of Podemos do not translate their participatory claim into a concrete institutional design capable of materializing the expressive, educational and epistemic values associated to political participation.

Participatory democrats could argue that the criticisms of citizens' abilities raised to reject direct democracy could be extended to challenge democracy itself (Budge, 1996, p. 66): if individuals are ignorant and sectarian, why let them participate in the selection of their representatives? Here, the fact that representative democracy coexists with high levels of ignorance and sectarianism highlights the core problem: an aggregative vision of democracy that discards the importance of public deliberation. From this viewpoint, 'it is no improvement that the mass of citizens, rather than select elites, should be the ones to make ill-considered choices in a disrespectful civic climate' (Gastil & Richards, 2013, p. 256).

Faced with this situation, the deliberative model states that truly significant participation is that which includes interaction with other points of view in shaping individual political judgements and, at times, changing preferences as a result of public debate (Habermas, 1996). Thus, the real boundary is not between direct or representative democracy, but that which distinguishes aggregation from deliberation. Representation and participation are not necessarily dichotomic ideas but any balance between them should be evaluated through the lens of the deliberative quality of the political system. It is not only about making better information available to citizens, but about creating the conditions so that they care about taking part in inclusive debates endowed with due epistemic conditions.

If citizen participation is to move beyond merely expressing predetermined positions, Western democracies must pay more attention to the quality of debates within the partial public spheres arisen from the technological revolution. Nowadays, the democratisation of communication via Web 2.0, smartphones and social media supports the democratic struggle against hierarchical elites but, on the other hand, it can also generate a loss of control over the truthfulness of the information on the web. In terrain as emotionally laden as politics, this phenomenon opens up the possibility that groups and individuals turn to 'information bubbles' in which they only receive the information and discourses that strengthen their own original prejudices. Along with this, the incorporation of new broadcasters generates an aggressive competition in traditional media, thus fostering a structural trend that stimulates whatever content that captures people's attention, meaning novel, spectacular, conflicting and simple ones (Habermas, 2006). All of this sets the ground for trivialising politics in a public sphere where monologues, *infotainment*, *post-truth* and *fake news* tend to prevail over more in-depth debates. Ignoring these dynamics, Podemos entrusts the success of participatory democracy to an informed and virtuous citizen who has been largely disproven by empirical research.

However, the reform of liberal democracy does not necessarily entail focusing on the aggregation of poorly considered positions, but instead of developing institutional innovations that can increase its deliberative quality (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). A deliberative enrichment of liberal democracy is possible both at the broad level of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990) and also via *minipublics* such as citizen juries or deliberative polls. These mechanisms could be strategically introduced into the institutional design of representative democracy to produce deliberative dynamics in different stages of decision-making, or as a previous requirement for holding referendums or electing representatives (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Gastil & Richards, 2013; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). For example, *minipublics* could be used to deal with matters subject to strong partisan divides, such as the proposal for electoral reform developed by the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly in 2004 (Warren & Pearse, 2008). In addition, deliberative polls could critically assess candidates and electoral programmes as a mandatory requirement during electoral campaigns, generating a deliberative impact in the public opinion by receiving extensive media coverage (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2002).

In short, instead of an expressive participation based on aggregation, it is an enlightened participation that should guide the reforms within liberal democracies to address the political malaise at the beginning of the 21st century. Even if a fully deliberative democracy may never be achieved, well-designed institutions can increase the deliberative quality of our political systems and, over time, generate a more civic environment.

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Conflict of Interests

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