Embracing Public Space and Urban Cultures:

Understanding and Acting on Complexity of Contemporary Cities

A consistent underlying democracy conceptualization for citizens' participation. Review of two public spaces design participatory initiatives in Madrid in the 2016-2019 period and proposal of an enhanced procedure

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Abstract

In recent years, several cities have promoted citizen participation initiatives as a means to move towards greater democratic governance at the local level. However, a review of the design of the initiatives reveals many shortcomings that call into question the apparent achievements.

These shortcomings are partly due to the current imprecise conceptualisation of the term democracy, which does not allow us to decide between different possible designs. This paper therefore outlines a consistent conceptualisation of democracy from different perspectives, which does allow progress toward better participatory designs for the future.

From this conception of democracy, two participatory initiatives promoted by the Madrid City Council between 2015 and 2019, linked to a political change in search of 'greater democracy', are reviewed, showing various shortcomings in the procedures. Finally, a procedure for participatory initiatives for the reform of urban public spaces is explained.

Keywords:

Citizen Participation; Democracy; Voting Theory; Madrid; Public Spaces

Una concettualizzazione coerente della democrazia di base per la partecipazione dei cittadini. Revisione di due iniziative di progettazione partecipata di spazi pubblici a Madrid nel periodo 2016-2019 e proposta di una procedura rafforzata

Negli ultimi anni, diverse città hanno promosso iniziative di partecipazione dei cittadini come mezzo per progredire verso una maggiore governance democratica a livello locale. Tuttavia, un esame della progettazione delle iniziative rivela molte carenze che ostacolano gli apparenti risultati.

Queste carenze sono in parte dovute all'attuale concettualizzazione imprecisa del termine democrazia, che non ci permette di decidere tra i vari disegni possibili. Il presente documento delinea quindi una concettualizzazione coerente della democrazia da diverse prospettive, che consente di progredire verso migliori progetti partecipativi per il futuro.

A partire da questa concezione della democrazia, vengono passate in rassegna due iniziative partecipative promosse dal Comune di Madrid tra il 2015 e il 2019, legate a un cambiamento politico alla ricerca di una "maggiore democrazia", mostrando varie carenze nelle procedure. Infine, viene illustrata una procedura per le iniziative partecipative di riforma degli spazi pubblici urbani.

Parole Chiave:

Partecipazione dei cittadini; Democrazia; Teoria delle votazioni; Madrid; Spazi pubblici

A consistent underlying democracy conceptualization for citizens' participation. Review of two public spaces design participatory initiatives in Madrid in the 2016-2019 period and proposal of an enhanced procedure

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a consensus in the discourse of institutions and political representatives in favour of greater citizen participation in public decision-making, presented as a natural step towards increasingly democratic societies. This consensus has led to the promotion of numerous initiatives aimed at enabling such citizen participation, especially at the local level. However, several issues call into question the apparent benefits of these initiatives:

• Citizens do not always perceive participation initiatives as progress towards greater democracy. For example, if they perceive that participation requires great effort but provides minimal benefit, it generates disaffection and discourages future participation (García-Espín & Jiménez, 2017).
• The term 'citizen participation' encompasses very different initiatives, ranging from those where participation is tokenistic to those where there is genuine citizen influence on the outcomes (Arnstein, 1969). This disparity influences the positive or negative perception of initiatives by citizens.
• Ex-post evaluations of initiatives, covering both process and outcome, by citizens are scarce, preventing the necessary feedback for the improvement of future initiatives.

Citizen participation initiatives can vary widely in design and objectives, and various scales have been proposed to assess their 'level of democracy'.

Both scales define levels of power distribution (kratos) between rulers/institutions and citizens (demos), with the lowest level being those situations in which all power is retained by institutions, and the highest level being those in which complete power rests with citizens. They are thus to be understood within the broader current debate about democracy in the field of political science[1].

This defines the objective of this article, which is to advance the understanding of the relationship between citizen participation initiatives and the concept of democracy. Therefore, a brief review of the term democracy will be carried out to explain a different conceptualisation that can be the basis on which to design better participation initiatives.

