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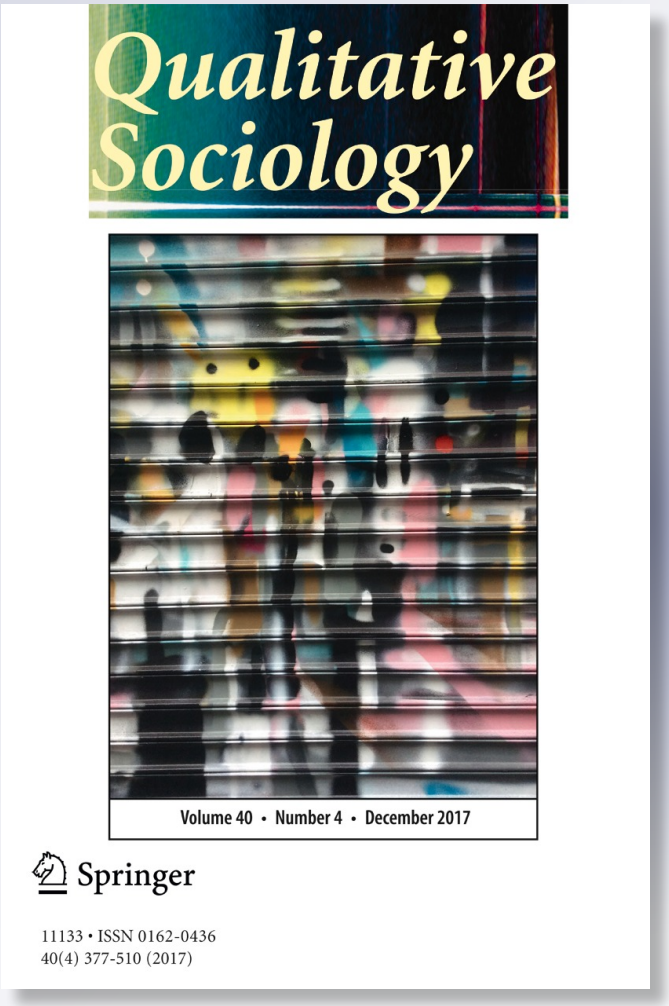
Qualitative Sociology

ISSN 0162-0436
Volume 40
Number 4

Qual Sociol (2017) 40:425-446
DOI 10.1007/s11133-017-9367-6



Springer

Qual Sociol (2017) 40:425–446
DOI 10.1007/s11133-017-9367-6

Participatory Skepticism: Ambivalence and Conflict in Popular Discourses of Participatory Democracy

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Published online: 3 October 2017

Abstract In recent years researches have focused on the preferences of ordinary citizens towards democratic deepening, asking: Do people want more institutional participation? The present work analyzes how different classes of people envisage a participatory democracy and its problems. Supported by qualitative research based on 16 focus groups conducted in Spain between 2011 and 2013, it is shown that skepticism plays a central role in the views of participatory democracy. Doubts surrounding its viability, negative expectations on the responsiveness of governments and, overall, distrust of the capacities of ordinary citizens, contribute to skepticism. In some groups these beliefs lead to a rejection of participatory reforms. In other groups, participants harbor hopes and positive prospects. For them, the key point is faith in education as a shortcut to political equality.

Keywords Institutional participation · Engagement · Public opinion · Skepticism · Political distrust · Civil skills

In a focus group formed by low-wage workers conducted in Madrid, participants were asked if citizens should have a more central role in political decision-making. Ginés, a social worker with sporadic jobs, made a suggestion:

> Participatory democracy. It's a type of democracy; it's been written about. I'm not making this up (…) because what we have now is a very basic democracy and it doesn't cover what is needed; we don't have the kind of representation that makes us really feel represented. And above all, to be really able to contribute, right?

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The rest of participants evaluated Ginés' proposal, building on their own ideas of democracy and the current situation of the country.

Political disaffection is fostering the imagination of people. Protesters, NGOs and even institutions such as the World Bank are all offering different ways to engage people in political decision-making. The popularity of participatory reforms has recently been set out in the research agenda.

The problem, as argued by Carole Pateman (2012, 15) "is no longer whether participatory democracy is feasible; the empirical evidence, both from 40 years ago and today, shows that making substantive steps towards creating a participatory democracy is quite possible. The question is whether, in the rich countries, there is any longer either the political culture or the political will to pursue genuine democratization." Pateman is not the only one who has wondered if citizens want deeper democracy in western countries. Among many scholars, the expectations related to this idea are becoming more modest, taking into account the actual transformations these institutions have produced (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017; Font et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2015; Polletta 2013; Talpin 2012).

In the US, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) conducted groundbreaking research on preferences towards participatory democracy. They showed the extent to which Americans lacked confidence about the benefits of participation. Since then, empirical research on public opinion towards participatory democracy has been carried out in Europe (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Font et al. 2015; Webb 2013). These surveys unveil respondents' doubts and low expectations, respondents anticipating negative consequences if participatory processes were implemented. In this article, we use the concept of participatory skepticism to reflect on this set of discourses of doubt and low expectations regarding participatory democracy.

Usually authors have interpreted skepticism as a realistic rejection of participatory institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 105). But skepticism has to do with doubts, the consciousness of limits, the problems and negative expectations that participatory institutions stir in people. Rather than opposition to it, participatory skepticism is a key concept for understanding the conditions under which participation is desired (or not). This problem will be expounded on in the sections that follow. First, we will review the literature on participatory preferences. Second, we will describe the research carried out with 16 focus groups in Spain. Third, the main findings will be reported, with particular emphasis on the groups' contexts. And finally, we will discuss how discourses of skepticism can lead to the rejection of participatory avenues or, on the contrary, to support, if some specific conditions are met.

