

Keeping them on a close rein: Authority-designed constraint mechanisms in Advisory Councils

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Introduction

The literature concerned about the risks and pitfalls of citizens' participation agrees that sometimes participatory processes and mechanisms might only serve to legitimize and support decisions that were already made by authorities (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Imperfect, deviant, tokenist, domesticated, "market tests", or "illusory" are different terms coined to identify participatory practices in which the degree of actual power that citizens hold is restricted by the authorities, to some extent. Constraints to full citizen control undermine the quality of citizens' participation, although institutional and contextual factors that may also affect this control remain unexplored.

Our research gives insight into the phenomenon of "steering", understood as practices, protocols, or institutional devices set to limit the actual decision power of citizens within participatory mechanisms. We explore the role of three potential explanatory factors behind institutional steering: first, the governance level (i.e. local or regional); second, the policy area addressed by the participatory mechanism; third and last, the ideology of the party ruling the administration responsible for the participatory experience. We also give insight to the mechanisms and dynamics used by authorities to steer citizens away from actual control or power. For this purpose, we use a mixed-methods approach to the reality of advisory councils (ACs). These are traditional participatory institutions (Lowndes et al. 2001) that display the characteristics of associative democracy for which previous research has identified "wardship" practices that are able to downplay the positive effects of well-designed and provisioned councils on their transparency (Galais, Fernández-Martínez, Font, Smith 2021).

Quantitative analysis draws on a Spanish dataset of a sample of a hundred ACs both from the regional and local levels of government. It aims to answer why some ACs display a "tighter" structure, which implicitly saves more power for the authority in place and leaves participants with little decisive power. More precisely, it puts to empirical test the possibility that regional (versus local), more strategic policy areas, and right-wing governments are more prone to put halts to the degree of power that citizens hold. We complement our findings with the analysis of interviews to ACs' participants, to find out which are the issues that stand out regarding the power of the authorities in the council and its impact on the AC functioning. Our quantitative results identify an association between a higher level of governance (regional) and more steered ACs; they also reveal some "strategic" policy areas that are more prone to suffer from steering (i.e. Health, Immigration, Environment). As for ideology, our analyses rule out a general association between right-wing ruling parties and steering practices, but they reveal a negative association between our research object and the so-called "cities of change", this is, the local governments ruled by citizen platforms stemming from the 2015 local election, following the 2011 Indignados

movement that demanded more participation. The qualitative evidence stresses the ability of politicians to steer these councils through other informal mechanisms, including rushing decisions and co-opting experts. However, these do not seem to be associated with the ideology of the government, but rather with the level of government at which they are located.

Theoretical framework

Participatory governance can be defined as the processes, structures and practices that allow citizens to be involved in public decision-making, complementing, but not replacing traditional institutions of democracy (Kübler et al. 2020). The participatory approach has become a good planning practice and is increasingly regarded as a means for balancing multiple interests (Kaza 2006). Participation has become a crucial feature of decision-making and planning processes, and it is believed to promote democratic skills and empowerment among participants while improving the quality and efficiency of the decisions (Innes and Booher 1999, Owens 2000, Cornwall 2002, Stringer et al. 2006, Fernandez-Gimenez et al. 2008). However, as participation becomes popular, the variability of existing practices increases, many of them deviating from the ideal original model. As a result, there is a long academic tradition that warns practitioners, politicians, and citizens about “deviant” forms of participation that fail to fulfil some requirements. Given that “meaningful participation requires the empowerment of participants and thus any evaluation of participatory activities must consider where power is found and how this is deployed” (Aitken 2010: 253), most of this literature focus on the actual degree of power that citizens have.

Ever since Arnstein (1969) used her “ladder” to signal how the lower rungs of participation were potentially subjected to manipulation, therapy or tokenism, imperfect forms of participation outstand by their disempowering practices, this is, by how they tilt the power balance in favour of the authorities and against citizens. Studies on participation in the domain of tourism development distinguish between “spontaneous participation” (analogous to “citizen power” in Arnstein’s typology and to self-mobilization and interactive participation in Pretty’s model, 1995), on the one hand, induced community participation (corresponding with Arnstein’s “tokenism” and with Pretty’s functional, incentive-based and consultation participation) and, finally, coercive participation, which corresponds with Arnstein’s non-participation and with passive or manipulative participation according to Pretty (Tosun 2006). Tosun points out that the real objective in these lowest rungs of the ladder is not to involve people in the decision-making process but to educate or cure the public to defuse threats and hostilities that may hamper the decision-makers and stakeholders desires.

“Domestication” has been another term adopted to signal practices that have turned into managerial exercises and displays of procedures and techniques, away from its radical roots focused on engagement (Cleaver 1999). Similarly, the urban development literature warns against “structural relations of dominance and subordination” (Fraser 1997: 79) that hamper deliberation between peers, and that under some circumstances may instrumentalize the participatory process, only serving to legitimize the authorities (Cooke and Kothari 2001, Raco et al. 2003, Taylor 2007). The mini-publics literature red-flags “market tests”, which identify practices meant to feed authorities information about how to better sell something – previously decided by an authority – to the general public (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). More recent approaches name this phenomenon as “the illusion of participation” (Samndong 2018). As for the restrictive aspect in which authorities “ward” the process, guaranteeing that a consensus is made which aligns with their own previous interests, the current research purposes the term “steered” participation, building upon a recent work that identifies this practice as a powerful suppressor of the positive effects of well-designed and provisioned councils on their transparency (Galais, Fernández-Martínez, Font, Smith 2021).