The hypothesis is that this conceptualisation makes it possible to review citizen parti-

cipation initiatives and construct improved procedures for these decisions.

To provide contrast, a review from this conceptualisation is undertaken of two initiatives for the reform of public spaces in Madrid developed within the framework of political movements linked to 15-M, which were postulated as symbolic of the 'advance towards greater democracy', and we will present an improved procedure for these decisions, congruent with the proposed conceptualisation of democracy.

2. The conceptualisation of democracy

2.1 Current definition of democracy

The term 'democracy' is currently ambiguous. This ambiguity is rooted both in the absence of a precise definition of the term at the time it was coined and in differences and competing interests as to which the distribution of power in society should be. Each actor defends the definition of democracy that comes closest to its optimal state.

Fig. 1 – Arnstein (1969) and IAPP (2018) scales of citizen participation. Davis & Andrew (2017) emphasise that Arnstein (1969) focuses on evaluating outcomes while IAPP (2018) focuses on defining processes. Source Image: Own elaboration based on Arnstein (1969) and IAPP (2018).

Today's dominant concept of democracy derives fundamentally from Schumpeter's (1943) conceptualization of democracy as a political system where politicians obtain decision-making power through citizens' votes. This paradigm was endorsed by theorists like Downs (1957) and Rae (1967), and completed with a set of individuals' rights and freedoms. More recently, it has been adopted by leading political scientists such as Sartori (1993) and Dahl (2004), and most international organizations.

However, dissenting voices such as Manin (1998) and Ober (2008) argue that in democracy, the citizenry (*demos*) has sovereign power (*kratos*) as the effective capacity to achieve the most important collective actions follow their values and preferences. They argue that electoral processes do not give power to citizens as the etymology of the term implies. Moreover, historically democracy referred to the ability of citizens to influence public decisions rather than to electoral mechanisms (Hattersley, 1930), a conceptualisation present in Arrow's (1948-1963) axioms for democratic decision-making which do not refer to how decision-makers have been chosen, but whether their decisions align with collective preferences.

To accurately define democracy, it is necessary to review its origins.

2.2. The etymology of democracy

The term democracy alludes to a question of the utmost importance in societies: who holds the highest political power. Therefore, since its inception, there have been intense debates about the form of political system it designates. These debates have been influenced by the ideologies and interests of the authors.

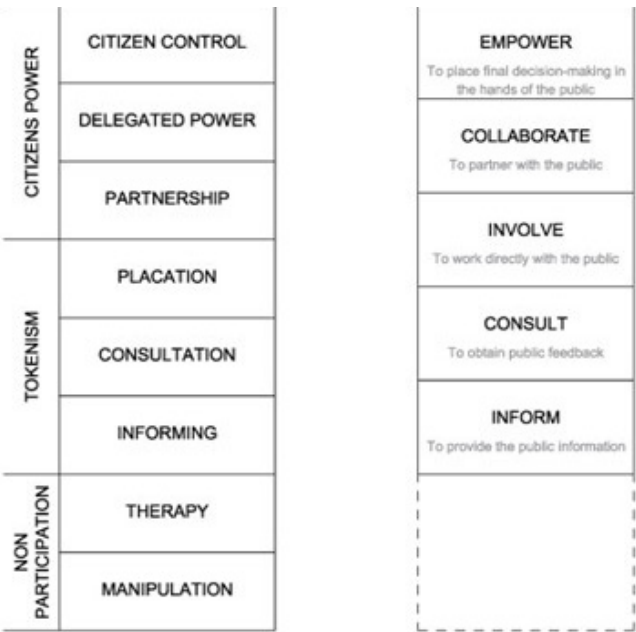The term is built from the terms *demos* (citizenry) and kratos (power). These terms

first appeared in the same sentence referring to the political system in the seventh-century BC constitution of Sparta: the *Great Retra* (Raaflaub & Wallace, 2007; Forrest, 1978; Plut. Lic). The *kratos* in the Great Retra was linked to citizen control over major decisions. Political decisions were proposed by a council of elders (Gerousia), which included two hereditary kings and members of the main families elected by vote for life, yet had to be approved by the citizens in the assembly (Apella).