Public Opinion on Participatory Democracy

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's Stealth Democracy (2002) is a seminal work on citizens' preferences towards participatory democracy. These authors surveyed the opinions of US people towards different types of political processes. They showed that they were moderate in this respect, preferring institutions that were neither fully dominated by representatives, nor by lay citizens (46). The authors interpreted the survey results with focus groups and argued, "The people have no desire for direct democracy, but if the options are for decisions to be made by elected officials or by people, they are eager to give more power to the people" (105). They argue that citizens would reject the accumulation of power in the hands of politicians or interest groups. Thus, they would prefer more participation as a counterbalance to dominant political actors. However, when people are asked directly, most of them are less confident

about the benefits of direct democracy; actually, they are worried about the political skills of citizens. According to this study, people like participatory institutions as a sort of "check and balance" device. This idea was challenged by Neblo et al. (2010), who show that different survey questions produced slightly different results. In their study, US citizens appear much more favorable to deliberative settings. Most people would like to see more institutions that incorporate the citizens' voice.

Similar studies have been developed in Europe, in which the same contradictions were detected. For example, in Finland, Bengtsson and Mattila (2009, 1044) show that the desire for more participatory channels (voiced by 44% of survey respondents) was associated with lower levels of education, the female gender, and left-wing ideology and was linked to lower levels of political efficacy, limited political knowledge, and less satisfaction with democracy. There were interesting dilemmas in the results: Sometimes, those who like more participatory processes also give a high value to hierarchical modes of decision-making (pure representation). This was also noted in the research carried out in the UK (Webb 2013) and Spain (Font et al. 2015). Based on the findings of these studies, we already know that favorable opinions of different forms of decision-making are not necessarily exclusive. That is, people may support citizen participation while understanding the necessity of strong representative institutions or even expert-based governance. The relationship between different models of decision-making is a qualitative aspect that is difficult to capture in surveys. Actually, Bengtsson (2012, 46) suggests that opinions on alternative decision-making processes and political change can be too complex to be wholly encapsulated in standardized questions.

A similar survey conducted in Spain showed that citizens indicated a moderate position regarding political processes (Font et al. 2014),[1] the trend being slightly participatory-oriented. Regarding group profiles, young people (18–34 years old), citizens living in medium size cities (50,000–100,000) and those with lower incomes preferred more participatory institutions (Font et al. 2014, 20). Also, leftists (*Izquierda Unida*, or United Left voters) and abstentionists were more in favor of participatory democracy. Indeed, this survey showed that participatory preferences cohabit with high doses of skepticism.[2] These attitudes emerge when citizens are asked about their expectations. For example, when respondents react to the question of having enough time to engage in participatory institutions, 62.3% are in disagreement. People also question whether or not citizens are adequately informed (73% disagreed on this issue) or if they are sufficiently interested to engage (64.9% disagreed on this issue). Further, respondents scored highly the statement "politicians would not pay attention," questioning potential responsiveness of political authorities in regards to participation. Feelings and expressions of skepticism seem to open up a wide range of questions when people evaluate participatory democracy. How can we interpret skepticism? Does it mean—as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 105) suggest—that, in the end, people do not want participation?

According to formal definitions, "skepticism" is the lack of trust or the manifestation of doubts towards the veracity or the efficacy of an idea.[3] Skepticism, then, does not necessarily mean refusal; rather, it implies doubts of and objections to validity or potential success. Regarding participatory democracy, we know from

[1] The average of all respondents was 4.5 on a process scale from 1 to 10, 1 being participatory processes, 10 representative ones.

[2] Survey: *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, study n. 2.860, January/February 2011. http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/Archivos/Marginales/2860_2879/2860/Es2860.pdf]

[3] According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, a skeptic is "a person who doubts the truth or the value of an idea or belief." http://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles-espanol/scepticism].

previous research that many citizens support the idea; but it is different when they think about specific institutional arrangements (Font et al. 2015, 159). Citizens seem to change their mind when they consider feasibility. Therefore, the concept of participatory skepticism, defined as the set of discourses of doubt and low expectations towards participatory democracy, can unveil the way people understand participation and the conditions they place on it. Participatory skepticism can be critical to understanding people's fuzzy (and sometimes contradictory) positions towards this type of innovative institutions.

Several factors may sustain the low expectations that lead to participatory skepticism. First, political distrust, defined as dissatisfaction towards politicians and the performance of political parties (Río et al. 2016; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), may foster the desire for more participatory processes because people have critical views of political elites. They may prefer alternative decision-making procedures in which citizens have a central role (Navarro 2012, 96). However, if we think about horizontal distrust, in particular the concern about the citizens' skills, we can see that those who have less trust in citizens—in terms of their morals, civic qualities, information and education—are less supportive of participatory democracy (Navarro 2012).

Second, another source of skepticism would be the perception of (deficient) political efficacy. Political efficacy is the set feelings related to internal capacities and external possibilities to influence public policies (see also the concept of "agency" in Gamson 1992). Internal efficacy is normally understood as "the individual's perception of his or her own competence as a political actor" (Pollock 1983, 403). External efficacy "refers to whether or not the individual perceives the political system as potentially responsive to popular demands" (Pollock 1983). There may be crucial subjective factors feeding participatory skepticism. For example, using ethnographic research from Guatemala, Mayén (2003) reports that ordinary women refused local engagement in their communities. The women's perception that they lacked skills (low self-esteem, fear of religious and economic sanctions) and their feelings of being disregarded ("they won't listen to us") affected their attitudes towards engagement. These women were not against local participation institutions; but they were skeptical about their real capacities to influence them.

Finally, participatory skepticism can also be enhanced by personal experience (Font and Navarro 2013). If a person has already had a previous negative participatory experience, it is possible that he or she may not develop positive prospects for the future of these institutions. Font and Navarro (2013, 12) show that those citizens who were more active in participatory processes tended to be more critical. They could be influenced by bad personal experiences, but they could still be committed to participatory institutions in abstract terms (Levine and Nierras 2007).

The concept of participatory skepticism has been absent in previous literature, though it seems to describe an extended set of feelings regarding participatory politics. This notion may allow us to go beyond the "war of discourses" (Battani et al. 1997) in regards to the issue of participation: the reduction of the debate to for/against positions. It opens the door to listen carefully to the political discourses of ordinary people, even when they are fuzzy, doubtful or contradictory. In the following section, we will show the methodological strategy we used to capture the meanings of participatory democracy and the positions of ordinary people regarding to it.

