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Cherry-picking participation: explaining the fate of proposals from participatory processes

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Abstract

What happens to the proposals generated by participatory processes? One of the key aspects of research on public participation that has been the subject of rare systematic analysis and comparison is the fate of the output from participatory processes: their proposals. Which specific factors explain whether proposals are accepted, rejected or transformed by public authorities? This paper contributes to this gap in our understanding in two steps. First, we identify contextual, process and proposal related factors that are likely to affect the prospect of proposals being implemented, generating a set of testable hypotheses. Second, we test the explanatory power of these hypotheses through multilevel analysis on a diverse set of 571 policy proposals. Our findings offer evidence that while there is no effect for contextual factors, both process and proposal related variables have significant explanatory power. The design of participatory processes affects the degree of implementation, with participatory budgeting and higher quality processes being particularly effective. But most significant for explaining implementation are proposal level economic and political factors: a proposal's cost, the extent to which it challenges existing policy and the degree of support it has within the municipality all strongly affect the chance of implementation.

1. Introduction

Public authorities make extensive use of public participation processes. Many of these processes generate large numbers of proposals that recommend particular actions on the part of authorities. But we know very little about the extent to which such proposals are implemented. This is a significant lacuna in our understanding of the impact of participation on public decision making (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014: 81). After all, if proposals are ignored and there is no discernible effect on the policies and practices of public administrations, then one of the central rationales of a more participatory politics is brought into question.

Where evidence exists on the impact of proposals it tends to be from qualitative case studies of exemplary participatory processes (e.g. Baiocchi 2005: Warren and Pearse 2008) or comparisons of the fate of proposals from a small set of fairly homogeneous processes (Barrett *et al*, 2012; Font and Blanco, 2007; Olken, 2010; Progrebinshi and Samuels, 2014; Goodin and Dryzek 2005; Kochskämper et al. 2016; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). As such it is difficult to generalise to the diverse practice of more mundane participatory processes run by public authorities. Where larger scale comparisons exist, they tend to be for a single type of participatory process – for example, participatory budgeting (Boulding and Wampler 2009). Attempts to provide a more inclusive analysis across the field suggest limited and unsystematic effects (Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007; Mazeaud et al, 2012; Hoppe 2011). For example, in a study from the UK, Lowndes and her colleagues discovered that ‘only one-third of local authorities felt that public participation had a significant outcome on final decision making’ (Lowndes *et al*, 2001: 452).

Our aim in this paper is to develop a novel insight into the factors that explain variation in the fate of proposals across different participatory processes that are organised by or in cooperation with local authorities. These local participatory processes, established to generate proposals from the public, differ from forms of collaborative governance or co-production in which participants are directly involved in not only developing proposals, but then also implementing them. While elected politicians and local bureaucrats may be among the participants in such processes, typically they do not have a decisive voice, since these processes are developed to listen to demands 'from below'. Such processes often generate significant numbers of proposals for local authorities to consider.

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Traditional models of participatory governance will often use the term 'outputs' (Hoppe 2011) rather than proposals: we prefer the latter term because it reminds us that these are the recommendations put forward by participants. The term 'fate' is used rather than adopting the more common language of 'impact' and 'outcomes'. In participation research outcomes tends to refer to a broader range of effects, such as environmental, economic and social outcomes and individual, group and community level outcomes such as social learning, trust building and public legitimacy (Bryson et al 2013: 30; Fung 2003; Newig et al 2013). This type of research tends to focus on the overall impact of a participatory process rather than following how the public authority responds to each proposal individually.

Commented [GS2]: Ibid, footnote 2.

Our goal is not to explain the net impact of participation on political decisions or broader social outcomes, but to track the fate of participatory proposals themselves. In using the

term ‘fate’, we also recognise that there is not a simple causal relationship between proposal (output) and implementation (impact) – other factors may intervene in political decision making. Our research question is relatively simple then: Is the differential fate of proposals purely random or can it be explained by contextual, process design or proposal-related factors?

We approach this question through the first large-N analysis of proposals generated at the local level. This is the level of governance where most participatory processes take place and it allows us variation in both location and type of participatory process. Our large N approach provides a different set of insights to exisiting case study and comparative analysis, enabling us to make generalisations across context, process design and types of proposal[1].

We show that context variables have little effect and while some process variables are significant, it is proposal level variables that are particularly important to understand the fate of proposals. The effect of these variables provides evidence that authorities make a non random selection of proposals to be implemented, selecting those that are easier to develop or are closer to their own preferences. In other words, local authorities engage in ‘cherry-picking’ proposals (Smith, 2009: 93) or ‘selective listening’ (Sintomer *et al*, 2008).

The paper begins with a discussion of how we understand the relationship between proposals and implementation, identifying the different potential fates of proposals. This allows us to define the dependent variable to be used in our research. Second, we review a number of potential explanations of the fate of proposals: factors that may account for

[1] An alternative non-probablistic approach could be the use of fsQCA, although this would require a reduction in the number of explanatory variables (Ryan and Smith 2012)

why some proposals are implemented more extensively than others. Through the discussion of these factors we present our independent variables and generate hypotheses to be tested. Third, we explain our research strategy and the way in which we operationalized the variables across a set of 571 proposals that emerged from local participatory processes developed in three Spanish regions. Fourth, we present the results of a multilevel analysis conducted to test the significance of the various factors on the implementation of proposals. We conclude with a final discussion of these results and some of their potential implications.