The above description coincides with Ober (2008) who highlights the suffix "kratos" as an abstract representation of the exercise of power and not the form of government, which was designated by the term "arquia". Thus, "demos-cracy" would refer to the exercise of sovereign power, to the "ability to get things done" (ibid.), i.e. to shape major public decisions, and not to participation in government.

Later, in the fifth-century, the two terms were joined together to designate a new type of political system: the Athenian Demokratia. Understanding its meaning necessitates thus reviewing the system's characteristics prompting its coinage.

2.3 The Athenian demokratia

Although the origin of the political system can be traced back to the City Council instituted in 621 BC by Draco, Solon (594 BC) and Cleisthenes (509 BC) reforms are usually referred as its birth, with minor emphasis being given to Ephialtes' reform (460 BC). Notable features of this political system at the beginning of the 4th century include (Musti, 1995; Forrest, 1978; Arist. Athen. Const.):

• The Assembly played a central role in important decisions, but not all decisions were taken by the citizens. Judicial rulings were handled by the Dikasteria, laws by the Nomothetai, and day-to-day executive decisions by the Boule. The Boulé also drew up the agenda of the Assembly, ensuring focused debates.
• Election by lot, involving between 500 to 1500 citizens, was widespread for forming collegiate decision-making chambers (Boulé, Nomothetai, Dikasteria), which ensured representation of the citizenry.

In Athenian democracy, not all decisions were taken by the citizens, but *the most important decisions in the executive, judicial and legislative spheres were taken by all citizens* (Assembly) *or by chambers composed of many chosen by lot* (Boule, Dikasteria, Nomothetai). This selection by lot of a large number of citizens implied a proportional representation of the ideology and sensibilities of the citizenry. The Boulé, composed of members from some 150 demes (administrative entities) of the Attica region, implied also a territorial representation.

In addition, decision-making procedures prioritised informed collective choices, through public deliberations or expert contributions[2]. In this way, the democratic system organised the powers of the state to align its decisions with citizens' preferences and values, using the best available knowledge (Alvira, 2019).

Throughout the fifth century, the concept and term "democracy" entered the literature, emphasizing decision conformity to citizen preferences. Early works like The Suppliants (Aeschylus, ca 490-463 BC) depicted a non-elected king facilitating democratic choices (Ehrenberg 1950).

A democratic decision is not one taken by a person elected by a vote (and an undemocratic decision is not one taken by a person not elected by a vote), but one that is taken following (or in disagreement with) the values/preferences of the citizenry. In a democratic state, decisions that affect everyone must align with citizen preferences[3].

2.4 Subsequent evolution

The evolution of the democratic political system faced challenges in adapting to larger environments, which became particularly evident with the emergence of larger political entities in Europe around the 10th and 11th centuries. The concept of democracy collided with the logistical difficulty of convening assemblies with large numbers of citizens over ever greater distances.

The rise of the cities became fundamental, prompting the European kings to give citizens a 'voice' in their councils by sending representatives. Two models of representation thus emerged (Alvira, 2019: 133 ff)[4]:

• In England, in 1295, Edward I introduced a plenipotentiary representative model, in which citizens elected representatives whose decisions were binding, even if contrary to their will. The citizens gave up sovereignty by electing these representatives.
• In contrast, some cities in Spain and the south of France adopted a model of representation without ceding sovereignty. Representatives had to vote according to instructions received from the citizens they represented. Otherwise, their decisions did not bind the cities (Merriman, 1911).

In the seventeenth century, the interconnection between sovereignty and representation was more fully realized in an adaptation of democratic governance in the State of Connecticut in 1638, featuring (CGA, 1638):

• Two annual assemblies were held for important debates and election of the governor and magistrates, with voting rights for all free citizens.
• The governor and magistrates ran the government, but a majority of citizens could call assemblies if they felt it necessary to vote directly on a matter.