Some works have sought to identify the traits that characterize “performative” participation practices (Turnhout et al. 2010), finding that authorities tend to exclude or include certain participants, force them into consensus, pressure them to display conformism (Mosse 2001), and hamper diversity (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Furthermore, participation can be restricted right from the start in regards the definition of the problems, range of solutions and decisions available (Gonzalo-Turpin et al. 2008), reinforcing existing frameworks and assimilating participants into existing practices. As widespread as it is the concern for flawed participation, research on its causes is scant. Some authors have suggested that public managers’ lack of trust in citizens is likely the main explanation for the authorities taking greater control over any participatory process (Aström 2020). But institutional and contextual factors might also be related to these steering mechanisms that disempower mini-publics participants. However, little is known about the institutional design of participatory local experiences and their fit within established representative institutions (Salvador and Ramió 2012).

A literature strand discusses the role of the level of governance on the effectiveness and rationality of participatory institutions and mechanisms. On the one hand, some arguments support that collective matters are better dealt with at a higher scale (e.g. national or supranational, see Dahl 1994, Flinn, 2000), as wider scales are more consistent with the common good and less susceptible to lobbying (Demmke 1997). However, “the higher the scalar level of collective decision-making, the lower the possibilities for participation of the relevant constituency (“input-oriented legitimacy”) and thus the more pronounced are potential conflicts” (Moss & Newig 2010: 2). Furthermore, local governance is believed to lead to better outcomes as it tends to rely on local lay knowledge and on the ability of local groups to self-organize and, in this way, guarantee social control over the process (Ostrom 1990). The literature also agrees that “decentralization is touted an enhancer of participation” (Arkorful et al. 2021: 202), as it empowers local people to participate in governance with further checks and balances that protect them from the interference of higher authorities. Furthermore, democratic innovations, this is, processes or institutions adopted to engage citizens in participation, deliberation and influence, were initially conceived to “bring the informed views of ordinary citizens into the processes of local government” (Stewart 1996: 32), and so they are intimately connected to the lowest scale of governance, although such democratic innovations have been applied over the last decades to regional, national and even supranational levels as well. Even so, given the long tradition associating the local level of governance to participation, the lowest scale of governance should be less prone to steer participatory practices. Not to mention that higher levels of governance deal with greater levels of power and higher budgets, so the authorities have more incentives to steer participatory experiences, so they do not lose control of the outcomes.

Secondly, policy sectors or areas might not equally be related to steering practices. From a utilitarian, market-based perspective, the government’s loss of control in the context of a participatory process can be regarded as a cost (Ianniello et al. 2019) and, as such, it will tend to be minimized. This would entail that more strategic topics and areas, where the budget at stake is bigger, would be associated with constraining practices. This is reasonable, as we know that the authorities in charge of participatory practices are sensitive to economic variables in a way that they tend to implement less citizens’ proposals and to cherry-pick the cheapest ones during crisis times (Alarcón et al. 2019). Also in regard the relationship between policy areas and the degree of citizens’ control in participation processes, Bishop and Davies (2002) conclude that one-way information practices (lowest rungs of participation) are common in policy areas such as “public health, road safety, and agricultural quarantine awareness” (:20). Partnership -mostly addressed through advisory boards-, in turn, implies some measure of joint decision-making, and are better suited for policy areas such as environment. Delegation, a step closer to full citizens’ control, is particularly important for long-term issues that extend the term of any given government, which might apply to education. In a cross-country quantitative analysis, Huxley et al. (2016) found that

defence, foreign affairs, economic affairs, and employment services were the policy areas less prone to let participants significantly reform a trend, unlike environmental protection, health and transport.

Hence, our two prior hypotheses are as follows:

H1: the higher the level of governance, the higher the tendency to steer participation.

H2: the more strategic a policy area is, the higher the tendency to suffer from steering.

But what is perhaps more intriguing is the relationship between citizens' control and ideology. Indeed, citizens' participation has been associated to the left of the ideological spectrum since its origins. While left-wing political representatives are more inclined to accept giving citizens a greater voice in the democratic process, right-wing ones are less willing and tend to prefer the traditional procedures of representative democracy (Bowler et al 2006, Junius et al 2020, Rangoni et al 2021). Ideological preferences for less inequality and the improvement of collective welfare versus a more conservative, pro-status quo view seem to be a relevant element in supporting citizen participation (Nylen 2003, Heinekt 2013). According to Sintomer et al. (2012), the participatory democracy model (implying that non-elected citizens have de facto decision-making power, even if the final decision remains in the hands of representatives) links participation with social justice, as its primary aim is inverting the priorities in order to benefit the poor, thereby creating a plebeian public sphere. Consequently, citizen participation "is a left-wing flag and is conceived as an alternative to neo-liberalism and as part of a broader social and political reform process" (Sintomer et al. 2012: 21).