2. From proposal to implementation

Many proposals can emerge from a participatory process. The distinctive characteristic of the proposals that we are focusing on is that they are recommendations (or demands) to the local authority to take some form of action. Such proposals can be extraordinarily diverse, in different aspects such as the degree of specificity of the proposals (from paving a section of a road to the promotion of women's safety at night), their number (from one to hundreds resulting from a single process) or the formality of the procedure of approval of proposals within the participatory process (from voting and ranking all proposals to simply collating all the ideas that have emerged within the minutes of the meeting).

But not all proposals are acted upon by the sponsoring public authority. Explaining the different fates of these proposals is our central task and our measure is whether action was taken by the authority that corresponds to the recommendation in the proposal. It is not enough that the local authority agreed to act. We are interested in whether the

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proposal was implemented. For example, we may witness formal acceptance of proposals by officials at the end of a participatory process and then no further action. We understand such a case as failure to implement.

The dependent variable cannot be simply dichotomous: whether a proposal was implemented or not. There is a middle ground between implementation on one side and rejection or abandonement of a proposal on the other. An intermediate category captures whether or not a proposal was modified by the local authority between the end of the participatory process and implementation. We can think of modification in at least two ways: the local authority alters the substance of the proposal during the process of implementation or only partially implements the proposal. Modified proposals is a highly diverse category that includes cases ranging from programs that were established but then abandoned; to an infrastructure proposal that was built in a quite different area of the municipality; to an activity that was suggested for week-days, but was only implemented at week-ends. All cases share the characteristic that some degree of implementation took place, but in a way that did not strictly follow the proposed recommendation. For the quantitative approach taken in this article, the different types of modification are treated as one category[2]. In the analysis that follows, we thus distinguish between three fates of proposals: (1) rejected; (2) partially implemented or modified and; (3) fully implemented[3].

[2] A more detailed description of this category appears in ANON (2016) and the role played by technical considerations in the explanation of why these changes were introduced is discussed in ANON. The potential explanatory role of the way in which technical interventions took place were tested and does not change significantly the results shown here.

[3] From a democratic perspective, non-implementation and modification may not in themselves be problematic: there may be sound reasons as to why a public authority decides not to implement or to alter proposals. Providing public explanations (to be analysed in further research) for these decisions becomes crucial in these cases.

In sum, many proposals reach the desk of the local administration, but only a certain amount of them are implemented. Is there any logic in this selection process? The next section will discuss the factors that can facilitate or diminish the likelihood that a given proposal will end up being implemented by the municipality, generating a set of testable hypotheses.

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3. Potential explanatory factors of differential implementation of proposals

In isolating potential explanatory factors to explain the fate of proposals, we draw on the broad literature on participatory governance, including the specific research on the use of participatory processes by local authorities. While research on participatory processes has grown over recent years, a particular focus on explaining the extent of implementation of proposals is relatively rare. Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) argue that literature on participatory processes in US local government needs 'more research on the policy outcomes of engagement' (ibid: 82). Our particular research question is often only considered tangentially, if at all.

We distinguish three basic types of explanations: those related to local context, process design and individual proposal. This approach has strong affinities with the analytical strategies of Newig et al (2013) for undertaking a meta-analysis of literature on cases of participatory environmental governance and Nabatchi and Amsler's (2014) framework for exploring variations in direct public engagement at the local level. Newig et al's approach distinguishes between context, process and results, although the category of 'results' captures broader outputs and outcomes beyond our focus on the fate of individual

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proposals. Similarly, Nabatchi and Amsler distinguish between context and setting, process design and outcomes, with an additional focus on the motivations of sponsors and convenors. Again, their category of outcomes is broader in its ambitions than the specific impact of proposals on government action.

Contextual explanations are those where the characteristics of the municipality and public authority are the critical factor in explicating implementation of proposals: they provide an explanation of the fate of proposals regardless of the particular design of the participatory process or the nature of the proposal. Process design explanations place an emphasis on the characteristics of the participatory mechanism. While the distinction between context and process design is reasonably common in research on participatory governance, our study introduces a third level of analysis, proposal level explanations that focus on the specific characteristics of each proposal, including factors such as their cost or the degree of support within the authority for the proposal. We draw a series of hypotheses from each of these three levels.

a. Contextual factors

At the contextual level, much of the explanatory work on participatory governance focuses on the legal framework and willingness of public authorities to organise and institutionalize participatory processes. For example, there is a strong line of argument, particularly focused on participatory budgeting, that Left parties are more likely to establish participatory processes (Baiochhi, 2005), although as processes diffuse across the world, this ideological underpinning is less obvious (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014). But

while there may be ideological explanations for the organisation of participation, there is no reason to expect such ideological predisposition to the outcomes of a process once it is established. The contextual factors that explain the fate of participatory proposals are likely to be different in kind.