This design combined democratic principles with efficiency, allowing government in a state nearly six times the size of Athenian Attica. While Athenian democracy held around 40 annual assemblies, Connecticut limited fixed assemblies to two per year, yet citizens retained the ability to convene as many assemblies as needed

The design implied that citizens' silence regarding a government decision meant its

approval while requesting an assembly indicated their willingness to debate and vote on the issue. In both cases it was ensured, without the need for an explicit vote in every government decision, that decisions aligned with citizen preferences maximizing thus efficiency. Citizens' veto over major decisions made vote' more efficient.

Gradually, many designs for democratic representation emerged, mostly at the local level[5]. Citizens' sovereignty involved both the election of representatives and control over the agenda and major decisions. After each government decision, citizens either explicitly request a vote on the matter or, if they did not, implicitly declare that the decision conformed to their preferences.

The possibility of voting became crucial to establish the common will (Rousseau 1762). Yet although various voting procedures had been proposed since antiquity, paradoxical or manipulated (i.e., *undemocratic*) results were periodically detected. Voting did not always lead to reasonable outcomes and different rules could lead to different results (i.e. decisions). Efforts to develop new procedures intensified in the 18th century, with notable contributions by J. C. de Borda, J.M.A.N. de Caritat, but they still did not solve these problems.

In the 20th century, Arrow's (1950) Impossibility Theorem challenged whether voting could ensure democratic decision-making, showing that no method could satisfy seven reasonable conditions. Later, Gibbard and Satterthwaitte's (1973) result proved no voting procedure could prevent manipulation, while Mc Kelvey's (1976) theorem showed that an agent's complete control of the agenda gave him dictatorial power. Later impossibility results further complicated the landscape of democratic decision-making.

2.5 Recap

Although the difficulty of defining the term democracy goes back to its origins, the current ambiguity of the term can be traced to its redefinition by Schumpeter (1943), who moves it away from decision-making and links it to the election of representatives, thus diminishing the power of the citizenry.

This definition contrasts with Arrow's in voting theory (1948-1963), which preserves its traditional link to the nature of decisions. Sovereignty lies in the preference prevailing in public decisions, not in how government offices are elected. If citizens are sovereign, decisions must conform to their preferences, incorporating the best available knowledge. *Democracy implies that decisions conform to citizens' preferences, using the best available knowledge in the decision-making process*[6].

However, citizen participation initiatives are often built on Schumpeter's redefinition; i.e., they often assume that sovereignty belongs to the representatives and that the initiative only temporarily transfers a portion of sovereignty from rulers to citizens. Moreover, the fact that citizens make the decision does not guarantee its democratic nature in the terms described:

• Decisions should both conform to citizen preferences and integrate best knowledge.

• Citizen veto, not necessarily voting, can maximize said preference alignment.

• Voting procedures may often result in choices that deviate from citizen preferences.

To better illustrate these problems, two citizens' initiatives undertaken in the city of Madrid are reviewed about above explained concept of democracy.

3. Two initiatives for citizen participation in Madrid

In 2016 and 2017, after the arrival to Madrid Citiy Council of political movements linked to the 15-M and 'Democracia Real Ya' movements, two participatory initiatives for the reform of public spaces were launched. These initiatives were postulated as examples of 'progress towards greater democracy'. Their review from the above explained democracy concept, allows to show their strengths and weaknesses.

3.1 Plaza de España

The objective was to redevelop the Plaza de España and its connection with the surrounding green spaces. A survey was carried out to find out the preferences of the citizens. These preferences were subsequently incorporated into the Competition basis.