Conversely, disempowering practices have been theoretically associated to the New Public Management paradigm, which bridges the consumerism and the democratic perspective (with a strong leaning towards the first one) to allow citizens to make choices while ensuring that public resources are used wisely. According to Rowe and Shepherd (2002), the two normative models that inspired the NPM paradigm are heavily value-laden. The consumerist model is service-led, focuses on information, access and choice, and is based on right-wing values. The democratic model is citizen-led, focuses on challenge and forcing those in power to consider and justify their practices, being left-wing oriented. For the sake of efficiency, NPM allows and welcomes that service providers retain power (Rowe and Shepherd 2002). As such, participation is seen as a form of management technique, a means of improving organizational learning, and even as a "social technology of legitimation" (Harrison et al. 1997).

Given that the New Public Management has been defined as a diffuse ideology (Flynn 1997) and has been hegemonic over the last three decades, the temptation to conclude that these disempowering practices were unavoidable and ubiquitous is great. However, persisting variation suggests that ideology was and is still relevant to identifying authorities' steering practices. Indeed, paradigms and models on public participation are not free from the effect of ideology. While the NPM introduced "reforms based on neoclassical or neoliberal doctrines in the field of economic sciences" (Cavalcante 2019:200) aimed at reducing the role of the state, post NPM paradigms have been able to incorporate new elements that contrast with the market exaltation of the 70s and 80s (Cavalcante 2019). One might conclude that the latter are both more in line with left-wing values and allow citizens to retain more control over participatory processes. However, the relationship is not that straightforward.

While left-wing parties have been found to foster deliberative tools (Colino and del Pino 2008), some recent citizen assemblies in Ireland and France have been sponsored by centre-right governments. Similarly, while the first Participatory Budgets were associated to left-wing

governments (Sintomer et al. 2008: 175), right-wing authorities promoted many of these experiences during the last decade (Allegretti 2012, Baiocchi and Ganuza 2016). In spite of these signs of homogenization along the ideological axis as time goes by, our general expectation is that left-wing authorities will be less prone to implement steering practices aimed at restricting the degree of power that citizens hold in democratic practices. Hence:

H3: Right-wing authorities will engage more often in constraining/steering practices than left-wing ones.

Research design

Data and context

In order to explore the relationship between authorities' ideology and steering practices, we will focus on an established and widespread form of participation: advisory councils (ACs). These are an abundant form of participatory institution in Spain since the 80s (Navarro, 1999) but also in a large variety of other European, American and Asian countries (Fobé et al. 2013, Sintomer and Maillard 2007, Cooper and Musso 1999, Coelho 2006, Campos and Gonzalez 1999). Examples of them abound and, with it, variance, being a fertile ground for finding associations and making meaningful policy recommendations.

Advisory councils are institutions with 1) a formal existence with explicit links to public administration; 2) a permanent feature of the institutional environment; 3) a degree of citizen involvement, typically through associational membership. Advisory councils can be understood as a form of associative democracy (Cohen and Rogers 1995). As such, they aim at bringing together a variety of social interests to solve functionally-specific problems (Cohen 1997). Its aims are varied in function of its rules: sometimes act as spaces for public debates, others act as a body that can be formally consulted by authorities or can provide advice (most of the time under request, but also voluntarily). Most of them develop an advisory role, with little impact on final decisions. The number of participants (often including experts) representing each organization (or type of organization) is normally established by laws or local regulations. The participants are most frequently appointed by the leadership of each specific organization. Although they can be territorial or sectorial, this paper focuses only on the latter, this is, in councils concerned about a specific policy field and/or a specific sector of the population.

ACs always have a plenary (with usually 20 to 80 attendees) that meets a few times a year and sometimes have other more operational structures such as working commissions or an executive committee. Meetings involve provision of information and discussion on items that come from the public administration or from civil society members themselves. In terms of decision-making, the practice of ACs varies, with some formally voting on issues, others using consensual processes and others being more a place for information exchange rather than decision-making.

Our database consists of 108 Acs based in the Spanish region of Andalusia. 25 are regional ACs, and 83 are local, conducted in 57 different Andalusian municipalities. Most of them were founded between 2002 and 2012. These 108 ACs represent a sample of the 594 sectoral councils that were found in this region through the mapping carried out as part of the AssoD-And project¹. A mixed strategy of web scraping and requesting information from municipalities and regional government

¹ This is the most complete and updated database available for Andalusia. Given the lack of an official "census" or list, it is the closest we have to a "universe" of Andalusian ACs. This database was completed in early 2021.

(both by telephone and e-mail) was used. In this way, the Andalusian sectoral councils at regional and municipal level (in the 82 Andalusian municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants) were collected. The sample of councils on which this work is based was selected to the greatest possible diversity: both local and regional, and from four thematic areas with different political backgrounds (education, immigration, environment, and health). For each of the selected councils, their regulations were searched for and coded. The codification was conducted by a group of three experts, using the same codebook. This is the information we will use as a basis for our quantitative analyses.