There are three contextual factors that have been related to the response of public authorities to proposals from participatory processes: participatory experience, availability of resources and the size of the population. The first, participatory experience, suggests that where a municipality has invested in developing 'participation infrastructure' (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015) it is likely to be more committed to responding to the input of citizens. To this end, the number of participatory processes and the existence of a municipal public participation plan are taken as proxies for the extent to which a participatory tradition is present, generating the following hypotheses:

H1. The number of participatory processes in a municipality increases the rate of implementation of proposals.

H2. The presence of a municipal public participation plan increases the rate of implementation of proposals

A second municipal-level variable that may explain the difference in the fate of proposals is the availability of resources: those authorities with access to resources are more likely to be responsive to the demands of citizens. The successful story of Porto Alegre's participatory budget and its distinctiveness from many other cases is often attributed to the availability of funding: the city was wealthier than others and the process started with a significant tax increase that provided additional resources (Baiocchi, 2005). More

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recently, Boulding and Wampler (2009) have explained the limited impacts of participatory budgeting in many other cities in Brazil by pointing precisely to the lack of funds that many of them had available for these programs. This generates the following hypothesis:

> H3. The higher income per capita in a municipality, the higher the rate of implementation of proposals.

A third municipal-level factor relates to the general claim within democratic theory that size of the population matters (Dahl, 1998: 110; Bryan, 2004). Debates about scale are far from resolved (Koontz 1999), although there is evidence from European water governance that local participation is generally more effective than at higher levels of governance (Newig et al 2016: 106). In principle, in a smaller municipality it is easier for participants to hold the public authority to account for failure to implement proposals, thus leading to the hypothesis:

> H4. The smaller the population of a municipality the higher the rate of implementation of proposals

b. Process design

One of the most extensive areas of research on participatory processes is the analysis of how the design of participatory processes (for example, form of interaction between participants; decision making powers; etc.) can be related to outcomes such as social justice, mutual learning, democratic skills and capacities and popular mobilization (Bryson et al 2013; Fung 2003; Hoppe 2011). Again though, this extensive literature does not

generally speak directly to our specific research question: the ways in which design characteristics may impact on the fate of proposals from participatory processes. We can discern at least four potential process design factors where there are good reasons to expect an effect on implementation: type of participatory process, quality of the process, number of proposals and the involvement of other authorities.

Participatory processes vary in the extent to which they are designed explicitly to impact on formal decision making processes (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009). As Baoicchi and Ganuza (2014: 36) note, some participatory processes employ an ‘exclusive conveyor belt’, with less veto points where proposals can be altered during implementation. This is often the case in participatory budgeting which is typically based on the distribution of a budget that the authority has already committed to the participatory processes. That said, as participatory budgeting has spread from Latin America to Europe, the extent of citizen control over budgets has become more ambiguous (Sintomer et al 2015). Compare the annual cycle of participatory budgeting with strategic planning processes where participants suggest proposals with a much larger time frame and there are generally more veto points: for example, proposals are often collated and then screened by policy experts after the participatory process has taken place. The type of participatory process would thus appear to be an important factor in the fate of proposals. This generates a fifth hypothesis:

> H5. Participatory budgeting will have a higher rate of implementation of proposals than other participatory designs.

A second process-level factor that we can reasonably expect to affect the impact of proposals is the quality of the process. This is not simply an argument that the outputs of a higher quality process are likely to be taken more seriously by officials, but also indicates the extent of commitment by the authority to the process. A higher quality process requires more investment in terms of time and resources. What makes for a higher quality process? Three design elements can be used as proxies for quality. The first is the use of facilitation: this indicates a desire to ensure that the variety of voices are heard; facilitators typically aim to ameliorate existing power dynamics to encourage those who are less politically confident to contribute. Second, the provision of high quality information aims at increasing the competence of participants in producing proposals. Third, the employment of external consultants is a recognition that the organisation of participatory processes requires particular specialist skills. Each element necessitates investment of resources by the sponsoring authority. Two of these aspects of quality can be seen reasonably as a proxy for more deliberative processes: facilitation and information (Smith, 2009). While this is a contested area in the literature with some suggestions that deliberation is less goal-directed and thus less likely to produce translatable outcomes (Gilman, 2013; Smith et al 2015), we will test the hypothesis:

> H6. The higher the quality of the participatory process, the higher the rate of implementation of proposals.

There are good reasons to expect that two further characteristics associated with process design could be related to the degree of implementation. The first is the involvement of other authorities in the process, particularly those from a higher level, such as regional administrations. Where other authorities are part of the organisation, horizontal

accountability appears, with external institutional actors able to hold the public authority to account for the implementation of proposals (Fung, 2006).

> H7. The involvement of other authorities in the delivery of participatory processes will increase the rate of implementation of proposals.

The final process-level factor that is likely to have an effect on the fate of proposals is the number of proposals that emerge for any given participatory process. While this is not a factor discussed in the literature, where a process produces large numbers of proposals it is reasonable to assume that it is more challenging for the municipality to respond to them all – both in terms of the necessary resources and the complexity of the implementation process within authorities – and for participants to hold the authority to account for implementation. Equally there is more opportunity to cherry-pick proposals as the number of proposals from a participatory process increases. The final process-level hypothesis therefore is:

> H8. The more proposals generated by a participatory process, the lower the rate of implementation of proposals.

c. Proposal related factors

The third set of potentially significant explanatory factors differentiates between the characteristics of proposals individually. Much of the research in participatory governance neglects the fact that the same process may produce proposals that have quite different fates: some are ignored whereas others are (totally or partially) implemented. Which are

the factors that help to explain these different fates of proposals generated in the same contexts?