The survey included one-question options equivalent to Plurality voting. For example, to decide the fate of the Cervantes statue, the survey presented three options each citizen choosing one option (casting one vote), and each option being assigned a collective preference according to the total received votes. Almost 70% of respondents preferred preserving its current location, so it was incorporated as requisite in the basis.
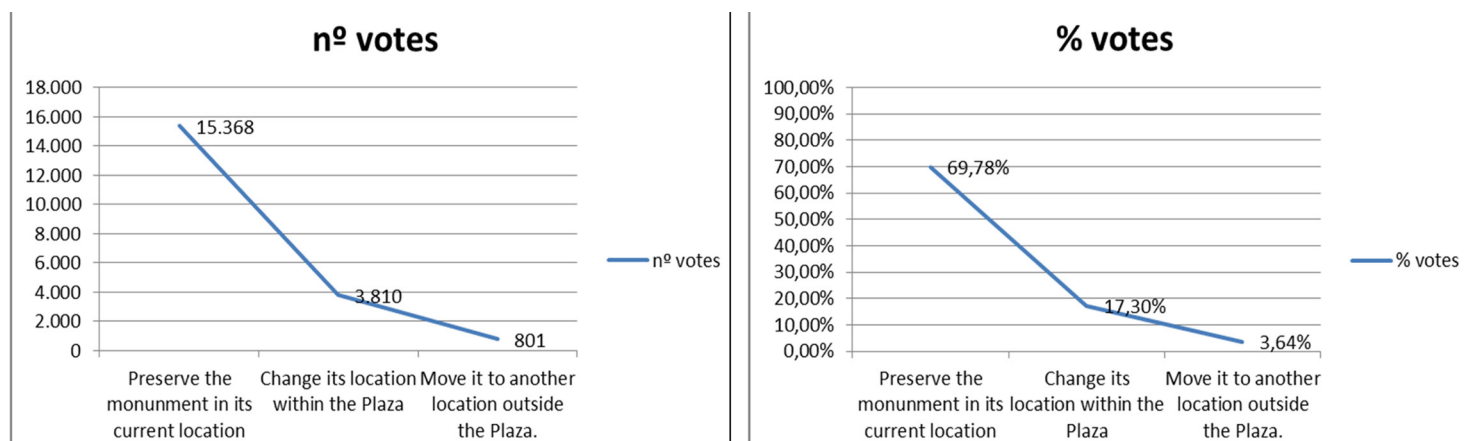
The survey included also multiple answer questions equivalent to approval voting. For example, to detect which the favourite uses were the municipality offered several possibilities allowing each citizen to indicate as many as wanted.

The citizens' preferences collected in the survey were incorporated into the basis of an open architectural competition. An exhibition was held with the received proposals, which were voted on by citizens each one casting one vote for their preferred option (Plurality Rule).

Fig. 2 – Results of the survey on the change of location of Cervantes' statue (single answer). Image Source: Own elaboration.