Regarding the qualitative material, 6 concrete cases were selected: 2 at regional level, 4 at local level. In order to achieve thematic diversity, councils were selected from two thematic areas: education and immigration. Finally, local cases were selected from cities of different sizes. These criteria can be seen in Table 1. Note that the two regional cases display the same ideological situation: the conservatives (PP) rule the region since 2018, and after almost 40 years of uninterrupted rule by the social democrats (PSOE). Among the four local cases, two have been long-term ruled by the conservatives, and two have been recently regained by the social democrats. For each case, 5-6 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of these councils. Both representatives of the administration (politicians and civil servants) and representatives of civil society (associations, federations and trade unions) were interviewed, as well as experts, if they were part of the council. All types of participants have been considered, to ensure diversity of opinions. Table A1 of Supplementary materials summarises the profiles of the participants interviewees for each case. This makes a total of 33 interviews, for which fieldwork was conducted between late 2021 and early 2022. The characteristics of the government in each case can be found in brackets in the table.

Table 1. Criteria for the selection of qualitative cases

<p style="text-align: center;">(R1) Regional level Education</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PP, right-wing, just last legislature; after PSOE long-lasting government)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(LE1) Local level Education >500,000 inhabitants</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PP, right-wing, since 1995)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(LE2) Local level Education >50,000 inhabitants – < 300,000 inhabitants</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PSOE, centre-left, since 2021; after a short government of a right-wing coalition)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">(R2) Regional level Immigration</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PP, right-wing, just last legislature; after PSOE long-lasting government)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(LI1) Local level Immigration >500,000 inhabitants</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PP, right-wing, since 1995)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">(LI2) Local level Immigration >50,000 inhabitants – < 300,000 inhabitants</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(PSOE, centre-left, since 2021; after a short government of a right-wing coalition)</p>

Methods

In this paper we use a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. As for quantitative sections, using various AC design variables we construct a measure of steering (explained in detail in the following section). We will first explore the bivariate relationships that

our steering measure holds with ideology, governance level (regional or local), and the subject covered by the AC. Then we will run a series of multivariate analyses, including OLS regressions and multilevel estimations. Multilevel analyses will be restricted to local-level ACs, where ACs will constitute the first level of analysis and municipalities the second one. This will allow us to control for municipality-level heterogeneity and also to include basic controls, such as the size and wealth of the municipality (measured using the number of inhabitants and income per capita, respectively). We also control for the abstention in the two last local elections, under the assumption that a more engaged citizenry will probably be less likely to be “steered”.

As for qualitative evidence, we analyse the 33 interviews available. More than 20 codes address aspects such as the profile of the interviewee, the origins and change of the council, its performance, and the process of decision-making, among others. We focused on those related to decision-making, authority relations, influence and the relationship with other institutions, as well as the changes that the council has undergone over time. The aim is to understand why councils are more or less steered, with special attention to the role of ideology, governance level, and policy area. However, the qualitative analysis has a more exploratory role, being open to other explanations and aiming at answering how is steering conducted. Particularly, we are interested in what role politicians played in the council, what their strategies were, and their potential motivation to steer ACs.

Quantitative operationalization of “steering”

First, we looked at the composition of the ACs, and more particularly of the directive bodies, under the assumption that if roles higher in the hierarchy were held by politicians or members of the administration, steering practices were more likely to happen. There was hardly any variation in regards to the president, almost always a politician or public official (90% of observations). Hence, we tap exclusively whether the role of vice-president is held by the political or administrative authorities or someone else not based in the administration. Next, we considered who was able to convene meetings, under the assumption that if only directive bodies could do so this was consistent with constraining practices. On the contrary, if members could convene meetings, this implies more opportunities to challenge administrative dominance. Next, we considered the number of times the AC met over the course of a year. A minority (N=5) only met once, while one AC met as many times as 10. The mean of this variable was 3.3, so we considered that those meeting more often than 3 times a year were less suspicious of being steered, while those meeting less often were more likely to be subjected to constraining practices. If AC members were asked to vote we considered them less likely to be steered. Similarly, if the AC had a permanent commission -which allows for permanent involvement of lay citizens over the course of the year, beyond formal meetings-, we considered them less subjected to authorities’ constraints. Similarly, we consider the number of collegial bodies, under the assumption that more complex structures allow citizens to retain power and fight back steering attempts. We also had a look at the internal composition of the council. If the percentage of members that were not citizens (including representatives of organizations) was higher than 25% we considered it more susceptible to steering practices.² Finally, we considered whether the recommendations made by the AC were compulsory or non-compulsory³.

² This included politicians, positions of trust, public officers, and representatives from other administrations.

³ All ACs for which the information on these variables was not available were coded as 0 in order to keep the number of missing data at bay.

From these eight dichotomous items, six were reversed (so higher numbers indicate constraining practices, see indicators 3 to 8 in Table 2), then added to create a steering scale, for which the Cronbach's alpha is 0.80. After normalization, the scale runs from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate a maximum of steering practices and 0 indicates the minimum. The mean value for this variable is 0.38, and the standard deviation is 0.29.