Proposals sit in a relationship with the existing policy and practices of the public authority. It is a reasonable assumption that the willingness to adopt a proposal will be affected by the extent to which it conforms with or challenges existing practices. This can be seen as a path dependency argument with the weight of the past blocking change (Hoppe 2011: 178). We see a similar argument made in the 'goodness of fit' literature in Europeanisation studies: nation states are more likely to implement those European regulations and directives that fit with their existing institutional practices (Knill and Lenschow 2001). A more critical literature on public participation suggests that processes tend to be nothing more than forms of co-option to legitmate current practices (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Fiorino, 1990: 230-31). Following this logic, results of participation are used to legitimate support for the existing policies and practices of authorities. Such a sceptical perspective does not mean that all proposals will be ignored; rather only those that conform with existing practices will be acted upon. This leads to the following hypothesis:

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> H9. When a proposal challenges existing practices of an administration, it is less likely to be implemented.

A different explanatory factor is the presence or absence of support that a particular proposal garners. Critics of the goodness of fit hypothesis contend that a better explanation of implementation is not its relationship to the status quo but rather the preferences or beliefs held by political and administrative actors (Mastenbroek and Kaeding 2006). This is thus a different version of the cooption thesis in that it focuses on

the alignment of preferences between actors within the local administration rather than existing institutional policy and practices: if it is in the interests of key political actors to change the practice of the administration, then proposals from participatory processes that recommend that direction of change are likely to be supported. As Hoppe argues: 'The appearance of open participation… lends additional legitimacy to policies already considered, proposed and (almost) decided upon by the elites' (Hoppe 2011: 180; see also Fiorino, 1990). It is the match of a recommendation with the preferences of key political and administrative actors that is critical for the fate of proposals. While there are always complex rationalities and power constellations within public bodies, the most important actors able to influence a proposal's fate are the governing party and the civil servants responsible for implementation of the particular proposal (Ryan and Smith, 2012). This generates the hypothesis:

> H10. Support for the proposal from within the local administration increases the likelihood of its implementation.

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The final proposal-level factor is the cost implications of fulfilling each proposal: the higher the cost to the municipal authority, the greater the impediment for implementation. This factor may be mitigated where other sources of funding are available for the implementation of a specific proposal, for example from a higher level of government. To this end, we need to consider both the cost of proposals and whether external sources of funding are available, generating the final two hypotheses:

> H11. The lower the cost of a proposal, the higher the likelihood of the implementation of a proposal.

H12. Availability of external resources increases the likelihood of the implementation of a proposal.

4. Research design: from theory to operationalization

This section summarises the research design, data collection and operationalization strategy to test these hypotheses. A more extensive explanation of methodological details can be found in ANON (2016).

Research design and process selection

To test these hypotheses, we require variation in three levels: local context, process design and proposal. Simultaneously, we need to have a controlled amount of contextual variation, since extremely different contexts could create a scenario where alternative explanations would be impossible to control. Balancing these two concerns, our choice was to select a single polity with a constant legal and administrative framework (Spain) and to introduce contextual variation through the selection of diverse municipalities and regions. Spain is representative of the Southern European approach to institutional participation, in which there is limited supra local pressure to organise participatory processes and where ideological motivations for participation (for example, a commitment to social justice rather than to efficiency) tend to be more important than in other European countries (Font et al, 2014; Talpin, 2011). At the same time, the Spanish case was the only one where large and diverse datasets of participatory processes were available. We use a quite diverse collection of participatory processes developed in three

Spanish regions with different levels of development and history of participation (Andalucía, Catalonia and Madrid).

We selected a specific time frame, from one local election (2007) to the next (2011), thus combining the possibility that there was time enough for at least the initial implementation of these proposals (a minimum of three years between the participatory process and the fieldwork), but also that memories and administrative records are recent enough to be tracked (maximum of seven years between process and fieldwork in 2014). Since our goal is to analyse what happens to proposals, we focus only on those participatory processes that actually generate proposals (recommendations for action rather than, for example, complaints). Thus, *the population for our study is participatory processes sponsored by municipalities that generate proposals within three Spanish regions during the period 2007-2011*[4].

Our final unit of analysis is proposals. Since we are considering the possibility that different proposals emerging from the same participatory process are treated differently, we need to follow the evolution of a sample of these proposals to discover whether there are factors associated systematically with their differing fate.

A full list of participatory process does not exist. Thus, to construct the sampling frame we drew on two existing datasets constructed through web content mining and online surveys to municipalities that provided information on 809 participatory processes developed by subnational governments in Spain (see ANON 2016). 403 of those processes were developed in our temporal frame (2007-2011) and resulted in proposals. We selected 10

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[4] In permanent processes we selected proposals from 2010.

cases from each one of these 3 Spanish regions. We added 10 cases from a second Andalusian dataset that captured information on participatory activities of smaller municipalities to compensate for the limited presence of these municipalities in the first dataset.