Fig. 3 – Results of the survey on preferred uses (multiple-answer). Image Source: Own elaboration.
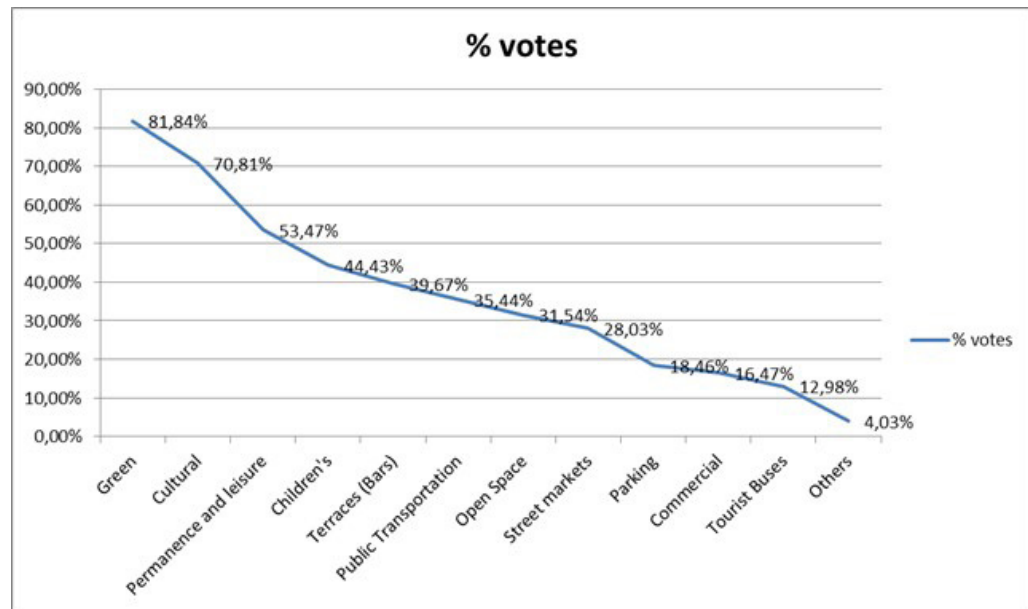
Fig. 3 – Proposals Vote And Selection.
1) Blue bars account for votes received by each proposal in the first citizens' vote.
2) The five shortlisted proposals by the jury for further development are highlighted with dotted rectangles.
3) The two proposals selected by the jury for the final citizens' vote are signalled by an arrow.
Image Source: Own elaboration.
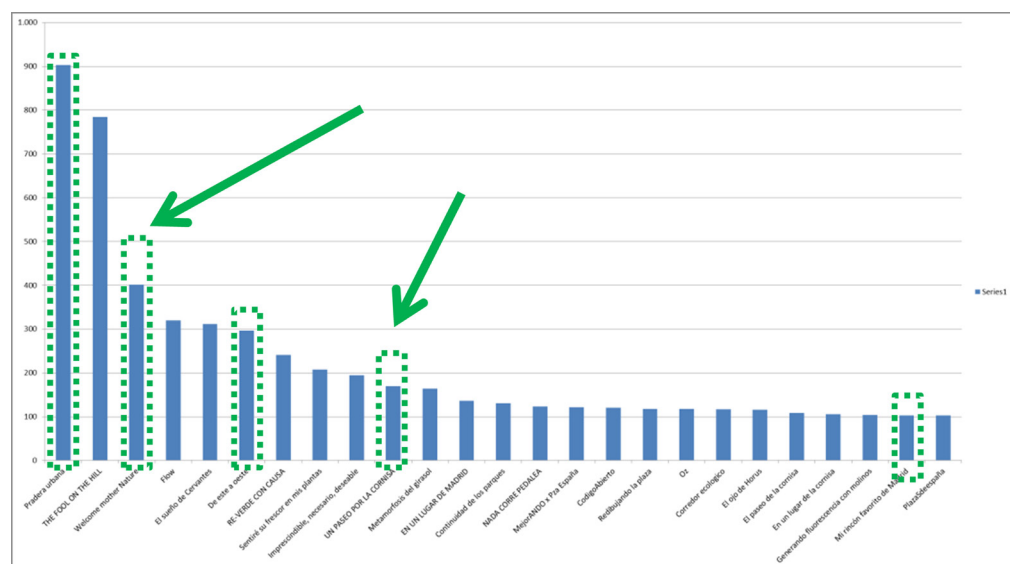
Subsequently, the jury evaluated the proposals and shortlisted five of them for further development. After further refinement, the jury selected two finalists. The winner was chosen by citizen vote: one proposal received 51.99% of the votes, and the other received 30.01%.

The reform was finished in 2021.

3.2 Proposal for eleven 'plazas' reform in Madrid city

In 2017 eleven citizen participation initiatives for the redesign of squares in Madrid were launched, incorporating citizens' preferences in several phases:

1. First, citizens and groups were consulted on the needs and problems of each square.

2. Then, the municipal technicians integrated the opinions into the terms and conditions of each architectural competition.

3. Subsequently, the municipal technicians selected two proposals per square, which were publicly exhibited, both physically and virtually on the web.

4. A vote was called, so that citizens could choose whether or not to reform each square, and, if so, which project they preferred.

However, the new local government elected in 2019 chose not to implement the chosen reforms.

3.3 Assessment of the initiatives

3.3.1 Plaza de España

The preliminary survey effectively captured citizens'preferences through an interesting mix of single and multiple-choice questions; its incorporation into the competition rules ensures that the final decision (i.e. the chosen project) is based in some way on citizens' preferences. Also, the open competition format promoted the incorporation of the best available knowledge and, through its public exhibition, was incorporated into the public debate.

