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The Professionalisation of Participatory Democracy: Class and Cultural Biases in Citizen Advisory Councils

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Abstract

Numerous democratic innovations have tried to promote the ideal of social and political inclusion. This value was at the core of associative democracy and citizen advisory councils, which rely on associations and individual citizens to represent diverse voices. However, recent research has found that these spaces are not particularly inclusive: inequalities in associationism and biased mobilisation play a central role. In this respect, the article argues that previous studies have not fully explained how institutional design and institutional dynamics can be penetrated by class inequalities. The type of participation labour significantly influences who participates and why, becoming a central exclusionary factor. With this idea in mind, we analyse two surveys and ninety-six interviews with Spanish council participants, which reveal that these spaces are highly professionalised. Their design and the planned tasks shape associations' mobilisation strategies, leading to the prioritisation of professionals. Also, the participation labour requires specific skills linked to cultural capital, technical knowledge and dispassionate discourse, making involvement exigent and exclusive regarding education and social class. In the end, institutional design and participation labour can discourage popular participation, even if it was not intended.

Keywords

associative democracy, participatory democracy, citizen advisory councils, institutional design, social inequalities, social class, education

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Introduction

The literature on participatory democracy has paid particular attention to the question of 'who' participates in assessing the capacity of democratic innovations to foster inclusion. Most of the works have examined the integration of citizens who have been historically excluded on the basis of social class or cultural background (Baiocchi, 2003; Fung and Wright, 2003; Lupien, 2018; Pape and Lim, 2019; Young, 2001). In this respect, research on mini-publics and participatory budgeting has uncovered significant findings (Boswell, 2021; Ganuza and Francés, 2012; Goidel et al., 2008; Jacquet, 2017; Talpin, 2008), but less is known about citizen advisory councils (ACs) even though they are probably the most widespread participatory institution.

Presently, school, neighbourhood, health, environment and women's councils exist across all public administrations, although often under different names: citizen advisory councils, consultation councils, citizen committees (Cohen and Fung, 2004; Fobé et al., 2013), *conseils* in France (Blondiaux, 2000) or *Bürgerforum* in Germany (Hendriks and Tops, 1999). The little quantitative research that has been conducted shows that they have been expanding in the past decades: over 2000 cases in Spanish public administrations (Brugué et al., 2021), 800 in Norwegian municipalities (Aarsæther et al., 2002), around 260 in Polish cities (Pawłowska, 2023), 300 in Belgium (Fobé et al., 2013) and 'thousands' in urban France (Sintomer and De Maillard, 2007).

Citizen ACs are permanent participatory institutions that bring together lay citizens and associations to advise governments. As opposed to expert committees, the main targets of these associative democracy institutions are civic groups, stakeholders and the specific populations affected by a policy (Hirst, 2002). First created in the 1960s–1970s, citizen ACs were seen as an instrument that could offset the excessive influence exerted by lobbyists and elite groups in the context of corporatist capitalist policies (Cohen et al., 1995; Cohen and Rogers, 1992; Fung, 2003; Schmitter, 1992). Indeed, in many countries, their creation was a response to popular mobilisations and the original idea was to include people who were not typically involved in policymaking, such as workers, families in public education, public health users or social welfare recipients (Navarro, 1999; Piven and Cloward, 1979 [1977]).

Recent empirical studies, however, have questioned the capacity of ACs to foster inclusion, finding that contrary to their original intent, ACs afford the general public limited access and influence over government policies (Alarcón and Font, 2014; Coelho, 2004; Collins, 2021; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023; Font et al., 2021; Matthews, 2001; Navarro and Font, 2013; Sintomer and De Maillard, 2007). While some research has pointed to problems such as class, occupational and educational bias among participants (Brown, 2008; Collins, 2021; Font et al., 2021), others have revealed a tendency to select well-established organisations (Coelho, 2004; Lima, 2019; Navarro, 1999; Young, 2001).

In this study, we examine social inequalities in AC participation. We draw on quantitative and qualitative data from two research projects developed between 2017 and 2021 in Spain. Our analysis suggests that the dominant AC model can best be described as 'professionalised', closer to expert committees than to citizens' assemblies – public audiences, town meetings or participatory budgeting. Furthermore, we show that – together with other social factors, selection bias results from the participation labour promoted by authorities and assumed by associations. The involvement is affected not only by the everyday obstacles to participation but by ACs' design and the tasks and skills expected to be performed. This explanation can help us understand why some participatory devices end up so professionalised, even when designed to promote social inclusion.

The article begins by reviewing the relevant literature before describing the background of the Spanish case, the methods and materials. Later, the main findings are displayed, and we discuss the implications of professionalised ACs.

The Problem of Inclusiveness

This article addresses social class and educational inequalities from the perspective of both presence and voice in institutional participatory spaces. This approach is relevant for several theoretical reasons. First, ACs have been historically conceived as spaces where citizens and, specifically, affected social groups could express their needs and demands before authorities (Schmitter, 1992). It can be argued, therefore, that the recurrent absence of some groups from such bodies sustains political inequities and concentrates resources through an asymmetric distribution of political capital, such as contacts and institutional information (Bherer et al., 2018).

Second, even though ACs are often based on association representation, individual members acquire symbolic recognition from administrations and knowledge of the functioning of politics, which increases citizens' capacity to act in the political sphere (Funes et al., 2014; Pincock, 2012). People from heterogeneous social backgrounds should benefit from the opportunities to learn and acquire recognition from such involvement (Martínez-Palacios, 2017). Third, a deeply democratic public sphere should allow diverse sectors to contribute through their distinct demands, discursive styles and forms of leadership (Fraser, 1990). Thus, as public institutions mediating between the state and the associative fabric, ACs should be socially heterogeneous, broadening and diversifying the political debate (Hirst, 2002).

The question of social inequities in the composition of ACs represents a significant gap in the literature, especially regarding causes and explanatory factors (Collins, 2021; Cornwall, 2008; Fung, 2001; Navarro and Font, 2013; Young, 2001). The literature has tended to assume that the profile of participants was not particularly relevant as ACs are mainly based on delegates from associations.[1] However, participants' social characteristics can signal the (limited?) capacity for inclusion of State-led participatory spaces.