To select these 40 cases we adopted a stratified sampling design to ensure representation of a diversity of participatory processes and socio-political contexts. The strata were created combining 4 variables: region, municipality size, number of previous participatory processes and process design. We simplified the diversity of participatory process designs into four broad types to create the fourth variable. The first two, participatory budgeting and strategic planning (e.g. Agenda 21, education plans, economy) are common forms of engagement: the former aims to distribute a given budget; the latter contributes to strategic policy development. We then divided the remaining processes into other permanent and other temporary processes. These permanent processes are mostly citizen advisory councils (e.g., Municipal Health Council or Neigbourhood Council), while the temporary processes are, for example, one-off participatory consultations or workshops. The final selection of cases in each strata was achieved through random selection, resulting in the final selection of cases represented in Table 1. The final sample is constituted by 39 rather than 40 cases because for one of the cases selected there were no available records[5].

Table 1 about here

[5] In order to avoid a sample dominated by best practices we adopted a strict substitution policy, resulting in only 9 cases excluded due to lack of cooperation. The result was an excellent cooperation rate of 81.3% (Total number of cases included in the final sample, 39, divided by the total number of selected eligible cases, 48).

From proposals to variables

In most cases, all the proposals generated by a particular participatory process were found in a single document. These documents vary widely in length, structure and detail. In a few cases (mostly for strategic plans), proposals were organized under a series of common policy areas or objectives. Even in these cases, however, each of the proposals could be implemented (or abandoned) independently from the other proposals. For example, one of the strategic plans includes the following proposals: complete the reconstruction of the historic castle; create a walking trail from the castle; develop a plan of equal opportunities for men and women; develop a participatory budget addressed to young people; develop a viability plan for the historical center of the municipality; create a business incubator to help promote small local companies.

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Some processes had over one hundred proposals (mean 53.2). As such it was necessary to find a balance between capturing a diversity of proposals from each process to observe potential cherry-picking and not to give too much weight to a single process in the final sample. With this in mind, we limited the number of proposals for which we collected information to 20 per participatory process. The selection of proposals was made through systematic random sample[6]. When the total number of proposals coming out of a single process was less than 20, all of them were selected.

To discover the fate of each selected proposal and collect information on each of the independent variables, we accessed a variety of sources. Initial data was drawn from

[6] In most cases, the process documents included a clear list of proposals (or a few of them that could be simply added). In a few cases (4 processes) the list of proposals was not fully explicit and was built by two coders of the research team and shared with the municipality to verify that our interpretations were correct. To select proposals we used systematic sampling, because it respects the structure of the listings of proposals, assuring a better representation of the different types of proposals.

official documents on the participatory process, some of which were publicly available. Further data was gathered through interviews with municipal officers, participants, government and opposition politicians and other informants. We also made use of media reports and personal blogs of participants.[7] We made a total of 162 interviews with an average of 4.6 per participatory process. The main goal of the interviews was to clarify the final fate of each proposal (i.e, to code the dependent variable) when official documents were not available. Some interviews were also useful to clarify characteristics of the participatory processes.

Commented [GS13]: 3.4. Expanded explanation of how data collected on each proposal.

The variety of sources as well as their differing quality meant that there were important differences in the reliability of information collected (e.g., official records versus subjective personal assessments). In order to account for these differences, the data includes a reliability filter. This is a dichotomous variable taking the value 0 if there were significant contradictions among two crucial informants and 1 if there was no important reason to have doubts about the final fate of the proposal. Excluding the non reliable observations results in 571 (from the original total of 611) observations, which are the ones considered in our analyses.

The dependent variable accounts for both the degree of implementation of a proposal and the degree to which it was modified. Implementation means there had to be evidence that the local authority had taken action to follow the recommendation[8]. Decisions on

[7] The codebook is available at ANONYMISED URL. It was tested and improved in a pilot case study. Each case was coded by a single coder, and weekly team meetings were used to ensure the use of common coding criteria.

[8]The focus of this paper is on implementation and not decision making by the local authority (see Newig et al 2017) because 'decision' proved to be an ambiguous category in the Spanish local context (e.g. what counts as a definite decision?) and it was thus difficult to garner reliable information. A more detailed

proposals were treated as if they were independent and clearly distinguishable. This is fairly realistic in the case of most of the relatively small proposals that emerge from local participation processes.

The dependent variable takes three values. Value 0 identifies all the proposals that were rejected or where the proposal was never implemented. Value 0.5 identifies the proposals that were significantly modified (or only partially implemented). Finally, Value 1 identifies all the proposals that were fully implemented without significant changes. Our dependent variable is, hence, of ordinal nature, which is taken into account when choosing an estimating strategy.

Drawing on the earlier discussion of explanatory factors, we use four variables at each level: municipal context, process design and characteristics of proposal. The independent variables are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

The participatory experience of the municipality is captured by two variables. The density of participation simply takes the value of the number of participatory processes developed in the municipality previous to the period of study.[9] The existence of a participatory plan is coded as a dichotomous variable (1, yes; 0, no). The size of the municipality is measured

descriptive, qualitative analysis of the extremely diverse categories of government reaction to proposals, short of implementation, will be developed in further research.