Table 2. Steering indicators and scale

	Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
1.	Vice-president is a member of authority	108	.324	.470	0	1
2.	Only directive bodies can convene meetings	108	.102	.304	0	1
3.	The AC meets more than 3 times a year.	108	.519	.502	0	1
4.	Members vote	108	.731	.445	0	1
5.	Composition: Percent of non-citizens is less than 25%	108	.593	.494	0	1
6.	There is a permanent commission	108	.556	.499	0	1
7.	Compulsoriness of Acs recommendations	108	.463	.501	0	1
8.	Number of collegial bodies	108	2.64	0.6	1	3
	STEERING SCALE	108	.38	.29	0	1

As for the independent variables, we have considered two levels of governance, regional and local, depending on whether the AC was created by a regional (the Andalusian government) or local authority. As for policy areas, we consider them “strategic” if “a government considers it to be very important for the country’s economy or safety” (Cambridge.org). Our coding distinguishes between four policy areas: Education (N=55, 51% of the sample), Environment (N=29, 27%), Immigration (N=8, 7%), and Health (N=16, 15%). We consider Immigration and Health to be more strategic than Education and Environment, given that the first is related to security affairs and the second area is one of the most expensive ones according to the Spanish state’s general budget -certainly, the costliest among the four considered here-; hence they are expected to be more prone to suffer from steering practices.

Next, we tapped authorities’ ideology following different strategies. First, it must be noted that we hardly have any variation on this respect at the regional level, as the Regional Andalusian government was ruled uninterruptedly by the PSOE from 1982 to 2019. Hence, only one regional ACs founded after that date is coded as right-wing. As for the local governments, we coded them as “left-wing” if the winner of a local election was a left-wing party (namely, PSOE, IU, PODEMOS, and the Andalusist party). More specifically, we associated ACs with left-wing local authorities if the winner of the last local election before the last modification of the AC regulations was a left-wing party. For 20 observations missing this information, we have used instead the year of creation of the AC. In this way, we have information for 62 local cases in total. Alternatively, we will consider the effect of local government; this is whether successive left-leaning governments (tapped using the most voted party in each local election) positively affect our steering measure, or else.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that Spanish local political landscape suffered a major turmoil in 2015, when a significant number of the “indignados” social movement’s activists stepped forward

to create new political formations to participate in the electoral process. These citizen platforms took different names and won the 2015 election in several major cities (Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza, Cádiz, A Coruña, among others), which became popularly known as “cities of change” (Feenstra & Tomey 2021). Among their pledges, they agreed to transform traditional representative politics by making it more participatory and engaging. Their associative tradition, their rooting in different social movements and their firm commitment to a horizontal and participatory model of democracy suggest that where one of these “new left” parties ruled after the 2015 election, less steer practices should be in place. A case in point is the demand from Podemos Sanlúcar (an Andalusian municipality) in 2019 to reactivate the different Citizen Participation Councils that were constituted by plenary approval and that have been paralyzed for years, along with more transparent and clear accounts and the celebration of several citizen consultations.⁴