Moreover, the functioning of ACs may reveal a tension between social equality in participation and effective discursive representation, since a vigorous defence of specific technical arguments may be at odds with the incorporation of subaltern actors (Mansbridge, 2015), such as happens when certain participants are excluded by the legal and bureaucratic jargon of public officials, experts and private sector delegates. Given the importance of ACs and that they are often the most widespread participation tool in many countries, examining who participates is crucial to understanding the inequities that cut across public debate, even in the context of participatory settings.

Who Participates and How?

The involvement of citizens in ACs is subject to the same everyday difficulties of other time-consuming participatory activities: exhausting work schedules, family and domestic responsibilities and misinformation (Verba et al., 1995). Generally, research has analysed the characteristics of the citizens who engage, differentiating between the concepts of 'presence' and 'voice' (Ganuza and Francés, 2012; García-Espín, 2024; Smith, 2009; Young, 2000).

On one hand, *presence* refers to the type of people who attend meetings and come to be recognised as members (Smith, 2009). However, presence has yet to be examined in

the context of ACs and research has worked with a somewhat disembodied description of participants ('citizens', 'civil society members', 'association members', 'social movement activists'). An exception is a study by Font et al. (2021) that found that Spanish ACs were primarily composed of professionals with university degrees (more than 80% of members) and that more than 90% were executives, management, technical and cultural specialists. Sintomer and De Maillard (2007) observed similar patterns in France. This contrasts with Cornwall's (2008) work in Brazil, which showed that around 50% of health council participants had only basic educational attainment.

Research on presence has also considered participants' positions inside organisations. For example, Brown (2008) showed that in the United States federal administration ACs had a mixed composition of experts and citizens from affected social groups. Work in Kosovo by Visoka and Beha (2011) established that ACs were composed of non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders – often competing for funding. In these studies, participants are not abstract citizens but representatives with specific qualifications and positions in their associations. As such, they have a 'delegated authority' (Bourdieu, 1981) to represent their collectives.

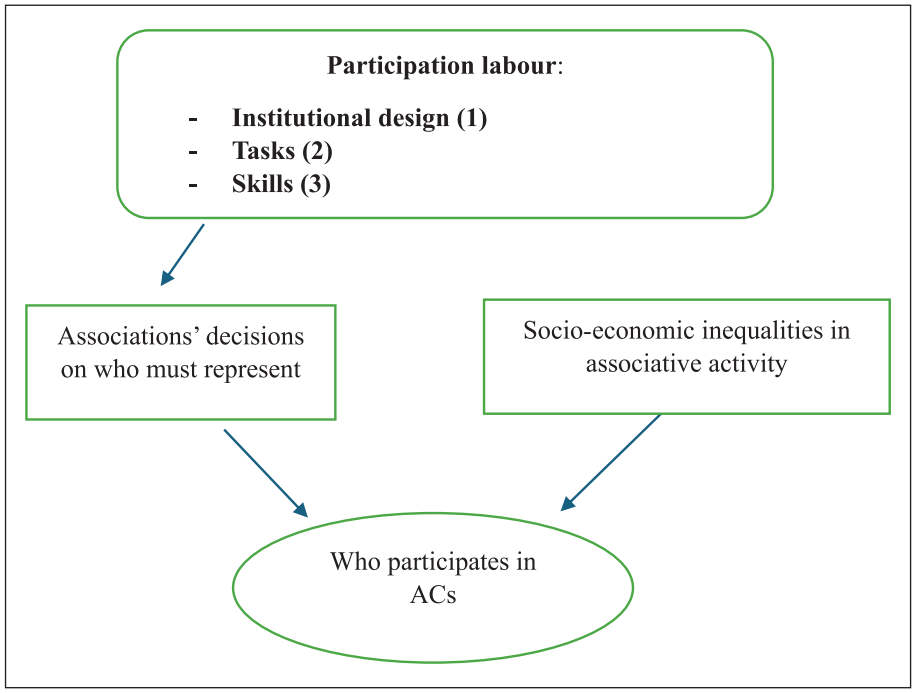
For its part, the concept of *voice* refers to the internal dynamics of deliberation,[2] the possibility of presenting arguments and being involved in decision-making. Voice is also challenged by internal barriers that make it difficult for people from oppressed groups to be heard (Martínez-Palacios and Nicolas-Bach, 2016). Even if representation is balanced (i.e. acceptable numeric presence), demands from oppressed groups may be ignored because they are not formulated in the 'correct' bureaucratic terms (Collins, 2021). Voice, therefore, implies a focus on debates, the 'deliberative capital' or the skills necessary to have a full say in discussions and decision-making (Holdo, 2015).

In this sense, empirical work has shown that, with some exceptions (Collins, 2021; Cornwall, 2008), bureaucratic and technical debates tend to predominate in ACs. Communication practices are deeply rooted in participants' class and education and are affected by political experience (García-Espín et al., 2020). Participants develop specific ways of communicating with authorities, a 'language' dependent on actors' relationships and dominant institutional codes (Luhtakallio, 2012).

Explaining Presence and Voice

Why do ACs tend to display such composition and deliberation dynamics? Navarro and Font (2013) used the metaphor of a 'double filter': first, participants have to be part of associations, and second, they need to be internally selected from within these collectives to be part of ACs as public representatives. This double filter hypothesis draws first on the sociopolitical inequalities that prevent large segments of the population, especially the less well-off, from joining and being active inside associations (Verba et al., 1995). In Spain, these imbalances have been largely documented (Caínzos, 2004; Caínzos and Voces, 2010). Today, around 8% of Spanish adults state that they have been members of an NGO, while around 17% have participated in neighbours' or parents' associations,[3] common entities in ACs. Among the occupational categories that surveys report as being most active, technical groups, managers, professionals and office administrators have the highest participation rates.

The second filter is activated when organisations choose the members that should represent them in ACs and other institutions. They follow their internal criteria and usually mobilise experts and leaders. But why do associations choose these members instead



Graph 1. Explanatory Factors Affecting the Selection Process.
Source: Own elaboration.

of others? Do they select from among the people who best represent their political cause (i.e. immigrants, women in precarious situations) or organisational leaders who can best defend specific technical arguments (Khwaja, 2001)?