[9] See supplementary materials for the codings of the variables. Collapsed (ordinal) versions of this variable as well as of the number of inhabitants and income per capita were considered in alternative versions of our estimations without substantial changes being observed.

by the number of inhabitants. Finally, we have considered municipalities' income per capita, in euros in 2012[10].

The process design variables include the type of participatory process, which distinguishes between participatory budgeting (assigned the value 1), strategic planning (2), other permanent processes (3) and other temporary processes (4). The quality of participation is captured by a four-category index (0-3) where a process scores a point for the presence of each of the following three features: facilitator, external experts, high quality of information[11]. The number of proposals per process is a simple numerical value from between 1 and 131. The involvement of other supra local administrations takes the form of a dichotomous variable (1, yes; 0, no).

Finally, at the proposal level, whether or not the proposal is challenging to existing policy and practice[12] and the availability of external funding for implementation are captured by dichotomous variables, where the value 1 identifies the presence of these features. The implementation cost of each proposal is operationalized according to four categories: no cost, low cost, intermediate and high cost[13]. The presence of internal support captures

Commented [GS14]: 3.5a. How type of process measured.

Commented [GS15]: 3.5b. Clarifies the four point scale

Commented [GS16]: 3.5c In reponse to question about splitting quality index.

[10] Two other contextual variables relating to the municipality were analysed because of their role in explanations of the *establishment* of participatory processes: region and the ideology of the governing party. Both variables have no significant effects and their inclusion does not change the explanatory power of the remaining variables.

[11] The three variables are combined into an index for a number of reasons. First, for the sake of parsimony. Second, because there are good theoretical reasons from the literature on deliberative democracy that it is the combination of these factors that promotes good quality engagement (Gastil et al 2014; Smith 2009). Third, to avoid the risk of multicollinearity. If we split the index, the three variables have coefficients on the same direction, but only information reaches statistical significance

[12] This variable is generally based on the judgments of our interviewees, except if there was strong evidence that they had misunderstood the question. Proposals that represent a break with traditional policy or practice in the municipality were considered as "challenging". For example, among the proposals considered challenging there were more substantive ideas (to develop a new local regulation to prevent noise pollution) and more symbolic ones (to change the way in which a public protest is organised or managed by the local authority following an episode of violence against women).

[13] We lack information on this variable for 91 observations. As the type of estimation models we have employed is not compatible with multiple imputation, we have performed a classical imputation, predicting

support from both politicians in the governing party and from civil servants responsible for implementation of the proposal. In both cases we created a four-category variable that ranges from “completely disagreed” to “completely agreed”. These were added (Cronbach’s alpha 0.7), generating a quite skewed variable potentially overstating the agreement of the local actors. Finally, the index was collapsed into two categories, distinguishing those observations in which both politicians and civil servants completely agreed (77.8%) about the implementation of proposals (value 1) from those where there was more ambiguous support or none (value 0). For comparability purposes, all non-dichotomous independent variables were recoded to range between 0 and 1.

Since our dependent variable was measured at a different level (proposal) than some of our explanations (process and municipality level), we estimated the implementation of proposals using a series of multilevel regression models for ordinal responses, given the ordinal nature of our dependent variable.[14] These models allow us to consider dependent and independent variables measured at different levels. Although interpretation is not always straightforward, multi-level models yield robust coefficients ensuring that the effect of all proposal-level and contextual-level variables will not be overstated due to the similarities of proposals within a process or a municipality.

A crucial decision involved choosing between a two-level and a three-level analysis. We selected a two-level model for several reasons. First, although the data are undeniably arranged in three levels (proposals, processes, municipalities) they are not perfectly

---

the missing values of the variable “cost of the proposal” using 11 municipality characteristics and 13 variables that characterize the participatory processes. The results do not change if we run the models losing these 91 cases instead of using imputation.

[14] More specifically, we have employed the meologit STATA (13) command. The integration method used for the random-effects model (mvaghermite) performs mean and variance adaptive Gauss–Hermite quadrature.

pyramidal. Put in other words, our data do not comply with the rule of thumb regarding the minimum, safe number of units at each level of the analyses, which should ideally be 30 or higher (Maas and Hox, 2005). Instead of having 30 times more proposals than processes and 30 times more processes than municipalities, we have 25 municipalities, 39 participatory processes and over 550 proposals. The aforementioned rule of thumb is violated when considering processes nested within municipalities. Finally, a likelihood ratio test comparing identical models with two or three levels yielded no significant differences, suggesting that specifying a third level was not necessary. As a result, we have considered two levels. The first is the level at which the observations are measured, that is, the proposal level. The second, the 'contextual' level, includes characteristics of both processes and municipalities, although we have clustered first level observations using process identifiers. What this means is that municipal phenomena are regarded as aspects of process characteristics[15].

5. Results

We begin with a preliminary look at our dependent variable, tracking the fate of the 571 proposals. This is followed by the development and discussion of the multilevel model.