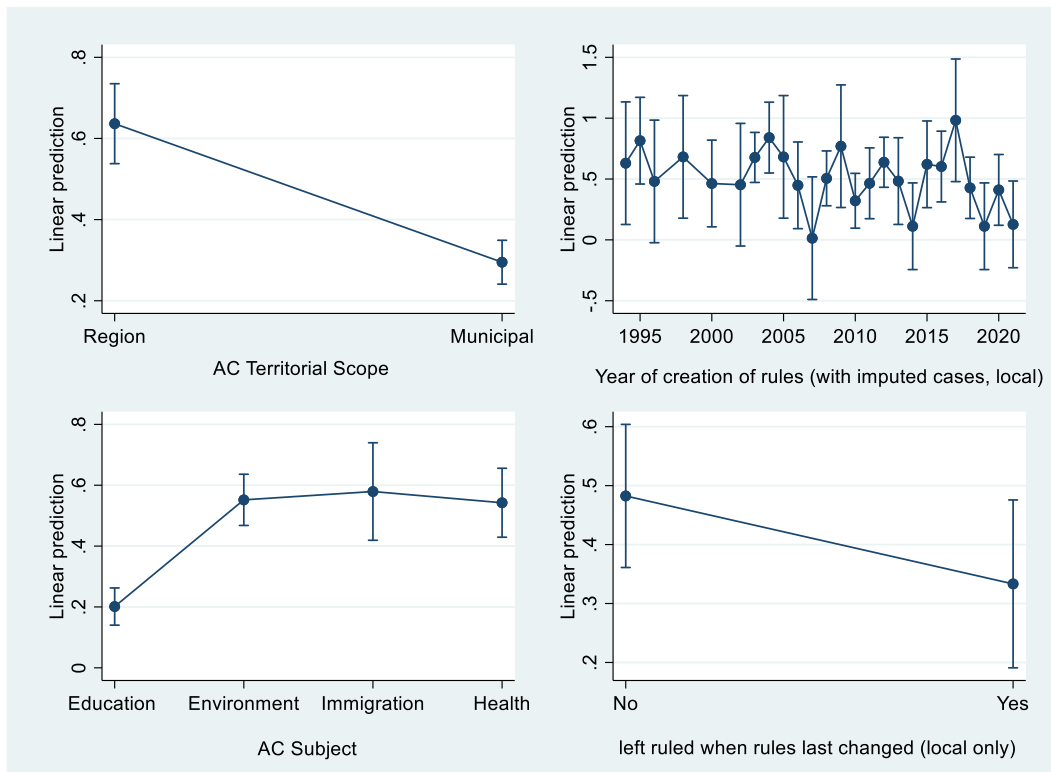
Results

Quantitative analysis

Figure 1 summarizes the results of a series of bivariate analyses involving our main variables. Based on the observations for which we have information on the year of the last modification of the AC rules, steering has gently decreased over the years (Pearsons’ $R = -0.33$, $p = 0.008$). Based on t-test analyses, we can conclude that region-based ACs obtained a higher steering score (0.61) than local ones (0.26), differences being significant at the 0.05 level. An ANOVA analysis revealed that the ACs more prone to fall into steering practices are those devoted to Health (0.72), followed by Environment (0.56) and Immigration (0.47). Education comes in the last place (0.10). As for the local ACs for which we have information on the date of their rules’ last modification, a t-test analysis indicates that the steering mean score is higher for municipalities not ruled by the left at the time (0.48) than for those ruled by the left (0.33), and this difference is almost significant for a one-tailed test ($p = 0.057$).

⁴ Source: <https://andaluciainformacion.es/andalucia/842192/podemos-exige-los-consejos-de-participacion-ciudadana/>

Figure 1. Average steering scores



Next, Table 3 presents several OLS estimations that aim at putting our hypotheses to the empirical test. The first column presents a straightforward approach, using all the observations for which we had information about the policy area, showing that authorities have a higher tendency to steer environment, immigration and health-related ACs, as compared to education-themed ACs. It also confirms a lower tendency of local ACs to be steered as compared to regional ACs. The second and third models nuance our expectation on the effect of ideology, since its coefficient is only significant as long as we do not include further controls and we include both regional and municipal observations, suggesting that the variable largely overlaps with governance level (namely left and regional). The effect of governance level and policy area, however, are impervious to controlling for ideology (see model 4). The last estimation includes clustered standard errors by the municipality, focusing only on local governments and confirming the explanatory power of the policy area, health-themed ACs being the ones more prone to be steered.

Table 3. Effect of ideology and policy area on steering practices

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Left ruling when rules last modified		-.241** (.077)	-.15 (.092)	-.099 (.074)	-.082 (.087)
Environment (ref: education)	.296*** (.047)			.299*** (.067)	.346*** (.056)
Immigration (ref: education)	.384*** (.075)			.327** (.097)	.417** (.114)
Health (ref: education)	.278*** (.057)			.330*** (.084)	.472* (.180)
Municipality (ref: region)	-.275*** (.047)			-.198** (.067)	
Constant	.436*** (.048)	.574*** (.039)	.482*** (.065)	.438*** (.062)	.178** (.056)
Observations	108	62	38	62	38
R^2	.536	.140	.07	.462	.463

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. estimations 3 and 5 feature local ACs only and clustered standard errors by municipality

Next, a multilevel linear model has been employed to estimate the effects of the subject and government's ideology, this time focusing on the ideological leaning of the party most voted in each local election. The assumption here is that, regardless of coalitions and bargains, the most voted party can carry the influence of their participatory culture to citizen participation. Alternatively, we can also consider that having a left-wing party as the most voted one taps the participatory culture of the municipality, and that citizens willing to have a left-wing government will be less willing and prone to be steered.

For this purpose, only municipalities have been considered. In this case, ideology is tapped paying attention to the party that won each election in each municipality from 1979 to 2019. While the estimation considers the subject as a level-1 variable, a series of level-2 controls have been included, namely abstention rates in the last two local elections, the size of the municipality (measured as number of inhabitants in 2020), and wealth (measured using the average net income per capita in 2018). The results suggest that having a left-wing party winner in the 2015 election significantly de-escalated steering practices. The possibility exists that municipalities ruled after 2015 by new left parties were had in fact a more participatory culture and were more dense in associations, social movements and vibrant participatory activities, although the consideration of participation rate in the last local election tries to account for these confounders. No other level-2 control variables turned out to be significant except wealth: wealthier municipalities are less prone to have their ACs steered ($p=0.066$). The tendency of health-related ACs to be more steered than the rest is again confirmed by this estimation.

Table 4. Multilevel linear estimation of steering practices within ACs

	steering
Most voted party in 1979: left	-0.025 (0.049)
Most voted party in 1983: left	0.159 (0.081)
Most voted party in 1987: left	-0.094 (0.065)
Most voted party in 1991: left	0.123 (0.073)
Most voted party in 1995: left	-0.041 (0.058)
Most voted party in 1999: left	-0.091 (0.075)
Most voted party in 2003: left	0.054 (0.069)
Most voted party in 2007: left	0.020 (0.067)
Most voted party in 2011: left	-0.040 (0.060)
Most voted party in 2015: left	-0.168* (0.066)
Most voted party in 2019: left	0.081 (0.063)
Inhabitants in 2020	-0.000 (0.000)
Average net income per person 2018	0.000*** (0.000)
Electoral local participation 2019	-0.000 (0.000)
Environment (ref: education)	0.284*** (0.048)
Immigration (ref: education)	0.393*** (0.077)
Health (ref: education)	0.317*** (0.063)
Constant	0.342 (0.297)
<hr/>	
Ins1_1_1	
Constant	-18.905 (5365.568)
<hr/>	
Insig_e	
Constant	-1.762*** (0.078)
<hr/>	
Observations	83
ICC	0.012

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Reference category for subject: education. ICC for the null model= 0.062

Qualitative analysis

So far, we have dealt with the possibility that either ideology, governance level or the policy area drive politicians to make institutional design decisions in order to secure their decision-making

power. However, the steering of the participatory process can take place in other ways that are not institutionalized and will therefore not appear in our quantitative analysis. More informal dynamics can also act as a suppressor of council members' decision-making capacity. The qualitative part of this paper, building on the ideas outlined above, aims to find out whether participants corroborate this view or whether they point to other ways in which authorities “ward” the participatory process.