These questions led us to consider what happens between the first and second filters, that is, what factors are operating in the background of associations' decisions. Why do organisations choose some people instead of others to represent them in public? This article considers the possibility that the usual participation labour impinges on selecting participants, even if ACs are open to everyone. This approach draws on Annette Lareau's (1987) theory on parents' involvement in the education system, which showed that economically disadvantaged families were less involved in school participatory spaces because of the nature of the activities that schools organised and the absence of serious reflection on social inequalities.

ACs may be affected by similar problems: authorities make decisions on (1) *institutional design* that might not be neutral when mobilising participants. Furthermore, associations and participants accomplish certain (2) *tasks*[4] requiring a selection of (3) *skills*. By examining these elements, we propose to observe the typical participation labour and how it can affect mobilisation processes. Graph 1 shows the logic proposed for analysis.

First, as Young (2000) has argued, *institutional design* (1) is never neutral: it implements procedures that select specific social groups, even if unintentionally. Other research has also suggested that institutions actively mobilise certain publics, fomenting their presence and voice (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009). This hypothesis is similar to Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) *mobilisation bias theory*: as part of the institutional design, authorities

establish the functions or roles that members are expected to fulfil in these spaces, which affects who is activated. For example, looking at the communication and decision-making procedures (Fung, 2006) is vital to understanding who participates. Still, examining the broad range of functions members must fulfil according to regulations is pertinent.

However, the study of design may need to be revised to understand the type of people that make up participatory spaces. A limited focus on institutional desing would assume that people passively acquiesce to institutional demands and that social entities enact formal regulations without adapting them to their criteria, aims and capacities. Thus, to develop an explanation based on the interactive and conflictive nature of participation (Glimmerveen et al., 2022; Holdo, 2020), we contend that it is also necessary to study other informal dimensions: specifically, (2) the *everyday tasks* that participants accomplish in these forums and (3) *the skills* considered essential to develop them.

Therefore, we suggest focusing on the participation labour that people undertake in these spaces, which is partially determined by the institutional design (regulations) but also by the tasks that are completed on an everyday basis (i.e. proposal-making can be disaggregated into several tasks such as collecting complaints, writing documents or preparing speeches), and the skills that participants consider valuable to accomplish these commitments. Participation labour probably conditions the selection of members, even if previous studies have not delved into this, which concerns all types of participatory processes. Social and political inequalities are, ultimately, inscribed or imprinted on institutional design and everyday functioning.

Case, Context and Methods

To study these aspects, we focused on Spain because it is a typical case[5] in the South European participatory tradition. Although liberal democracy was only re-established in the late 1970s, the expansion of ACs since then has been comparable to surrounding countries, where these bodies emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (Font et al., 2014; Navarro, 1997). Initially, Spanish ACs were created to 'channel' the contribution of popular associations (i.e. trade unions, women's groups, cultural associations, neighbourhood collectives and youth associations, among others) that had played a crucial role during the transition to political democracy. Following corporativist approaches, associations were rewarded with a small amount of institutional power, such that the Spanish Local Regulation Act (*Ley de Bases de Régimen Local* (1985)) included ACs in its catalogue of bodies (Navarro, 1999).

Decentralisation during the 1990s and the expansion of social services saw ACs mushroom in all sectors and public administrations (Hanson and Ulrich, 1994; Jiménez-Sánchez, 2005; Pastor Seller, 2009). By the 1990s, more than 70% of Spanish cities had either sectorial or district councils (Brugué and Vallès, 2005; Navarro, 1999), and there was a comprehensive system of ACs in education, health, youth services, social welfare and socioeconomic areas. Knowing the exact number of ACs currently active across all administrations is difficult, but Brugué et al. (2021) have documented more than 2000, representing many thousands of participants. No other deliberative institution mobilises such a broad base of participants in a stable way.

Methods and Data

As the research goal was to shed light on the social trends in participation, our starting point was two research projects that examined ACs' composition and functioning. The

first was developed at the national level between 2017 and 2019, while the second study took place in Andalusia, the country's largest region, from 2021 to 2022. In both projects, data collection started by mapping existing ACs, registering 2013 cases at national level and 594 in Andalusia (see Tables 1–3 in the Supplemental Appendix[6]). The most significant difference among mappings was that the first included big cities,[7] while the second included smaller ones.[8]

Each project conducted online surveys with AC participants. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select a manageable sample of ACs.[9] In the national project, a collection of ACs was chosen on the basis of two criteria: (1) councils operating in national, regional and local administrations dealing with traditional policy areas (education) and newer policy areas (environment and immigration); (2) central district councils of all the big municipalities (also traditional and introduced in the late 1970s). Thus, while ACs in education and districts had a long tradition and well-established associationism, those in environment and immigration were more recent and had a more unstable associative fabric. The main objective was to have diverse policy traditions, associative fabrics and potential variety in AC dynamics. The final survey included data from 70 ACs and 569 participants.[10] The response rates (81.4% at the AC level and 19% at the participant member level) actually vary significantly between policy areas and governmental levels, as the operation of this institution is irregular, with activity fluctuating between councils that are very active and others whose deliberations are limited to one or two times per year. Tables 4–6 in the Supplemental Appendix provide further details of the cases, response rates, as well as information on the mode of administration (see Note 1 in the Supplemental Appendix).

A similar strategy was followed for the Andalusian survey. ACs dealing with education, health, immigration and environment were selected and administered an almost identical questionnaire. The resulting sample included responses from 412 participants in 58 ACs. Response rates at the Andalusian survey reflect the same diversity across levels and policy areas as in the Spanish case (37.2% overall at the AC level and 31.1% at the participant level) (Table 5 in the Supplemental Appendix includes a more detailed analysis). Across the two surveys, the total sample included just under 1000 members from 128 ACs. These data were subsequently analysed to explore the characteristics of participants in terms of sociodemographic profile, with educational levels and occupations as a proxy for social class (Caínzos and Voces, 2010).