The fact that most participatory processes generate a significant number of proposals offers plausibility to the idea that some are cherry-picked. A preliminary search of the

[15] For instance, in order to explain the fate of a proposal A that emerged from Process B, we analyse the characteristics of the proposal itself (e.g. Was this a "challenging" proposal?), the process from which the proposal was generated (e.g. Were the participants well informed about the alternatives?) and the municipality in which the process was organised (e.g. Was it a small town?). In our model, the latter municipality characteristics are attributable to the process (e.g. a well informed process held in a small town).

original population of the 249 participatory processes captured through internet search showed that a large majority of the processes that generated implementable proposals had more than 25 proposals, with some processes producing more than 100 proposals. The scope for cherry-picking is also clear in the most preliminary look at the fate of proposals: 32 of the 39 processes fully implemented some of them; only three processes implemented none of them; and only four implemented all of them.

Figure 1, based only on the sampled cases, summarizes the fate of proposals from participatory processes. Cherry-picking exists, with local authorities responsive to some of the outputs of participatory processes. Our set of proposals is divided in three groups similar in size: implemented (35 percent), partially implemented and rejected (both close to 31 percent).

Figure 1 about here

Figure 2 presents the results of a multilevel mixed-effects ordered logistic regression that takes into account all the independent variables considered above. The graph gives us a visual impression of the impact of each predictor along with its significance, at 95 percent Confidence Intervals (value zero signals non-significant effects). It illustrates the strength of proposal-level variables: internal support for the proposal is the strongest predictor of implementation, followed by the existence of external funding. In the opposite direction, costly and challenging proposals are more often abandoned or substantially modified than implemented .

Figure 2 about here

The figure also confirms that aspects of process design affect the extent to which proposals are implemented: proposals stemming from high quality participation processes as well as those coming from participatory budgeting having more positive prospects[16]. Finally, no significant impact of municipal variables is observed.[17]

In order to clarify the impact of each of these variables, Table 3 displays the predicted probabilities for each category of the dependent variable and for each independent variable with a significant effect on the fate of proposals. For example, while non-challenging proposals have a 24 percent chance of being rejected, challenging ones are almost twice as likely to be rejected. Conversely, non-challenging proposals have a 42 percent chance of being fully implemented, and challenging ones only 26 percent. A similar effect is observed for the cost of proposals. The difference between the chance of rejection of low and high cost proposals is about 20 percent. Similarly, there is 15 percent more chance of proposals being rejected when external funding is not available compared to those with external funding. When both public servants and politicians in a local council give their support to a proposal, its likelihood of being rejected is 30 percentage points less than when one or both of these actors fails to offer support: a supportive authority

[16] To confirm that participatory budgeting did not have an overwhelming effect on the overall result given its particular characteristics, we reproduced the analysis excluding these cases. The results do not suffer any major change, with only two process characteristics (number of proposals and other administrations participating) now achieving significant results.

[17] Table 4 in the Appendix displays the multilevel estimations in detail, from the null model to the full model presented in Figure 2. The table confirms that introducing the municipal variables pairwise does not change the fact that their effect is not significant. However, these models also show that the size and wealth of the municipality probably have more explanatory power than the variables related to the municipality's participatory experience (lower estimated variance of the random intercepts). The lowest values of the AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) and the BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion) suggest that the second or third model (respectively) are probably the best in predicting the phenomenon under study This suggests again that the inclusion of municipal variables does not add to the explanation provided by the characteristics of the proposals and the process design.

implies a 46 percent chance of being fully implemented, while a proposal lacking support from politicians and public servants have only a 17 percent chance of full implementation.

Table 3 about here

Turning to variables associated with the participatory processes from which proposals stem, processes characterized by all three quality criteria are almost 20 percentage points less likely to be rejected than those with none of these characteristics. The effect is similar for full implementation, with proposals from high quality processes having a 45 percent chance of being fully implemented. Finally, proposals from participatory budgeting are 17 percentage points less likely to be rejected than those from other types of participatory process. They have a 51 percent chance of being fully implemented, while proposals from other types of process are only implemented 30 percent of the time[18].

6. Discussion

There is a suspicion within both academic and practitioner communities that public authorities cherry-pick proposals from participatory processes (Sintomer et al, 2008; Smith, 2009). If this is the case, then it may undermine significantly the democratic value of public participation. But the degree to which this selective listening on the part of public

[18] Correlations among these variables (available upon request) are not remarkably high, with only 4 out of 75 being over 0.3. Only cost and external funding (0.46) have correlations above 0.4. Our goal here is not to test how process design affects the content of proposals. While we cannot rule out that process characteristics have a larger influence through effects on the kind of outputs they produce, the relatively small correlation that exists among these variables (e.g, 0.06 between quality processes and internal support) suggests this additional effect would be limited.

authorities actually happens is the object of scant systematic attention, especially if we move beyond individual case studies or research focusing on a single type of participatory process or specific set of policies[19].