Methods & Data: Focus Groups in the Spanish Context

The cycle of protests around the *Indignados* movement (2011–2012)[4] (Castañeda 2012, 2014; García-Espín 2012; Nez 2012), which made demands for democratic deepening, radically altered the debate on institutional reform and popular participation in Spain.[5] Participatory democracy was one of the central claims in the initial manifesto of protesters.[6] Most Spanish people, according to opinion polls, supported the movement in 2011 (Sampedro and Lobera 2015). Opposed to political elites, engaged activists started to think of alternative ways to imagine politics and public decision-making.

Participatory democracy has become a central issue in political debate in the country during recent years. The right to political participation was included in the 1978 Constitution (Article 23) and was developed, during the 1980's at the local level. Most municipalities passed participation regulations and opened up different participatory channels to the public. Currently, a diversity of forms of institutional engagement has been widely tested at the local level (Font et al. 2015). Actually, we can say that two waves of participatory reform have taken place. First, in the 80s, there was a proliferation of advisory councils at all levels (Font 2001; Navarro 1999), which accommodated the abundance of civic associations and NGO's emerging after Francoism (Funes 1995).[7] Later, in the 2000s, new participatory innovations spread, which included one of the major developments of participatory budgeting in Europe (Ganuza and Frances 2012). From 2007 onwards, with the ensuing economic crisis, a new debate arose around the role of participatory institutions in the context of budgetary cuts and austerity policies (Blanco 2013).

Spanish participatory institutions have already been studied from different approaches (Bherer et al. 2016; Font et al. 2015). But, as previously highlighted, there is less information on public support of these institutions. In our study on democratic preferences, the use of focus groups was crucial in order to extend and interpret survey data, but also in order to analyze people's discourses in their complexity. Most research is based on survey data; focus groups represent a novelty in this area of study.Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 121) used focus groups to interpret their survey results, but as a subsidiary tool. As Dryzek (2011, 240) points out, "The snatches reported in the book actually admit interpretations different from those Hibbing and Theiss-Morse choose." The authors did not perform a complete study of discourses, contextual meanings, and potential interpretations. In the present study, in contrast, focus groups were established to generate solid and concentrated qualitative information on the topic of participatory democracy, and discourses are analyzed and interpreted within groups' contexts.

Beyond surveys, complex opinions can be captured well by qualitative data. In this sense, the strategy of focus groups is an appropriate tool for research on public opinion (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994, 8) and has several advantages. First, focus groups allow for the study of a

[4] This is a social movement that emerged between 2011 and 2012 in Spain. Participants were demonstrating and organizing against corruption, austerity measures, and impoverishment due to the economic crisis. Indignados clamored for democratic deepening under the slogan: "We are not puppets in the hands of politicians and bankers."

[5] Moments of crisis are quite productive to study collective representations on political change since "people are more willing to talk, images and expressions are livelier… Individuals are motivated by their desire to understand an increasingly unfamiliar and perturbed world" (Moscovici 2000, 64).

[6] The manifesto can be read here: http://www.democraciarealya.es/documento-transversal/

[7] During the last years of the Francoist dictatorship (1939–1978) and onwards, there was a flourishing of neighborhood associations, trade unions, women's organizations, environmentalist groups, and NGOs.

variety of social profiles, while producing focused in-depth data on a given topic (Morgan 1996). Secondly, in contrast to individual interviews, participants in focus groups contrast their individual views with others' perspectives in a semi-structured setting. Subjects defend their positions, exchange different types of arguments, and establish a dialogue with other discourses. Thus, focus groups offer the opportunity to analyze closely how people collectively construct their discursive positions, marking their agreements and disagreements (Kitzinger 1994). Third, although they are far from spontaneous meetings, participants give meaning to the phenomenon using their own language, vocabularies and circumstances as the departure point (Bryman 2001). Participants bring the argumentative tool-kits acquired within their social environments, and they make allusions to them in conversations (Callejo 2001). It is not that all members in each group think the same. Rather, they demonstrate implicit agreements about concepts and they make collective assumptions, which then form fluid conversations. Consensuses, shared vocabularies, collective assumptions, and discrepancies, form the dynamics of conversation that we analyze in focus groups (Barbour 2013; Kitzinger 1994; Martín Criado 1997).

The sample of focus groups was based on the idea that different socio-political positions would produce different discourses on political processes, displaying also different views of participatory democracy. As Table 1 shows, the sample for the focus groups included a variety of socio-political profiles. It is a "structural sample," which seeks to represent central discourses on the topic (Montañés 2013). First, we knew that political and participatory background influences views of participatory processes (Font and Navarro 2013; Mayén 2003). Thus, we included groups with markedly different political experiences in the sample: groups of activists (highly politicized militants, members and supporters of socio-political groups), and groups of non-activists (minimally politicized, no members or supporters of socio-political groups). Second, a variety of social positions, in the form of socio-economic status (age, education and social class) complemented the previous frame of focus groups. The socio-economic status, especially age, was significant for participatory preferences in previous surveys (Font et al. 2014).

Politically active groups were overrepresented in our sample (in comparison to the Spanish population). However, this allowed us to better characterize politicized discourses. As politically active citizens are highly informed, they are also active representatives of new ideas, like participatory democracy. Their discussions were compared with those of less active citizens. In the end, the strongest point of our selection strategy was the number and the variability of social positions covered by the 16 groups, given that focus groups samples are usually selected according to binary categories or a specific population (Gamson 1992; Vázquez 2011).

Like structural samples, groups were internally homogeneous to facilitate the conversation and also to favor the emergence of emblematic discourses of these social positions. As can be seen in Table 1, two similar rounds of groups were organized between 2011 and 2012,[8] the latter being a control strategy for the stability and consistency of the discourses over time. The two rounds provided a further basis for the patterns and findings and was a control measure for internal validity.[9]

Participants were contacted with the support of a research cooperative, and the personal and professional contacts of the researchers. Non-active groups were

[8] The two 2013 groups complemented the fieldwork for operative reasons.

[9] In most cases, each pair of groups was internally comparable. Only one pair showed strong contrasts: middle-class professionals.