In addition, extensive qualitative materials were also collected to conduct a deeper analysis of participants' perceptions. This part of the methodology involved 96 semi-structured interviews with public officials, politicians, association members and experts from 16 case studies.[11] As in surveys, the strategy for case-selection was based on a policy and territorial diversity. Of the 16 ACs, eight dealt with education and eight with immigration (traditional vs newer policy area). In addition, cases were selected from different territorial administrations (two at the national level, six at the regional and eight at the municipal level). Policy and territorial variation were intended to maximise the contrast among policy traditions, associative networks and, potentially, ACs' dynamics, design and participation labour. Table 1 details the final sample of cases, which have been anonymised.

The primary purpose of the qualitative approach was to reconstruct the relations and tensions around ACs (Bourdieu, 2014). As such, the cases included between 5 and 10 semi-structured interviews per AC to cover the variety of members. Interviewees were contacted directly through published lists of members or through the information given

Table 1. ACs Selected by Policy Area, Territory and Government Level.

	State	Regions	Municipal > 250,000 inhabitants	Municipal > 50,000 < 300,000 inhabitants
Immigration (n = 8)	State Council (1)	Catalonia (2) Madrid (3) Andalusia (4)	Barcelona (5) Madrid (City) (6) Malaga (7)	Granada (8)
Education (n = 8)	State Council (9)	Catalonia (10) Madrid (11) Andalusia (12)	Barcelona (13) Madrid (City) (14) Malaga (15)	Granada (16)

Source: Own elaboration.

by associations.[12] Most interviews were conducted at participants' workplaces and lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour.[13] The interviews focused on the composition of ACs and their deliberative practices.

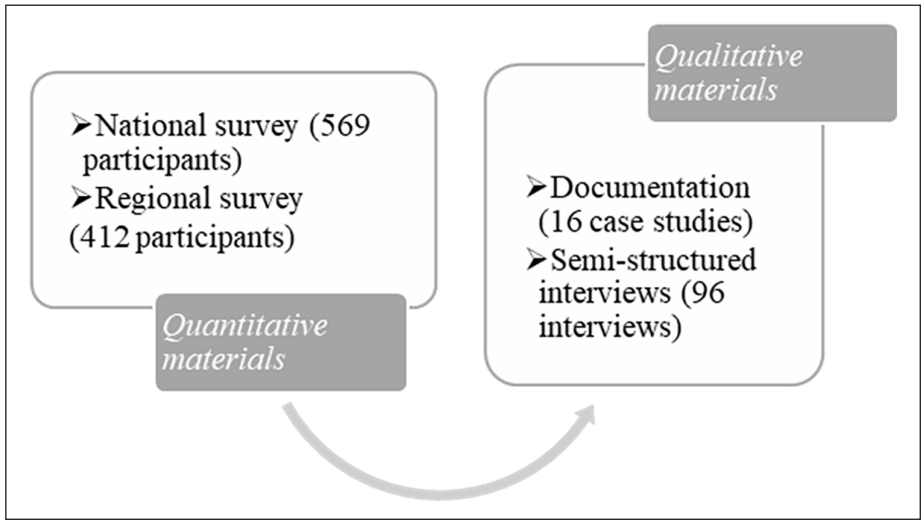
The transcriptions were analysed and coded using N-Vivo and Atlas.ti (see Table 8 in the Supplemental Appendix for the codebook). The qualitative interviews were complemented with a review of various documents (legislation, bylaws, internal working papers, reports, legal reviews, etc.), which helped to interpret the discourses. As the qualitative dataset was vast, only two main coding nodes were used for this article. The first one centred on 'selection procedures' and participants' recruitment and the other on 'tasks', the activities that members carry out while participating. Based on the initial coding, interpretative memos were developed, and the main discursive axes were identified. The results are presented in the following section along with some interview quotes. Participants' names have been anonymised. Graph 2 illustrates the multi-method strategy.

It is important to note that the samples for surveys and case studies do not represent all existing ACs. Since we collected 981 responses in surveys and 96 in-depth interviews, we consider the data to be sufficiently large and varied, at least if compared with similar studies (Aarsæther et al., 2002; Fobé et al., 2013; Galais et al., 2021; Ganuza and Francés, 2012). A partial mapping of these institutions was considered (Tables 1–3 in the Supplemental Appendix), but the main criteria for selection were purposive and based on the contrast between policy areas and territorial levels. Therefore, the material helps examine the theoretical problem (professionalisation and social imbalances in participation), but we need to be cautious regarding the interpretation and extension of results.

Findings

Professionals as Participants

The first step was to look at 'who' participates at the national, regional and local levels in the selected ACs. In both surveys, association members were slightly overrepresented, which was an advantage because the aim was to explore the social characteristics of civil society participants.[14] ACs are mainly composed of association representatives, accounting for 61% of respondents in the national survey and 56% in the regional survey. This group includes members of NGOs, cultural and solidarity groups, neighbourhood associations, labour unions, students' and parents' groups, immigrant and environmental groups, and business organisations, among others.



Graph 2. Summary of Data and Methods.
Source: Own elaboration.

Font et al.'s (2021) analysis had already found that Spanish ACs were not representative of the general population, particularly that some categories, such as men in their fifties with higher education and professional occupations, were highly overrepresented. Our analysis of the data from Andalusia (see Table 2) also shows that while directors and managers were overrepresented, the proportion of skilled technicians and scientists was 57% higher than the population average. The same was found for education; 88% of participants had university degrees compared with only 28% of the regional population.

The ACs in the sample were highly professionalised: most members were qualified technicians and professionals (scientists, doctors, nurses), education professionals (teachers and lecturers) and from other professional occupations such as lawyers, engineers or social workers with higher education credentials. In contrast, the 'other' category (low-skilled service workers, craftsmen, operators of machinery and installations, and other manual workers) only accounted for 11% of members, even though they make up a large majority of the working population (68% in Andalusia).

To study variations in the composition of ACs based on territorial level and policy sector, we performed a bivariate analysis (z-tests) and found associations between both variables and the participants' profile.[15] First, participants with higher education and those with higher-status occupations had a more significant presence at the state and regional levels than local ACs ($p < 0.1$, see Table 3). Thus, as we move up the territorial ladder, ACs became even more professionalised and integrated by people with higher cultural capital. In the national survey, even though the z-tests did not reveal significant differences, the general pattern was similar: local councils were less professionalised.