The first element that favours the power of the administration is that every individual interviewed (regardless of their profile) assumes that the AC is not a decision-making space. This is common to all of our six cases analysed. Whether the interviewees see the council as a purely informative space (they attend mostly to receive information, but also to inform and to contact and debate with the rest of the participants) or as a consultative space (where their opinion is listened to and minimally considered for subsequent decision-making), there is a common discourse that "the last word" is left to the administration. As it is not obliged to give any explanation to the plenary about its final decision, any agreement, proposal, or suggestion coming out of the council is easily reduced to nothing. Binding capacity is something that could be in the regulations of the councils, but most of them are established as non-binding. However, despite being non-binding, the council's decision does matter to the administration. If they get a negative vote, this can be instrumentalized discursively by the opposition or by those actors who have grievances. This is important because although the council's decisions do not necessarily change public policies, they do influence the framework in which these are debated. This leads to the use of informal mechanisms to “steer” the participatory process.

"But at the political level, the people in charge must play a more critical role (...) we have seen that the administrations tend to pull in their own direction" (I13, Association member, R2)

"The administration, well, even if it is consultative, it also likes to be endorsed (...) if something comes out that the administration is not willing to approve (...) because it serves... the unions, etc. or the parliament itself, it serves as a bit of a... a weapon, doesn't it? For their political battle, in other words, the School Council has given the approval to this or that proposal" (I14, Politician (council president), R1)

To do so, politicians use their central position in the council. Chairs (politicians in all our cases) act as intermediaries between the AC and administration. They represent the administration and its interests on the AC, setting the tone, the positions and trying to make this vision the prevailing one. To do so, they use a variety of strategies, some of which are common to several councils analysed. Firstly, the administration may use the council as a space to "sell" its projects or political progress. Thus, in some cases, the meetings are used as a space where the politician reads to the participants the project that the administration is presenting to them or the list of things they have done so far. This, in the opinion of the interviewees, is given at short notice to the participants. In this way, discussions are made more difficult, as there is no time to read them beforehand. In some cases, we even found that politicians abort the discussions with the associations by imposing themselves.

"The government took advantage of the fact that they had everyone gathered there and told them whatever they had to tell them, didn't they? (...) it served, just as a loudspeaker when the government had the intention of telling them something". (I9, Politician (council vicepresident), R2)

"They are more informative than participative (...) they tell you: well, this year we are going to do this, this and this" (I22, Association member, LE1)

"To me, for example, I think it would be positive if, when the call is sent out, the documents that are going to be presented were also sent (...) I mean, that it is not just a matter of presenting it there, so that we go there with information, and we go there with more real contributions, right?" (I16, Association member, LE2)

"Sometimes has happened that... you put an issue on the table and the answer is "well, we don't have time today and we'll see about it another day", right? I mean, they avoid it being a space for confrontation". (I10, Association member, R2)

"It is true that there have been meetings in which... the president of the Council has said "this is the way it is, and that's it", there is no more discussion". (I28, Association member, LI2)

Our cases indicate that this does not depend on the ideology of the government: the performance is similar under any government. The only case that shows something different is LI2. This local council was created by the PSOE (centre-left party), but the government soon passed into the hands of the PP (right-wing party), which paralyzed its functioning under the pretext of the pandemic. They also modified the regulations to reduce the number of assemblies to be held. As some interviewees indicated, even when the situation normalized, they did not want to restart it because they did not believe in it. After the resignation of this mayor, the PSOE returned to the government, restarting the council shortly before our interviews. According to interviewees, this is because participation is part of the PSOE's agenda.

"The PP was a little afraid that these councils would take on a leading role in municipal politics, so what it did was not to eliminate them, but to minimise their functioning. That's why they reduced our council to once a year" (I25, Association member, LI2)

"It has been stopped because there was a government team that didn't believe in this, and secondly because of the pandemic" (I27, Association member, LI2)

"The Socialist Party, which is the one that is now holding... the one that is, let's say, promoting this participation (...) I think it is part of their political agenda, isn't it? On returning to the exercise, let's say, of the mayor's office, right, and of the whole government team in the city council, they are doing it. They have reactivated these spaces, which they didn't have with the other new one. Now, ummmm... new developments. I don't think there are" (32, Association member, LI2).