However, the subsequent plurality rule voting, which is suboptimal when there are many eligible options, means this intermediate voting provided little information and could even be misleading. Moreover, the jury's selection of the finalists raised doubts about its transparency and possible bias, which could influence the final result.

Although citizens' preferences were incorporated into the competition basis, the chosen option may not be the most collectively preferred one, which could be any proposal previously discarded by the jury, including - albeit unlikely - the option of preserving the square without any reform.

3.3.2 11 Plazas

The plazas and the process had some relevant differences from that of the Plaza de España. Firstly, although these squares were mostly relevant at the neighbourhood level, it was overlooked to limit voters to nearby inhabitants, allowing non-users (i.e. people neither informed nor really interested in the reform) to vote. Secondly, limiting the voting options to two proposals preselected by the jury could have excluded citizens' preferred designs. Third, although the jury made a thorough assessment of each finalist proposal, it was not made public, hindering a more informed citizens' vote.

Moreover, the voting design means that, from the votes received, in six of the eleven squares it is not possible to say what the actual preference of citizens was. When comparing the three options pairwise, the losing option, or even not reforming the square, could have been preferred to the chosen option.

3.3.3 Recap

The two initiatives focused on integrating citizen participation to shape urban renewal projects through various procedures to aggregate citizen preferences. Initially, through surveys, which results were incorporated into the competition basis, and then by voting to make the final decision. However, some flaws were detected in the process.

First, more attention should have been paid to defining the group whose preferences should be taken into account, especially in the case of the eleven neighborhood squares. Subsequently, while the initial surveys made it possible to incorporate collective preferences into the competitions basis, the voting rules may not have reflected the actual preference of citizens. Additionally, not providing citizens with access to expert jury evaluations limits the informed nature of the vote/decision.

Finally, it seems ex-post evaluations by citizens have not been conducted.

4. Proposal for an enhanced procedure

Below a proposal for a democratic decision-making procedure adapted to the remodelling of urban spaces is outlined. The objective is to seek consensus gradually and effectively, accommodating diverse individual points of view, bringing the outcome as close as possible to citizens' preferences and incorporating the best available knowledge.

Preparatory step

Define the population whose preferences are relevant according to the nature of the initiative. It may be the residents of the surrounding area, all city inhabitants...

Step one

Ask relevant citizens to list and/or indicate on a map the general qualities they attribute to each part of the area. For example, citizens may point out that

• Next to a highway or busy street, there may be a noisy area;
• A sunny area may be perfect for the winter but be too hot in the summer
• An area may be too windy, ...

Neighbors often have more knowledge about the area than technicians, so it is a means of gathering the best available knowledge, on which the decision should be built.

Step two

A list of existing uses/elements in similar parks is compiled and neighbors are asked to indicate which ones they find interesting (and to what degree).... Citizens can also suggest uses/elements not included in the list. A survey is conducted incorporating most of the listed uses and complemented by municipal technicians.

Step three

A vote is taken on each of the proposed uses, activities and elements. Since the space admits several combinations, multiple-response questions can be used for each one: binary (each citizen indicates the uses he/she approves of) or on a graded scale (Excellent/Very Adequate/Adequate/Little Adequate/Unsatisfactory/Inadequate).

Step four

The neighbours are asked in which area of the space they prefer to locate the most demanded uses and elements.

Step five

The qualities of the space and the preferences of the citizens are incorporated into the basis of an open competition. Those that received the most support can become mandatory for the design teams. Others that received less support can be offered as suggestions.

Step six

Once the architectural proposals have been received, a proposal is selected by one of the following two procedures:

The first procedure would consist of submitting the proposals to a vote of the citizens. Before voting, the municipal technicians provide citizens with a reasoned assessment highlighting the strengths and flaws of each proposal. Citizens are allowed to express their preference using more appropriate voting rules (e.g. multiple voting -each citizen gives 1 point to as many options as are approved-; preferential voting -each option is arranged between the *most preferred and the least preferred*-; or majority judgment -each option is rated between excellent and very poor on a scale of 5 levels-).