However, when we examined policy sectors, we did find statistically significant results in the national survey. Education and immigration councils were substantially more professionalised (see Table 4), and the opposite was true for environmental and district ACs. In environmental bodies, the lower presence of qualified professionals might be related to the integration of people employed in farming and forestry in the 'other' occupational category. In the case of district councils, lower professionalisation may be due to the

Table 2. Andalusian AC Members Surveyed Compared With the General Population.

	Andalusian members (%)	Andalusian population (%)	Difference
Education			
Up to primary	1	20	−19
Secondary	11	52	−41
Higher education	88	28	+60
Total	100	100	–
Occupation[a]			
Directors and managers	7	4	+3
Scientific technicians and professionals	74	17	+57
Technicians, support professionals	8	11	−3
Other	11	68	−57
Total	100	100	–

Source: Own elaboration from the two surveys and the National Statistics Institute data (2021).
[a]Occupations are divided according to the national classification (CNO-11).

Table 3. Educational and Professional Profile by AC Government Level (%).

Spanish survey data (%)		
	State	Regional
Education		
Up to primary	0	0
Secondary	14	16
Higher education	86	84
Total	100	100
Occupation		
Directors and managers	23	17
Science technicians and professionals	54	61
Technicians, support professionals	19	14
Others	4	8
Total	100	100
Andalusian data (%)		
	Regional	Local
Education		
Up to primary	0	1
Secondary	5	13
Higher education	95*	86
Total	100	100
Occupation		
Directors and managers	9	6
Science technicians and professionals	83*	71
Technicians, support professionals	2	10*
Others	6	13
Total	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.
Given the N number p-value chosen is 0.1.
*$p < 0.1$.

Table 4. Educational and Professional Profile by AC Sector (%).

Spanish data (%)				
	School Councils (SC)	Immigration Councils (IC)	Environment (EC)	District (DC)
Up to primary	1	0	0	0
Secondary	12	11	26*(SC)	37**(SC, IC)
Higher education	87*(EC)**(DC)	89**(DC)	74	63
Total	100	100	100	100
Occupation				
Directors and managers	13	29*(SC)	15	17
Scientific technicians and professionals	67**(IC)*(EC)	43	50	57
Technicians, support professionals	14	18	25	17
Others	6	10	10	9
Total	100	100	100	100

Andalusian data (%)					
	Education (SC)	Immigration (IC)	Environment (EC)	Health (HC)	Health-environment (H-EC)
Education					
Up to primary	1	0	2	0	0
Secondary	10	13	11	12	0
Higher education	89	87	87	88	100
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Occupation					
Directors and managers	3	14	7	17	0
Scientific technicians and professionals	79	66	71	58	75
Technicians, support professionals	9	11	2	8	0
Others	9	9	20	17	25
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.
*<0.1; ** <0.05

municipal location because neighbourhood cases appear to be more inclusive. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these small variations do not affect the overall trend: the generalised professionalisation of these ACs.

The Selection Moment

The professionalised composition of the indicated ACs is better understood when the selection process is examined considering the qualitative material (documentation and

interviews). First, the regulations state that associative groups are responsible for choosing their delegates. Even when the organisations that participate are chosen through elections, associations themselves decide who will represent them on the AC.

Therefore, we should look at the selection moment which is crucial in the mobilisation process. According to interviews, the leaders of the entity often appoint an internal employee or a technical cadre and vertical nomination is the most frequent method, often because of its simplicity and practicality: 'The person is chosen by management, and of course, it is discussed' (NGO representative, local AC). Contracted professionals, technical personnel, lawyers, social workers and project managers are often chosen to fill these positions, but associations rarely nominate non-staff activists or grassroots volunteers.

Moreover, in many cases, associations' leadership chooses people from middle- to high-ranking positions, such as coordinators and directors: 'We, the members of the board, should represent the association in these forums [. . .]. We have a big organisation which works in many areas and services, sometimes it is difficult to identify the correct person' (NGO representative on a regional AC). So, management directors decide who should represent the organisation and, most frequently, decide they are the most appropriate figures to fulfil the public representation role. Even in small organisations with none or very few employees, participants in ACs are often chosen from the board of directors: '[Participation in this organisation] is purely altruistic, so we choose from among the board' (association representative on a regional AC).

Thus, participants in ACs tend to be professionals or from leadership positions rather than lay participants, everyday users or grassroots members. However, why do associations select these profiles? The analysis shows that directors make this decision based on the activities performed by ACs.

Institutional Design

The activity of these institutions is, first, determined by the regulations and the institutional design. These specify that the primary goal of ACs is to give voice to the populations affected by a policy and to enhance the relationship between associations and authorities. In this sense, the regulations list the essential functions attributed to participants: basically, the discussion of proposals on policy programmes, writing expert reports and reviewing and debating legal provisions (Rico-Motos and Alarcón, 2022). This is the basic legal framework that participants must fulfil in these institutional spaces.

If we examine ACs' regulations, making proposals is members' first and most common function.[16] However, ACs' bylaws at all territorial levels are rather broad and allow for different forms of proposal-making, negotiation styles and political vocabularies, which, in principle, do not necessarily require the preferential selection of participants with professional backgrounds.

However, the second most common participant function, writing and commenting diagnostic and technical reports, is more directly connected with professional expertise. These documents may be periodic (e.g. the annual report on the state of education in a region) or thematic and issue-oriented (e.g. a special report on immigration laws). The most emblematic example is the National School Council annual report, considered as one of the best documents on Spanish educational performance. Similarly, one can read excellent reports on immigration and education produced by well-resourced urban ACs.[17] Writing these documents implies a phase of research and information collection,[18] such that these reports often acquire prestige and are widely cited.

According to the regulations, the third function is the review of legal provisions and policy plans, which is also related to professionalism. Conducting reviews requires writing and discussing drafts of regulations and auditing strategic plans and other policy documents. For instance, in education, consultations are compulsory and ACs receive draft regulations (school calendars, basic laws, pedagogical guidelines, etc.), which are also sent to other institutional bodies. In national and regional ACs, decisions and amendments are called *dictámenes* (opinions) and are submitted as legal commentaries with amendments to specific articles. Local bodies also evaluate regulations, but the language tends to be less legalistic. This was the case, for example, of a local council where participants voted on the official school calendar, but the debate centred on the political symbolism of alternative school holidays. In this sense, while reviewing legal provisions in general require professional expertise, the local approach is less technical.