Interviewees acknowledge that changes in government bring about changes in council dynamics. But more from the point of view of progress within the council. Their interlocutors change, but sometimes the area to which the council is attached also changes. The latter is particularly true in the case of immigration-related councils, whose competencies may pass through different departments depending on the government. This entails a change in the work that they had been doing under the previous government, which is sometimes restarted (at great cost) or even paralyzed (as in the previous case). In one case (LE1) problems emerged when the local and the regional governments had different ideological orientations. In this case, the regional government belonged to the PSOE and the local government to the PP. As long as this lasted, conflicts over competencies and who should be in charge of which things were the norm in this local council. This generated a lot of disaffection among participants, discouraging participation. When both governments had the same ideological sign (both PP), these conflicts ceased. Thus, while it is true that changes in political colour do influence the work of the councils, their functioning and decision-making capacity does not seem to be strictly influenced by this.

"During all the years that we have had PSOE in the Territorial Delegation [regional government] and PP in the city council (...) this was a schoolyard (...). And this has not happened in just one council, eh? This has happened, I would say in many, while there has been political duplicity in the two institutions. Then, the PP arrived in both places and this has been a very quiet place" (I20, Trade union member, LE1)

However, we do see a clear difference between regional and local councils. In the former, there are more "formal" strategies to control the balance between the administration and the rest of the participants. In the two regional councils analysed, the high number of seats held by the administration stands out. Some interviewees indicate that it is common for the president of one of the regional councils to invite experts (people specialized on the issue at stake) to present a summary of the board's vision, which often coincides with that of the administration. This is the prerogative of the chair, and the experts can then also vote in the plenary. Some interviewees suggest that the administration does not clearly explain to these guests that they can vote critically and in conscience. Others suggest that these experts show a clear ideological link to the ruling administration. The result is that, on many occasions, the experts vote in acquiescence to whatever the administration proposes, skewing the votes in favour of the administration. These strategies have been identified only in the regional councils. This does not seem to depend on the issue, nor on the ideology of the government: in fact, interviewees explain that this has happened because the regulations allow it, and that these practices are recurrent regardless of who is in power.

"At the time, when the issue was discussed, it was decided that... most of the members would be proposed by the president of the council, and in this case, as the president is appointed by the council, they obviously vote according to the president's opinion" (I5, Association member, R1)

"The administration appoints the president, the administration appoints what they consider to be a personality of recognised prestige and those they appoint are more or less professionals in the sector, but ideologically related" (I8, Association member, R1)

"I mean, all the part that represents the non-administration is always in the minority or at least the same amount. So if there were to be a vote at a given moment, if the administration is all in agreement, it is impossible for anything else to come out of it. So that's a bit problematic (...) basically what they do is cover a position (...) because in the end they don't give up the majority" (I6, Trade union member, R2)

In local councils, the ways in which politicians use their centrality is different. Firstly, when there is a consultation from the council to another area of the local administration (but not related to the field of the politician involved), politicians tend to be in charge of making the consultation to the responsible person. In regional councils, there is usually more representation from other institutional bodies and other branches of government, so these intermediate consultations are less necessary. Secondly, in some councils, the politician also holds bilateral pre-plenary meetings with AC participants. This helps them to canvass opinions before participating in the plenary so that they can bring proposals that will not be so contested and can be approved by the council. All this means that, in the end, the politician is a fundamental part of the councils' functioning.

With respect to the hypothesis raised here about the political and relevance of the issue under debate, this did not emerge during the interviews. In fact, a recurrent issue to explain the lack of decisive capacity of the councils was the lack of competencies of the administration that runs it. This is more evident at the local level. In both education and immigration local councils, the capacity of the local administration is to manage a few small things (carrying out awareness-raising activities, establishing public holidays, repairing damage to certain infrastructures owned

by the local government, etc.). This leads to this being used by the administration as an argument for ignoring the complaints of the participants. Rather, the difference in “relevance” lies between regional and local councils. And as mentioned above, it is also where there are more “formal” strategies to control the balances between administration and the rest of participants.

Conclusions and discussion [to be done]

-the effect of the ideology is hard to measure... we lack many relevant data (e.g. on the founding year) and we can only imperfectly approach the local government’s ideology. What about the ideology of public officers?

-the effect of ideology in 2015 must be related to the “new city councils for change”. Podemos and friends and their horizontal views and love for “true” participation. Expand. Mention the Joan and Patricia (2019) on the municipalities of change in Spain and their translation into more citizen participation

-the effect of the AC subject is robust to several model specifications: Health issues are more “strategic” (?) expensive (?) or technical (?) and hence more prone to be steered. More ideas in Brugué, Font and Ruiz (2020).

-municipality’s wealth is negatively related to steering practices.

On mechanisms: politicians can be really creative steering processes without officially changing the rules, for instance by rushing meetings, co-opting experts or directly forbidding attendees to have a say.

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Supplementary material

Table A1. Profiles of interviewees for our case studies

		Profiles and number of interviewees		
Level of government	Policy	Administration	Civil society	Others (political opposition or experts)
Regional	Education	2	3	1
	Immigration	2	5	0
Local	Education (>500,000 inhabitants)	3	3	0
	Immigration (>500,000 inhabitants)	1	1	1
	Education (>50,000 inhabitants – < 300,000 inhabitants)	2	3	0
	Immigration >50,000 inhabitants – < 300,000 inhabitants)	2	5	0