Table 1 Final sample of focus-groups

FG1. VT students
Seville, 2011
Vocational training students
IT professional qualification
No political affiliation or activism
6 (4 men and 2 women)
18–20 years old

FG2. VT students
Seville, 2012
Vocational training students
IT professional qualification
No political affiliation or activism
7 (4 men and 3 women)
18–25 years old

FG3. Social movement activists
Barcelona, 2012
Social movement activists: radical community movement, co-parenting group, cooperatives, feminism, and left-wing parties
Low-wage workers
All levels of education
6 (mixed)
20–50 years old

FG4. Retired working-class men
Conil de la Frontera, 2011
Retired working-class men: agriculture, fisheries and local services
No political affiliation or activism
Basic education
6 (initially) to10 (at the end)
Over 65

FG5. Retired working-class women
Seville, January 2013
Retired working class women: housewives, cleaners, factory workers, a low-wage public officer
No political activism
Basic education
6 women
Around 65 years old

FG6. Middle-class professionals
Zaragoza, 2011
Business-men, liberal professions such as a lawyer, university professor, architect and economist
No political activism
University education
6 (mixed)
30–55 years old

FG7. Middle-class professionals
Zaragoza, 2012
Business-men, liberal professions such as a lawyer, university professor and architect
No political activism
University education
6 (mixed)
35–50 years old

FG8. Right-wing supporters
Elda (Alicante), 2011
Militants and supporters of the right- wing or conservative party (*Partido Popular*)
Liberal professions (nursing, doctor, lawyer, public officer)
University education
8 (5 men and 3 women)
25–40 years old

FG9. Right-wing supporters
Alicante, 2012
Militants and supporters of the right- wing or conservative party (*PP*)
Liberal professions (business-man, lawyer, public officer)
University education
6 (mixed)
30–60 years old

FG10. Left-wing supporters
Getafe, 2011
Militants and supporters of leftists parties (*Socialist Party- PSOE* and *United Left- IU*)
White-collar workers and liberal professions
Further and university education
7 (3 women and 4 men)
30–55 years old

FG11. Left-wing supporters
Getafe, 2012
Militants and supporters of left-wing parties (*Socialist Party- PSOE* or *United Left- IU*)
White-collar workers and liberal professions
Further and university education
6 (mixed)
30–40 years old

FG12. University students
Madrid, 2011
University students: psychology degree and other social sciences (pedagogy)
No political activism
6 (mixed)
20–25 years old

FG13. University students
Madrid, 2012
University students: philosophy and economy degrees
No political activism
6 (mixed)
20–25 years old

FG14. Social activists
Córdoba, 2011
Social activists in neighborhood associations and parents' associations
Liberal professions and white-collar workers
Further and university education
6 (mixed)
30–70 years old

Table 1 (continued)

FG15. Social activists	**GD16. Precarious workers**
Córdoba, 2012	Madrid, March 2013
Social activists in neighborhood associations, parents' associations	Low wage workers: catering, construction and electrician, social services, and unemployment previous autonomous worker in retail)
Liberal professions and white-collar workers	No political activism
Further and university education	Basic education
7 (3 women and 4 men)	4 (mixed)
30–60 years old	30–40 years old

incentivized with a small participation bonus (participants were paid 20€ each). Cities were chosen to facilitate the formation of target groups in that specific region. For example, right-wing groups were organized in Alicante, a city where *Partido Popular* (the national right-wing party) used to have an electoral majority. Sessions were held in hotels, a tennis club, a senior citizens' community center, a research center, university rooms, etc. The groups did not have direct moderation, though they were conducted with a script similar to that used by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), which included questions about the political system and process preferences (see the Annex for the questions on participatory processes). The debates lasted an average of an hour and a half, and they were recorded and transcribed by a research cooperative.

Transcripts from the focus groups were coded, assisted by the software ATLAS.ti. A first thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) was developed, identifying the main topics. Later, the extracts that dealt with the topic of participatory democracy were further analyzed in depth, in the context of the groups' broader conversations. Finally, group dossiers were written up and sociological discourse analysis carried out (Ruiz 2009), interpreting the discourses of participants and their dynamics in relation to the groups' social positions. The findings will be presented dealing firstly with activists' discourses. Later, we will present the non-activists' discourses. In both cases, we will show how participants define the problems of participatory reforms, and if they are inclined (or not) towards skepticism.

Active Citizens Talking about the Limits of Participatory Democracy

Focus groups with social activists, left-wing and right-wing supporters, reflect *vanguard discourses*. These participants develop elaborate long conversations on participatory democracy, mirroring recent institutional agendas and academic debates. In these groups, two different discourses on the problems of participatory democracy are outlined.

Overcoming Skepticism through Pedagogy: Social Activists and Leftists

Participants in the focus groups of social activists (FG3, FG14, and FG15) and left-wing party supporters (FG10, FG11) are in the vanguard in participatory matters. They are engaged in left-wing parties, labor unions, neighborhood associations, parents' groups, feminist circles, cooperatives and, also, participatory institutions. These members conceive participatory democracy as something familiar and close to their lives. They imagine the "participatory society" that Pateman (1976) described. Democracy should be a complex setting of deliberative institutions, which should be located in the local state and civil society, and account for a

variety of institutions, from advisory councils, to participatory budgeting, associations and civic groups. However, these active participants engage in long discussions about the problems associated with the development of a participatory society.

Members of these groups discuss the limits of institutional participation from a two-fold perspective. They build critiques of the roles of state authorities and bureaucracy (institutional distrust) and they also sharply criticize citizens and their civic flaws. This double discourse can be exemplified by Pedro,[10] a schoolteacher and education activist who attended one of the groups in Córdoba (FG14). He explained this twofold critique eloquently:

> My experience is that we, the associations [*colectivos*] have a lot of communication channels [with institutions] at our disposal. We have participatory regulations which are quite good. The problem is that it should go *back and forth in both directions*, from citizens to them [politicians] and vice versa.

According to Pedro, a two-directional impulse is required so that participatory democracy works; but Pedro and other participants question authorities and citizens' compromise with that idea.[11] The problems of participatory democracy are located both in the authorities' performance and in citizens' attitudes.

Indeed, for social activists and leftists, public authorities do not perform their role as facilitators of participatory democracy correctly. Members of these groups show considerable institutional distrust. They base their critiques on their personal experience of engaging in local institutions, such as participatory budgeting or advisory councils, and they also include their experience of national referendums.[12] For example, in a group of neighborhood and school activists in Córdoba (FG15), participants discussed how participatory institutions work poorly in their city, though these institutions were a benchmark in participatory innovation in Europe (Sintomer et al. 2008). For participants, practices such as party instrumentation,[13] excessive technical authority over the processes,[14] the imposition of methods that "individualize" participation (individual voting, for example),[15] and the lack of implementation of proposals[16] are sufficient proof of the deficient behavior of public authorities. Participants have a precise knowledge of the local participatory institutions; but they make critical evaluations based on their personal experience (Font and Navarro 2013) of the performance of public authorities.