The analysis of ACs' regulations shows, therefore, that social biases towards professionalism can be understood, in part, as an effect of institutional design. In this respect, regulations usually include a list of participant functions that affect mobilisation strategies. If, for example, participants in an AC are responsible for writing expert documents, it makes associations search for technical personnel to do it. In particular, the review of legal documents and the writing of expert reports are closely linked to the selection of professionals as representatives. However, the constraints that institutional design imposes over associations are relative; participants can challenge and make alternative interpretations of these functions and accomplish them in a less technical, legal and bureaucratic way, opening space for other debates, discursive styles and profiles.

Tasks

The activity related to proposal-making illustrates this last point: associations and participants do not need to passively embrace the regulations and the mandates of institutional design. They can dispute and make alternative interpretations of their functions. For example, even if proposal-making is defined as part of the institutional design, participants interpret it according to their aims and resources, and it can entail several tasks that are not explicitly planned in regulations. Therefore, proposal-making can be understood as the elaboration of general demands, complaints about services, broad political proposals and claims, requests for specific policy actions or the development of more technical projects. Table 5 illustrates how, according to interviews, proposal-making can involve a range of different tasks that can be connected to professionalism (or not) and depend on members' understanding.

According to interviewees, proposal-making takes on different meanings, resulting in everyday tasks that go beyond the formal design. On one hand, it can cover the public presentation of needs and complaints about services, which does not necessarily imply technical knowledge. As one participant argues, she only wants to voice her complaints: 'I only want to shout, to shout loudly, but don't ask me to do pirouettes [referring to difficult technical activities]'. However, proposal-making can also require, in other cases, tasks such as writing expert projects or drafting legal changes, which are technically demanding. These tasks are more frequent in regional and national ACs and are closer to the skill set of professionals.

Therefore, tabling proposals shows how the informal activity, the tasks developed in ACs, and not only the design, affects the selection of members. Participants can negotiate the meaning of formal functions and transform them into (more or less) technical tasks.

Table 5. Proposal-Making and Associated Tasks.

Design function (regulations)	Tasks (interviews)
Proposal-making	Consult partners Revise meeting's agenda Collect grievances Pull together complaints about services and working conditions Write brief statements Present a demand in public Write propositions in a constructive language Designing a project to address an issue and proposing it Documentation and data collection Propose legal changes Prepare presentation before authorities and social agents

Source: Own elaboration.

In this respect, anyone can voice general proposals, political claims and service grievances, but when proposal-making is interpreted as, for example, writing legal amendments, the pressures to select professionals increase. This frequently happens in regional and state ACs, where a higher professionalisation is seen.

Skills

Finally, a look at the skills that participants associate with accomplishing these tasks further clarifies why associations tend to select employees with a technical profile. When the board of an association chooses someone, they consider who has the right skills, with a notable focus on 'preparation'. In this respect, the leader of an immigrants' association observed that 'sometimes we have sent people who were not so well skilled, so they didn't get anything [. . .]' (regional AC member). According to most interviewees, preparation is related to the mastery of several skills that are key to having an impact. These competences are related to availability, cultural capital, bureaucratic and legal knowledge, and dispassionate discourse.

Availability. First, participants are required to be 'available', which means having time to perform all the tasks associated with participating in an AC, which ranges from attending plenaries and commissions to writing diagnostic reports, reviewing legal provisions and submitting demands. Availability has two meanings, which are only partially connected with professionalisation. On one hand, it requires free time after work and fulfilling domestic obligations (Verba et al., 1995). This understanding of availability was only forwarded by the interviewees participating as volunteers, such as parents and students not employed by their associations. In contrast, as most interviewees were employees of associations, they connected 'availability' with the professional time they devote to preparing for ACs. As a member of a regional immigration AC pointed out:

> My colleague has had to invest many hours of her working time [. . .] to write the report, asking the other members, reminding them . . . organising meetings, acting as moderator, writing the minutes, writing the final reports [. . .] That is the investment and the internal cost of devoting a lot of professional time.

Some interviewees stated that the main reason for selecting associations' employees for ACs was the burden of participation, which they could do during working hours. In addition, this was seen by some as the only way to ensure an association's contribution:

> You can say to an individual [a volunteer] 'look, go to this meeting' but if that person has to work [in another job], then the person will only go if they are able to. But since it [participation] is of utmost interest to us [. . .] we need it to know where we are going, to coordinate with other organisations, to exert pressure (representative of an immigrants' association on a local AC).

Therefore, interviewees suggest that paid professionals' capacity to invest time in ACs improves their representation and helps them meet obligations. In comparison, asking for the same level of commitment from volunteers is more difficult and less secure.

Cultural Capital. Understood as technical knowledge and expertise (Bourdieu, 2016), cultural capital has become another central criterion that biases selection towards professionals. For instance, when organisations have many employees, managers choose from among staff with expert knowledge in the policy area. As employees usually work in different departments or divisions, directors choose the personnel based on those with the greatest level of specialisation. As one interviewee explained: 'My colleague from the women's project goes to the women's council (. . .) The one for children . . . she goes to the childhood AC (. . .) but this [decision] is due to their knowledge of the collective and the problems [. . .]' (NGO member, local AC participant).

Since meaningful participation is associated with having technical expertise, some interviewees argued that it was necessary to master the subject by studying strategic plans and government guidelines and then drafting proposals other associations and the authorities would see as feasible and effective. In this respect, a participant on a local AC argued that 'it [the council] can be considered an expert panel', while a national council participant stated that:

> It is very specialised work. Then, we, though we dedicate a lot of time to writing reports, in the end, it's an everyday matter for us. If you ask to me, 'hey, what's new about the asylum system?' We need some time to draft it, but we don't have to study the topic further as we're studying it every day (NGO employee).

Expert and technical knowledge mastery is crucial, especially for participation in regional and national ACs. Participants who are not professionals working in associations or policy experts admitted feeling a bit lost during these technical discussions. For example, a member of a parents' association that did not work in education reported that:

> There are some topics that it's better for me to just listen to because I cannot [contribute] anything. When they speak about curricular issues, for example, that in vocational training they are going to teach whatever . . . the curriculum is 'x', 'y' or 'z', there . . . you leave these issues to the professionals (regional AC member).