The second procedure is to leave the final decision to the jury but to establish the "right of citizens to request a vote" in case of disagreement, that is:

1. The technicians evaluate each proposal, indicating which one provides the best quality (aesthetics; accessibility...) and best suits the preferences of the citizens.

2. An exhibition of all the proposals is organized, which includes their valuation by the technicians.

3. If the citizens do not request a vote, they implicitly approve the best-valued proposal by the technicians to be implemented. But citizens may request a vote, which must then be carried out using the above procedure.

Finally, an ex-post survey should always be conducted to know the citizens' satisfaction with both the process and the redesigned urban space.

5. Conclusion

The assertion that citizen participation initiatives always represent an advance towards democracy has been refuted in recent times by numerous authors. There are important contradictions between what has been affirmed and actual practice, example of which are the proposals for scales that include steps where the citizenry has no power in decision-making (e.g. Arnstein).

This contradiction must be understood within the broader political debate on the realization of the democracy principle. Therefore, a brief review of the concept of democracy has been made, exposing a definition consistent with its etymology that maximizes the sovereignty of citizens within the framework of representative institutions. Also, the impossibilities of always producing consistent decisions by voting have been described.

Taking into account the proposed conceptualisation and the voting impossibili-ties, two initiatives of citizens' participation for transforming urban spaces have been reviewed, highlighting both interesting aspects and flaws. Addressing these flaws requires tackling two key issues:

• First, a conceptualization of democracy that reconciles the representative principle with the sovereignty of citizens is crucial. For this reason, a definition has been put forward in which public decisions must conform to the preferences of citizens, which does not require that every decision is voted on by them, and incorporate the best available knowledge.
• Secondly, addressing the mathematical complexities of voting processes requires implementing procedures and rules that are easily understood by citizens and have shown empirical consistency.

In light of these considerations, a procedural framework is proposed for such initiatives. The goal is to progressively build collective decisions, recognizing that the quality and stability of decisions often necessitate a process. This framework is not rigid, but a guideline for participatory processes so they align more closely with the democratic ideal. Key points emphasized are:

• Decisions should build on the best available knowledge, with expert evaluations made accessible to citizens before any vote.
• Democratic decisions may not always require explicit citizen votes; efficiency permits expert technicians to decide, provided citizen preferences are considered and citizens are informed of options and reasons behind decisions, with means to express disagreement and call for a citizen vote if deemed necessary[7].

Furthermore, the analysis of these initiatives highlights the lack of feedback from participating citizens. How do they perceive the outcomes? Did the initiatives meet their objectives? What areas could be improved? Regular evaluation from participants' point

of view is essential to assess the actual impact of participatory processes and drive improvements.

Lastly, the selection of citizen participation initiatives by public authorities already implies a decision on what citizens can and cannot decide (i.e., agenda setting). Approaching democracy requires not only refining participation procedures but also empowering citizens to determine the projects they wish to have a say in[8].

Endnotes

1 For example, the debate about how to establish 'the conditions that make possible the political participation of all citizens, on the one hand, and the set of governmental institutions capable of regulating the forces that actually shape everyday life, on the other' (Held, 1990; 339).

2 However, it has been criticised that the incorporation of expert knowledge could have been improved (De Romilly, 1975).

3 In the Middle Ages this idea was incorporated in the saying "quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus aprobari debet" (what affects all must be approved by all).

4 A characterization of both extreme positions is provided by Mill [1861]

5 Tocqueville's chronicle (1834) of his journey through the USA confirms numerous similar approaches to the above; finding in New York State 104 towns governed this way. In 1793, in the context of the French Revolution, the Girondin and Jacobin constitutions incorporated similar mechanisms.

6 We find an equivalent reflection in De Romilly (1975:181) "it is up to the intelligence to give the safest advice and to the majority to decide, after having been informed".

7 The possibility of vetoing agreements (Arnstein's level 7 ladder) and resolving them by subsequent voting (Arnstein's level 8 lad-der), is a design that grants the greatest negotiating and decision-making power to citizens (Arnstein, 1969).

8 Held (1990; 333): "If ultimate control of the political agenda escapes the hands of the citizens, government by the people will exist largely in name only"

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