The most discussed problem for social activists and leftists is the state of citizenship and people's lack of civic competence. For them, participatory democracy is not only the burden of local authorities; they are concerned about the competence of ordinary people, represented by "neighbors." They are depicted as passive, apathetic, lacking political culture and civic skills, lacking solidarity bonds, and absorbed in egoistic selfishness, sometimes attributed to growing individualism and a capitalist economy. Participants express nostalgia about a past time (the *Spanish Transition* in the 1970's) in which civic engagement, solidarity and political

[10] For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality pseudonyms are used for all participants.
[11] Similarly, in another group of left-wing supporters, participants point to a vicious circle in which citizens would be apathetic, and politicians would perform poorly, increasing apathy.
[12] On the very few occasions in which it has taken place in Spain see Font Gómez and 2014.
[13] According to a participant, "It was too politicized."
[14] According to other participants in the same piece of conversation: "Participatory budgets did not satisfy anyone…We fought even against the basis of the process because it was not participatory at all, I've been personally at the table where proposals were selected on technical grounds. That was a harsh competition among social groups."
[15] For another participant, "Sometimes the machinery of participatory democracy atomizes…"
[16] A participant argues: "Most of the time they [politicians] do not implement what they have promised"

awareness was prevailing for them. They compare that memory with the current civic mood and the result is feelings of pessimism. This concern is illustrated by the following extract of a conversation between two left-party supporters (FG10):

> **Carmen:** To revert the individualism and selfishness in which children are educated today… an enormous effort is necessary.

> **Manuela:** It's education. We have to reverse that trend starting with the education of kids, the vocation of service, cooperation, and the value of mutual help…Not only thinking *about my small territory*. We have experienced that problem in participatory budgeting, in the neighborhoods; people only vote for their own proposals, *my street's proposals*. We must turn to the perspective of the community.

For these active women, who are supporters of left-wing parties, there is a crisis of civic values which undermines social engagement, solidarity bonds and community organization. Participatory reforms, from this perspective, can hardly flourish amidst such civic disaster. "Civic disaster" is the social activists and leftists' way of thinking about ordinary people, which can be interpreted as a form of horizontal distrust.

Furthermore, horizontal distrust is also related to the lack of knowledge attributed to most people. Social activists and leftists believe that citizens are, in general, ignorant and misinformed. In FG14, for example, two social activists who were members of school parents' groups and neighborhood associations, discussed this problem:

> **Manuel:** Here, there is no trust in people. It has been said that [education] *degrees* are required [to engage in political decision-making]. In my opinion, any human being, even the craziest, knows about his world. At any level, there are many citizens who know useful things that can contribute. Maybe they did not go to university, but…

> **José:** I believe that everyone is competent. But you must be well informed.

However, in this case, horizontal distrust towards citizens' political skills is challenged because participants believe whole-heartedly in the prospects of civic education. Participants follow the "school of democracy" hypothesis (Pateman 1976; Talpin 2012). In order to improve the distribution of civic virtues, they see that engagement itself can be a pedagogic tool. For example, in the group of social movement activists (FG3), Lorena, a woman who is engaged in feminist circles, defends the use of referendums to make people more informed about political debates: "It is a way for people to find out what goes on around them and take responsibility for it." Even a referendum, which is not an intensive participatory tool, is seen as a way to transform people, pushing them to be more competent.

For the members of these groups, participatory democracy is an appealing reform that carries many burdens. They are concerned with the performance of institutional actors and they also have doubts about the civic competence of their neighbors. However, they are more optimistic when they come to talk about pedagogy and the potential improvement of civic competence. Initial skepticism is transformed into hope, via the curative power of pedagogy and civic practice.

Skepticism and Rejection: Right-Wing Supporters

In contrast, participants in groups of right-wing supporters (FG8, FG9) represent participatory democracy as a negative reform. Font et al. (2012) show a similar pattern in their survey research. Right-wing supporters put forward a long list of arguments about why one must be skeptical and later reject this type of institutional reform.

First, when they were asked about participatory democracy, they perceive it as a source of institutional uncertainty and political unrest. For example, two members of the FG8, who were affiliated with the conservative *Partido Popular,* did not even take the proposal seriously:

Julián: What is normal and viable is representation.

Borja: It is very difficult for forty-six million people to have a say.

Esperanza: Many people think that the body of citizens is *a lady with a hat* [*ironically, she evokes simplistic views of the political subject*].

They do not visualize clearly new participatory channels for preference aggregation. They make fun of this type of proposal as if it was simplistic ("a lady with a hat"). Participatory governance is, in essence, a naïve proposal for them. They prefer current, already consolidated, representative channels.

Second, right-wing participants are worried about public austerity. From this perspective, participatory governance could contribute to increased public spending, more interventionism in social life, and slow-working bureaucracy. These problems go against their free market and "minimal state" approach. For example, Daniel (FG9), a *Partido Popular* affiliate, suggested that the implementation of frequent referendums could be too costly in terms of resources: "It could be a little bit crazy if every time you had to vote on something, you have to...go about mobilizing everyone, with all the tasks that voting entails, mobilizing people to polls, presenting the ideas in favor, against."

Third, participants dislike participatory democracy because they distrust the civic skills and the political knowledge of their co-citizens (horizontal distrust). For example, in the FG9 of *Partido Popular* supporters, all members assumed that most citizens were politically incompetent. They are categorical:

Moderator: So, do you think that Spaniards are skilled enough to make good decisions?

Pilar: No.

Daniel: No.

Mirella: No, unanimously.

Daniel: We're talking about something like in Switzerland, right?

Juan: *Cantons*? [a typical Swiss town-meetings]

Daniel: Yes, *cantons* [sic] are lay citizens who make the political decisions, so what happens there? They never make any decisions... [heavy laughter].