Bureaucratic and Legal Knowledge. Other skills such as ease of reading and writing legal texts, knowledge of legal documents, bureaucratic procedures and the organisation of public administrations were highly valued by the participants interviewed. In the absence of these skills, participants in national and regional ACs have to rely on their

organisation's legal support or on the assistance of external lawyers. Two regional AC participants said that some people attended meetings accompanied by lawyers, while another pointed out that 'members of ACs read the regulations thoroughly, write them down, compare them [. . .] there is a high degree of involvement and commitment and a lot of documentation on the regulations that we have to review'.

In addition, participants tend to have long-standing experience in dealing with public administration procedures. According to the participants interviewed, knowledge of bureaucracy and experience with the functioning of institutions was also given priority when selecting delegates:

> One of the persons we rely on a lot, is an honorary member of the association, he no longer has children here [at the school], but his experience, his career has been so . . . so important, hasn't it? So, for some things, we say 'you go because you know what to talk about while I'm going to get fooled for sure [due to inexperience]' (member of a regional education AC).

Legal and bureaucratic knowledge, along with extensive institutional experience, is seen as essential to being an authoritative speaker.

Calm and Dispassionate Discourse. Finally, a dispassionate and calm debating style is highly valued, though these skills are mentioned less frequently. For example, according to the member of an immigrants' association:

> You have to tone down your discourse a lot, not speak from your gut but more rationally [. . .] instead of speaking in a way that makes people uncomfortable [. . .], before we didn't mince our words, we were passionate, emotional. And I think that in these spaces we have to use a more rational discourse so we can reach consensus. Even if you get to walk a millimetre, you have walked more than before; when we made emotional speeches, we went backwards. So that's why I say, you have to train yourself a lot (member of a regional immigration council).

Other participants highlighted their difficulties using this consensual and dispassionate style when speaking in front of authorities, which, for some people, required effort and training, especially for those in militant, counter-hegemonic social movements (García-Espín, 2023; Young, 2001). Other speaking skills based on personal experience, or the passionate expression of collective suffering (Young, 2000) were mentioned as useful by only a few participants. As already stated, ACs are primarily conceived of as places for discussing technical issues and expert documents, so most participants do not expect to make passionate speeches linked to other contexts (special awareness commissions or protest actions). Furthermore, a passionate speaking style is not deemed as the most suitable because it is perceived as redundant; most participants are professionals working in associations, so they already have contact with harsh social realities through their everyday work (i.e. labour/housing precariousness, immigration status problems, educational needs, etc.).

However, in local ACs where debates are less centred on legal and technical issues and more on complaints, grievances and proposal-making, some participants did appreciate the possibility of voicing problems in their own words and based on their own (subjective) experience. In this respect, one participant stated that 'we are not strong enough to be able to offer alternatives, but at least . . . we have to speak about them [their concerns] . . . To describe in our own words what is happening to us' (social movement activist). Thus, in

local settings, some participants value a more passionate speaking style, challenging the calm mode of discourse that is dominant in regional and national spaces.

Conclusion

Public participation is often conceived as a response to the shortcomings of representative democracy, such as the lack of inclusion of citizens from politically disenfranchised groups. However, if we look closely at the composition of ACs, one of the most widespread forms of institutional participation, we find that they are often far from inclusive. This article explains this phenomenon observed in various policy contexts and countries (Brown, 2008; Collins, 2021; Font et al., 2021; Sintomer and De Maillard, 2007).

Considering the data presented here on presence and voice in a variety of ACs, professionalisation is the dominant model, quite removed from the theoretical expectations that connect these institutions with social inclusion. This is evident when participants' occupations and educational backgrounds are studied: managers, cultural, technical and scientific professionals are the most frequent participants at all studied levels and policy sectors. Furthermore, the data revealed a replication of the widespread 'middle class' predominance as in other political activities, such as associationism or protest actions (Gayo, 2021; Verba et al., 1995). The results reveal that professionalisation and participation from higher-status occupational positions become more common as we move up the territorial ladder. Nonetheless, the article demonstrates that the professionalised model is slightly less dominant locally and in some sectors such as environmental councils. This countertendency can be understood in the context of a participation labour less dominated by complex legal reviews and expert reports and more focused on submitting general grievances and broadly understood proposal-making.

The professionalised model of ACs may be illustrative of the social inclusion problems faced by many participatory institutions. Although ACs were initially conceived as institutions to promote the integration of subaltern social groups and their organisations (Cohen and Rogers, 1992; Hirst, 2002; Piven and Cloward, 1979 [1977]), this aim has not been fully achieved at least in terms of presence and voice. In this respect, the findings presented here are novel for two reasons: first, they define the contours of the current professionalised model in a variety of cases and policy areas and, second, they point to participation labour as a relevant factor that biases the selection of participants. Previously, no studies have delved into these trends and their causes (Collins, 2021), for instance, research has focused on showing both inequities in presence and voice, while skipping over the elements that explain this result.

We have considered relevant this study of the professional model for several reasons. First, ACs connect state institutions and civil society in a kind of 'mediation' institutionality. They embody semi-public sphere institutions where policy discussions are open to citizens and associations. On this basis, the absence of subaltern groups and the overwhelming predominance of employees from technical and managerial positions suggest problems with the integration and recognition of people from oppressed backgrounds. This is similar to the issues found in representative chambers, where few members of the working-class or minority groups break through the glass ceiling (Espírito-Santo et al., 2019; Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 2015).

The results of this study also suggest that many ACs play a limited role in social inclusion and the development of political capacities among the wider public (Meléndez and Martínez-Cosio, 2019). Participatory institutions can work as 'democracy schools',

potentially developing competences and political contacts and providing information to people who are not typically present in institutional politics (Pincock, 2012; Talpin, 2012). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that deliberative settings can spread political skills (Gastil and Dillard, 1999) and facilitate the exploration of new values (Hafer and Landa, 2007). Thus, ACs could better enhance the recognition of non-dominant discursive styles in public decision-making. Also, they should promote the expression of local knowledge and first-hand experience (Fung, 2006), by including other publics. However, limited inclusiveness implies that these benefits are circumscribed to certain social strata, which are already well-represented in most political activities. Therefore, rather than being schools of democracy, ACs may be spaces where associative and political elites interact and, therefore, just reproduce existing political inequities (Navarro, 2000). Furthermore, these institutions may have limited impact in growing and diversifying the body of citizens making contributions to public debate (Fraser, 1990).

Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation of professionalisation should be considered. The fact that ACs perform so poorly in inclusiveness does not mean that they are not valuable for other purposes, such as voicing a plurality of interests in policymaking (Cohen, 2009). In this respect, participants can act as representatives of associations that, in many cases, promote the needs of oppressed and exploited groups (De Graaf et al., 2015; Wampler, 2007). Suffice it to say, for example, that labour unions or migrants' associations frequently send lawyers or social workers to ACs to defend their needs and positions. Problems with inclusion should not take away from other purposes, that is, struggles to introduce critical issues and redistribution demands to the state agenda. Other studies have already shown that groups make strategic decisions to achieve better negotiation outcomes in the context of technical debates (Grillos, 2022). Thus, the choice of selecting professionals can be a strategy to improve the capacity of pressure in institutional spaces dominated by experts.

The professionalised model results from a complex combination of inequalities in associationism and a specific type of participation labour. Analysing the qualitative interviews, regulations and documents was fundamental to understanding the underlying logic of selecting professionals as the main components. Previous studies had suggested a double filter hypothesis, whereby the composition of ACs was highly dependent on external inequities and the internal decisions of associations (Brown, 2008; Navarro and Font, 2013). However, we have also demonstrated that decisions on who participates depend on the prevailing participation labour determined by the institutional design and the tasks and skills members agree to perform. Organisation directors choose those employees that, theoretically, can more easily develop the required expert, bureaucratic and legal participation labour.

In the end, the configuration of these spaces seems to reinforce the dominance of expert norms in politics (Martínez-Palacios and Nicolas-Bach, 2016). These findings are pertinent to ACs and shed light on the social inequalities present in other participatory spaces. Even those with different selection methods – for example, by lots – can encounter similar biases in composition and voice if the participation labour is conceived in such a technical way (Boswell, 2021). If careful attention is not paid to inclusive mechanisms and practices, design dimensions may inadvertently deter the contribution of people from oppressed backgrounds, exacerbating political inequalities (Baiocchi, 2003; Hernández-Medina, 2010; Nuamah, 2021; Smith, 2009).

Finally, it is important to consider the study's limitations. As we have already mentioned, both surveys and interviews came from a non-representative sample; however,

we consider that the reliability of the data is strong because the sample was large and well-diversified and the results are comparable with studies in other sectors and countries (Brown, 2008; Collins, 2021; Sintomer and De Maillard, 2007). There is also potential in examining the differences found across ACs, particularly what we can learn from the greater inclusiveness at some territorial levels and policy areas (i.e. local and environmental councils). Second, the analysis presented in this article concentrates on the dominant professionalised model and how it functions without exploring the critical narratives. As we have mentioned, in some cases there are also resistances, criticism and alternative proposals to exclusionary dynamics, which should be addressed in future studies.

The article set out to explore the professionalised model of participatory democracy embodied by ACs. The results allow us to conclude that, in their present conception, many citizen councils can be useful as expert commissions that give advice on public policies and to governments, including, at times, a variety of interests. However, more inclusive participatory spaces (special awareness commissions, citizens' committees, forums for affected social groups, *sortition* spaces, social movements, etc.) are needed not only to redistribute political capacities but also to counterbalance the excessive reliance on technical and professional backgrounds in political institutions and the public sphere.

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Supplemental Material

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Table 1. ACs Mapping in Spain and Andalusia.
Table 2. Andalusian ACs Mapping by Territory and Subject.
Table 3. Spanish ACs by Territory and Subject.
Table 4. Member's Profile in Surveys and According to AC Rules.
Table 5. Andalusian Survey Response Rates.
Table 6. Spanish Survey Response Rates.
Table 7. Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample.
Table 8. Qualitative Interview Codebook (N-vivo, Atlas-ti).

Notes

1. In some cases, self-selected citizens or citizens selected by lot also exist (see Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023).
2. Deliberation is considered here as participation in debates, in the broad sense of Talpin (2012).

3. Past and present pertaining. See Study 3195, November 2017, *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (Sociological Research National Centre).
4. Tasks are derived from the institutional design, which establishes certain functions for participants. In this case, AC regulations do not display very concrete tasks but broader official functions, contrary to other participatory spaces (e.g. participatory budgeting or mini-publics), where tasks are more clearly defined in bylaws.
5. See Seawright and Gerring (2008).
6. The appendix can be found in the journal webpage.
7. Cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants and provincial capitals with over 150,000.
8. Data were collected also in municipalities with over 20,000 inhabitants.
9. Representative sampling was discarded because there was a huge variation of topics across territorial levels and regions. So, we decided to select several topics to maximise comparison and contrast among policy areas. We also wanted to contrast associative networks and policy traditions.
10. Participants' contacts were on ACs' websites, or they were provided by authorities or by associations.
11. See Table 7 in the Supplemental Appendix for the number of interviewees and participants' profiles.
12. The list of AC members is usually available on their websites, although in some cases, we found contacts through news articles or by contacting public officials or associations directly. From these lists, we selected participants who represented contrasting positions (e.g. a representative of a union vs a representative of a business organisation; a member of an immigrants' group vs a religious organisation).
13. They were offered the opportunity of having the interview in a place of their convenience.
14. Not public officials or politicians who participate as part of their administrative obligations. Table 4 in the Supplemental Appendix provides details on the components of ACs.
15. We performed a z-test because this is the statistical test that best allows us to observe the relationship between these types of variables. It allows to compare participants' occupations and educational levels at different government levels.
16. Usually, the standing committee decides on the proposals to be submitted for a plenary discussion and suggestions are presented to a quorum vote.
17. One of our local cases was illustrative in this respect: every year, the plenary selected a groundbreaking topic and commissioned a research report written by a select few members.
18. Sometimes, association members work with public officials, especially in state-level ACs. For instance, in regional and local ACs, association members complain because they do not have this type of administrative support.

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