Rightists imagine the idea of Spanish ordinary citizens engaging in frequent referenda or popular assemblies (as they do in Switzerland) and it evokes political blockades and never-ending decision-making. They find the proposal derisory. As Mirella explains further, the lack of civic skills among Spanish citizens would make the idea objectionable, "Collaboration and team-work attitudes have not yet developed here." Right-wing participants draw a picture of "civic underdevelopment" consisting in a comparative lack of civic skills, as characteristic of the Spanish people. This is their version of horizontal distrust.

Also, they perceive that most citizens tend to be ignorant, intensifying their perception of civic underdevelopment. The following extract recorded in a right-wing group (FG8) in 2011, shows a discussion on the topic:

Julián: Everyone is educated today. That is sufficient capacity to make decisions. However, in Spain the rate of school droput is so big…I think that most young people have no idea about politics, and they do not want to learn. How can they make any decisions?

Rodolfo: Why do we demand good [educational] qualifications from our politicians when we do not require the same of citizens?

In the end, right-wing participants are deeply skeptical about participatory democracy. They put forward typical identitary reasons (austerity and bureaucracy), and a deep horizontal distrust (lack of civic skills and political knowledge of most lay citizens). In contrast to social activists and leftists, right-wing members do not discuss a potential civic transformation through education and engagement. This makes their skepticism entrenched, driving them to open rejection of participatory reforms.

Inactive Citizens Talking about the Limits of Participatory Democracy

While left-wing activists and right-wingers occupy contrasting positions, the focus groups with non-active citizens are in a grey area. They display a variety of discourses related to the problems of participatory democracy: (1) the perception of lacking internal efficacy, (2) the perception of no influence, or external inefficacy, and (3) horizontal distrust of fellow citizens. These discourses are mixed in the groups, producing different skeptical views.

Internal and External Inefficacy: Retired Working-Class Participants

In the two groups of retired working-class citizens (FG4, FG5), participants are sympathetic towards the idea of participatory democracy. However, this positive reaction goes hand in hand with a deep skepticism. As Walsh (2004) shows in her study of

conservative groups (the *Old Timers*), collective identities work like lenses through which we see political situations. In this case, retired working-class men and women feel displaced and excluded from politics. They analyze politics from that identity of subjective exclusion. So when they talk about participatory reforms, they also use that frame, and they question if participatory institutions would include them.

Therefore, participants in these groups raise doubts whether they would have a say or any influence, even if participatory institutions were implemented. For example, in the group of retired working-class men (FG4), they see that participatory governance is a good idea, but that it would not succeed: Their voice would be disregarded in the end. Eustaquio, one of the participants, suggests talking about a case of participatory budgeting in a nearby town in Andalusia; but his fellows question whether politicians would pay attention to the citizens' voice:

Pepe: But the system does not allow it. For, f*** sake! The system only allows you to vote every four years. And then you keep your mouth shut.

Mariano: They don't trust your vote.

Felipe: They don't care about you, right? They are not interested at all.

They assume that politicians ("they") are not interested in these institutions and would not listen to their proposals. The participants lack a sense of potential influence or external efficacy.

Retired working-class men and women also feel disempowered in terms of civic skills (internal inefficacy), especially the group of women. Participants question the political competence of other citizens, but they also question their own capacities. As Felipe says in the conversation of his group (FG4)[17]: "People are more scoundrels now than ever." He thinks that people are not morally competent anymore. For him and his fellow participants, young citizens are irresponsible, immoral and egoistic. They are viewed as not having a sense of public commitment, so they should not engage in participatory decision-making. Retired working-class women, who are around 65 years old, also perceive that most of citizens do not have sufficient civic skills; but they include themselves in the body of incompetents. As the following extract shows, they perceive such a great deficiency of capacity, that participatory institutions seem unrealistic to them:

Pepi: We're not even prepared to get along among ourselves.

Mari Carmen: So, someone else must be responsible for it.

Dolores: There should be other people who are well-prepared and who take care of it.

These women exclude themselves from participatory decision-making because they feel incompetent.

[17] At the beginning of the group, Miguel, another participant says that he is not even competent to answer our questions about politics.

Therefore, among retired working-class people, participatory reforms are seen as a good idea in normative terms; however, they distrust the public and their own civic capacities. Horizontal distrust, their perception of lacking internal efficacy and external influence contributes to their participatory skepticism.

External Inefficacy: Precarious Workers

The group of precarious workers was formed by working-class citizens, including an unemployed woman (previously working in retail), a man employed in a series of unstable jobs in social services, a woman working in a restaurant, and an electrician. They discuss the worst consequences of the current economic crisis. Their conversations deal with their personal situations of deprivation, unemployment and job insecurity. They develop enraged discourses against politicians, who are seen as responsible for the precarious situation they are going through. They feel politically "beaten," and they discuss participatory reforms from that critical frame.

For these working-class participants, more institutional participation sounds good; but they are concerned because of their lack of influence (external inefficacy). For example, Ginés, a participant who is temporarily employed in social services, expresses sympathy towards the *Indignados* social movement.[18] Reflecting on potential changes in the political situation, he proposes the idea of a participatory democracy, which is accepted uncritically by the rest of the members. Raquel, an unemployed retail worker, replies, "Yes, I agree that people should be asked. [Politicians] should ask people in the unemployment benefit queue about their needs." The other members agree with participatory democracy; but they call for parallel reforms to render these institutions credible:

> **Ginés:** For example, we can do it through the Internet…For real citizen participation to happen, where we can all have a vote and a say…political parties will be forced to accomplish what the citizens want.

> **Pepe:** I'd put them in jail if they violate their promises.

These participants depart from the perception that they do not have influence in politics (external inefficacy) and politicians are not perceived as responsive. Skepticism comes from their perception of disempowerment and nil influence on politics. They feel so disregarded that any participatory reform—to be credible—would need to include clear guarantees of responsiveness.

Multiple Streams of Skepticism: Young Students

In group conversations, students (FG1, FG2, FG12, and FG13) remark that they do not feel identified with mainstream political actors and institutions. Two of the focus groups (FG2,

[18] The frame of the group was workers without militancy or strong party-identification. However, Ginés, a man with sympathies towards the 15 M or Indignados movement, attended. The social movement reached extraordinary levels of sympathy in 2011–2012. It is not surprising that many citizens who had no previous political or partisan backgrounds, attended some events and were sympathetic (Sampedro and Lobera 2015).

FG13) actually took place after the cycle of protests of 2012 (the *Indignados* movement), which drove so many young people to demonstrations against austerity and corruption. The members, who are students in professional training schools (vocational training- VT students) and at university, reflect that critical mood. They frame their conversations with those feelings of political exclusion and protest.[19] Participatory democracy represents for them an opportunity to be included. However, they also consider a large variety of impediments.

First, problems of viability and feasibility limit their imagination of participatory democracy. For example, in a group of vocational training students (FG1), who study computing, two participants express their viability doubts in these terms:

Ramón: We would need a formula to collect proposals…This would encounter operational problems, perhaps a saturation of the system with too many proposals.

Víctor: But we're talking about something ideal, imagine twenty million people making proposals.

Here participants voice concerns about the mechanisms and the machinery that would make participatory democracy possible. The idea produces a sense of uncertainty.

Second, in the event that those viability problems are solved, young students are concerned about political responsiveness and their real capacity to have a say (influence and external efficacy, again). For instance, in the same group (FG1), several participants recalled a public consultation by the Ministry of Culture in 2010 with bloggers and famous IT experts. Public authorities wanted experts' proposals in order to draw up the new *Intellectual Property Law*. Participants argue that the Ministry just accepted those proposals that did not challenge the original draft. For them, this example shows that participatory institutions can be manipulated by authorities who can partake in a sort of "cherry-picking" of proposals according to their interests (Font et al. 2016). They are skeptical about the possibility of real influence and institutional response, without manipulation.

But, as in the previous groups, the central concern of these students is about the capacities of the co-citizens, which is interpreted as a serious burden to participatory democracy. Students show two contrasting representations of the political culture of their co-citizens. On the one hand, there are those participants who argue that the ominous Spanish political culture will never change. Following this pessimistic perspective, in a second group of VT students (FG2), participants reach the conclusion that people—who are depicted as corrupt and self-interested—will never improve their civic skills:

Rocío: Although people are aware of the [political] situation...They will become corrupted in the end too.

Eduardo: It is part of us, we will be also corrupted.

Rocío: Yes

[19] As Adrian, a student in a vocational training group (FG2) illustrates, "The already existing political system, the representative system does not represent us properly."

Eduardo: I believe that. And I feel Pfff! [So bad] But it's the truth. It will be always like that. It is always just...wrong.

Marta: [The possession of] power produces corruption.

Eduardo: Power corrupts everything and everybody.

Rocío: And money too.

They arrive at the conclusion that there is no good alternative in the end because people involved in participatory institutions would sell themselves, becoming corrupt and making self-interested decisions. For these participants, selfishness is inherent to human nature and it impedes ordinary citizens even being able to take good decisions. Horizontal distrust, in this case, is enriched by the cliché of natural selfishness. From that point of view, participatory democracy seems too idealistic.

In contrast, other university students (FG12, psychology and pedagogy degrees) believe that the flaws of the political culture can be improved with civic education. They perceive a general political apathy and disinterest in their social environments. Participatory democracy (referendums, in this case) cannot work properly without people willing to engage. However, this pessimistic view changes when participants consider the possibility of civic education. The culture of apathy can have a positive transformation. Their initial skepticism towards participatory reforms is, then, placated,

Jaime: Right now, the referendum, in the society we have today, it can't happen because we live in a society where politics…Many people think that that politics is meaningless…

Sonia: Because [citizens] are not integrated in politics, maybe a referendum would encourage people to move [mobilize]…

Jaime: Yes, if they had results…

Jesús: It should be a combination, what we said before...Education of the people.

Like in the groups of leftists and social activists, the discourse of potential civic education and the pedagogy of engagement has a central role powering skepticism off.

Horizontal Distrust, Elitism and Education: Middle-Class Participants

Finally, in the middle-class groups, participants also show two contradictory discourses regarding participatory democracy. In the first group of middle-class professionals (FG6), members showed strong reluctance to participatory democracy, similar to the right-wing

groups. In a second group, members expressed a more optimistic view, like social activists, leftists and some young students.[20]

The first group of middle-class professionals (FG6) was formed by university professors, an economist, a lawyer, and businessmen; it was formed at an exclusive tennis-club in the city of Zaragoza. These participants show a discourse thick with skepticism and rejection towards participatory reforms. For them, citizens are not sufficiently competent to engage in political decision-making. As the following extract shows, participants were direct and straight:

Fernanda: I believe that citizens are not prepared to make political decisions.

Amancio: They are not ready to make *any* decisions [he remarks], even in politics.

For them, most people are unskilled and ignorant to practice participatory democracy. They evoke a sort of political immaturity. Members of this group show an elitist/classist style and tend to speak about "they" (for ordinary citizens) not including themselves. They associate citizen participation in local assemblies with negative images such as a "birdcage with crickets" (*jaula de grillos*), a metaphor comparing people's deliberation with crickets chirping loudly without making any sense. Participatory reforms are undesirable due to a deep perception of distrust of the majority of citizens.

In contrast, participants in the second group of middle-class professionals (FG7) show a positive vision of participatory democracy through referendum. The composition of the group was similar to the previous one, but was more progressive. Regarding the problems of participation, they question the potential responsiveness of public authorities (institutional distrust).[21] But members also depict citizens as apathetic and disinterested. Lourdes, a woman in this group, summarizes their analysis regarding citizens' political attitudes: "There is a lack of education. I mean, if you have lived all your lifetime without access to politicians, you have never gone to the City Council, you have never thought about your rights, you have never asked for a meeting with your local representatives...Education about these actions is needed." For Lourdes and her fellows, state institutions should stimulate engagement and the participatory demand, supporting civic education. Here, horizontal distrust and skepticism is also transformed into positive expectations, due to prospects for civic education. However, they are no more precise regarding their idea of civic education and the actions that it entails.

Conclusions

The rhetoric on citizen participation has become dominant in our time. As Baiocchi and Ganuza (2017, 3) argue, "Political participation today occupies an exceptional position as a privileged prescription for solving difficult problems and remedying the inherent flaws of democracy." Recently the paradoxes, problems, and limitations of these reforms have been pointed out by

[20] Debates in groups with similar profiles tend to be comparable. This is not magic. It is that groups were organized appealing to concrete social positions and participants build their discourses appealing to shared positions and common experiences. Regarding the middle-class groups, both groups (2011 and 2012) were contacted through a private tennis club. They were university professors, economists, architects, lawyers and businessmen.

[21] As two participants argue "Lourdes: public participation offices are everywhere, they are mandatory; something different is that they really pay attention to your demands... / Luis: they are worthless, at least in my own experience" (FG7).

some scholars (Lee et al. 2015). They have wondered if participation is perceived as a political alternative for ordinary people and if it plays a relevant role in their imaginary.

In methodological terms, focus groups have been a powerful research tool for analyzing ordinary people's discourses: How they carefully weigh the advantages and problems (real or imagined) of participatory institutions. First, given the opportunity, participants develop complex arguments (Benedicto 1993; Gamson 1992; Stoker et al. 2016) in this debate, which has been a permanent feature in the public agenda in the last few decades. Second, focus groups have been useful for interpreting ambiguous patterns previously identified in surveys, as was the case with the issue of skepticism and moderately ambivalent positions facing participatory democracy. Third, the double-round strategy pursued in sampling (similar groups in 2011 and 2012), together with triangulation of results (Della Porta and Keating 2008) with previous studies validate and support the main patterns. Focus groups were a successful tool to generate discursive data, to have a deeper understanding of the views of participatory politics in different social groups.

In this sense, when "slow thinking" is practiced in focus groups (Stoker et al. 2016), all participants consider the problems that participatory democracy could entail and their position, either in favor or against it, is based on reasoned arguments. As Battani, Hall, and Powers (1997) argue, there are political issues that do produce a "war of discourses," a clear polarization in society. Participatory reforms seem to be a case in point, a war of discourses, involving only those who are militants, political party supporters or social activists. There is a certain left-right polarization, for-against participation, but it only involves active people. Our study suggests that the role of partisan ideology is relevant to explain participatory views, as other researches have shown (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Font et al. 2014).

However, in politically inactive groups, positions are not so polarized and the role of partisan ideology is not so clear. For example, working-class participants like the idea of participation in normative terms, but feel skeptical because they have doubts regarding their own possibilities of exerting influence. Disempowerment, feelings of lacking internal and external efficacy have been associated with a lower socio-economic status (Fernández-Ballesteros et al. 2002, 16). These perceptions produce participatory skepticism in working-class groups. They question a participatory democracy in which they do not have a powerful and respected voice, as is now the case, according to them. Thus, they agree with participation in normative terms, as a political horizon; but they do not see it in practice in regard to the current distribution of power and social skills.

Our study shows that most people find it difficult to see participatory democracy as a comprehensive political alternative. Aside from right-wing participants and one of the middle-class groups, most participants praise participatory democracy and had a positive view of it. They like the idea. Following Wendy Brown (2010), we can say that *we are all participatory democrats now* (or at least most of us are). From the World Bank to a group of precarious workers in Madrid, all are participatory democrats in normative terms. Participation has become the widespread dominant discourse. However, the participatory project does not seem to be sufficient to provide an emancipatory credible alternative. Indeed, participants in focus groups identify a long list of practical problems, which are related to the distribution of power, the performance of political elites and the civic skills of fellow citizens. We have called the perception of these problems *participatory skepticism*. Because of it, different classes of people reflect about the concentration of power in the hands of political elites and the political dispossession of ordinary people (dispossession in terms of political skills, and influence). In these conditions, the participatory project by itself is not seen as a clear-cut solution. It is accepted in normative terms; but it is not seen as a convincing practical alternative.

Furthermore, participatory skepticism reflects a profound distrust of the political capacities of most people, of our "neighbors." One way to understand this puzzle would be to think that people do not really want to participate, as other researchers have suggested (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Webb 2013); but the discourses we have observed in this study point to another interpretation. In most cases, skepticism does not mean rejection of participatory politics, but rather caution and respect for political affairs, which are seen as a complex activity. Politics has to do with the common rules, which are not easy to deal with. It requires some knowledge and expertise. It requires improvement of most of people's capacities and information.

We might wonder whether the recourse to horizontal distrust with which most participants fuel their participatory skepticism, hides certain classist and elitist conception of politics. Our research shows that people prefer participatory reforms when they trust their fellow citizens more. Right-wing participants and some middle-class professionals represent quite well the distrust to ordinary people as political actor, without envisaging any potential change. In contrast, leftists, social activists, some students and middle-class members see possibilities for civic progress through education and pedagogy. They believe in the "school of democracy" hypothesis (Pateman 1976, 2012; Talpin 2012). Paradoxically, our focus groups were conducted at a time when illiteracy has been almost eradicated in Spain. However, political illiteracy remains a central discourse. Even the more progressive participants suggest that more political education is needed. The problem of participation is related to expertise, knowledge, pedagogy and the distribution of civic skills in the society. This is a relevant finding. In our focus groups, some participants suggest that education might be a shortcut to the redistribution of political skills and power; but a radical conception of equality that values the experience of popular classes in political terms and offers a reflection on the lack of accesibility of institutions to most of people, is almost absent. Discourses on economic inequality are almost disconnected from debates on participation. In the end, our focus groups also reflect the question addressed by Lee et al. (2015), at a time in which the rhetoric of participation is more widespread than ever, discourses related to political and material equality are hardly connected to it.

Acknowledgements This research was financed by the National Research Plan of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (CSO2012-38942). The authors would like to thank Joan Font for his lucid suggestions on the early versions of this work. We also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their careful reading of the manuscript.

Appendix: Basic script of focus groups

1. Let's now speak about the political system.
1.1 What do you like? What do you dislike?
2. How would your ideal political system be?
2.1 If we designed it from the scratch, how would it be?
2.2 Who would make relevant political decisions?
2.3 What influence would citizens have on political decision-making?
3. Let's speak about different types of political processes.
3.1 Do you think that citizens should have more power in political decision-making?
3.2 Do you think that lay citizens are skillful enough?
3.3 Some people suggest that we should move towards a more participatory democracy, what do you think about that?

Source: Own elaboration. Translated from the Spanish version

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