Our paper contributes to filling this gap through the empirical analysis of the fate of nearly 600 proposals emerging from 39 different participatory processes. The scope for politicians to cherry-pick certainly exists, as most of the processes end with a substantial list of proposals. However, the extent of discretion and selective listening is limited, with two-thirds of proposals being implemented, more than half of which without significant modification. It is possible that our results may be overstating the level of government compliance with proposals through two different mechanisms. First, there are some extremely poorly designed and organised processes that are not documented and so were not visible when the datasets were constructed. As a result, we are likely to have undersampled this set of least successful processes[20]. Second, the important role of local authority personnel as informants may have also biased the results in a positive direction, even if we always triangulated their reports with the perspectives of other local informants, excluding the case if they were too different. These caveats aside, we believe that this result is not simply a product of methodological challenges, but may well relate to the relatively limited nature of many of the proposals: small projects and ideas that can be implemented without facing a tremendous economic or political challenge. Local administrations can afford to be participatory and listen when they face demands that require few resources and are politically unchallenging. In other words, would these

[19] For environmental policies see for example Drakiewicz et al (2015). Their comprehensive approach also uses a research strategy that avoids the selection bias problem that exists in most previous research.
[20] Our decision not to include in our population processes without proposals also has an effect of excluding least successful processes. Even if they are not be expected to have consequences on local authority policy and practice, their existence contributes to the image of non-consequential participatory processes.

results hold for a different set of 'harder' decisions on more controversial issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980)? To a certain extent, we have an answer to this question, since our model already predicts that a population with a larger proportion of challenging proposals would result in more limited compliance by authorities.

When we turn to the factors that explain the extent of implementation, it is striking that none of the contextual polity factors analysed have an impact on the fate of proposals: our first four hypotheses are not confirmed. Not only do none of these factors reach statistical significance, but their overall contribution to the explanatory power of the model is almost null. It is important to recall here the different nature of our analysis and its dependent variable compared to most of the literature on participatory processes: contextual factors matter for the original organisation and successful development of participatory processes, but none of them contributes to explain the fate of proposals. Clearly, our analysis does not prove that municipal context is immaterial: a sample including larger local diversity could achieve different results. But our null findings for the first four hypotheses point in the interesting direction that factors closer to the proposal are overtly more relevant than those related to the local context[21].

Evidence of cherry-picking does emerge when we turn to the analysis of process and proposal level factors. Democratic theorists have made a strong case that design matters in judging the democratic character and effectiveness of participatory processes (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009). Our data bears this out. The type of participatory design is particularly important and H5, which posited that participatory budgeting is more effective

[21] Newig et al (2017) also show that most contextual variables do not have an effect. Only one variable specific to environmental policies (Nimby situation) is significant in their analysis.

in realising proposals than other forms of participatory process, is confirmed. Participatory budgeting has at least two implementation advantages. The first is it generally operates within the confines of a specific budget that is designated for the purpose of distribution by participants: local authorities have accepted that these funds should be put at the discretion of local people and so are more likely to follow their decisions. Second, the design of participatory budgeting often includes institutionalised citizen oversight: selected participants have a role in overseeing the implementation process by local government. Arguably officials are less likely to cherry-pick proposals when they are being watched. Compare this arrangement with strategic planning processes. Often these involve a number of different participatory channels that each generate their own lists of recommendations, with more public authority veto points – opportunities for discretion in which proposals to take forward. In addition, some of these exercises work on a longer time frame: proposals are not to be implemented over the next year, but over a longer time span. It may be the case that if we undertook follow-up research 10 years later, the rate of completion of strategic planning proposals would increase and become closer to that other participatory exercises[22]. Future research will be needed to confirm these interpretations and fully explore the causal mechanisms that produce differential implementation rates across different designs.

A second process design variable that exhibits significance in effecting the rate of implementation of proposals is the quality of participation, thus confirming H6. This affirms the expectation that where authorities have invested resources to ensure a high quality

Commented [GS17]: 2. Clarifiction of H5

Commented [GS18]: Ibid.

[22] Most proposals do not include a specific time frame for their implementation. However, most are modest and could be developed in the time span of the analysis. Only a few proposals (mostly from strategic planning and other temporary processes) may need a few more years for full implementation.

process – through the use of facilitators, consultants and information – then they are more likely to attend to the recommendations that emerge. The causal mechanism would follow a logic of path dependency: a commitment to invest in a participatory setting is constitutive of a commitment to respond positively to its proposals. These factors are also reasonable indicators for the deliberative capacity of a process, offering a tentative finding that deliberation may be related to implementation. This contrasts with earlier suggestions that posit a trade-off between deliberation and political impact (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Smith *et al*, 2015), suggesting the need for future research on the real existence of this trade-off and its causal mechanisms. The other two process-level hypotheses (H7 and H8) that capture the role of other authorities and the number of proposals a process generates are not proved fully, even if both of them have a coefficient in the direction expected.

The strongest explanatory power of our variables rests with proposal-level explanations, with all four hypothesis (H9 to H12) being confirmed: our results suggest that local authorities are more likely to implement proposals that have strong internal support from both the governing party and civil servants, are less costly, bring additional funding from other authorities and do not challenge the administrations' current practices. The public tends to get its way if its recommendations correspond to the preferences or the existing practices of the administation – and do not put pressure on the budget (either through low cost or additional finance). From a rational choice perspective this is simple logic and it tends to support the cooption thesis that authorities will only act on proposals that either correspond to the preferences of key political and administrative actors or with existing practices of the administration.

From a democratic perspective this is a far from compelling finding. While local administrations do implement some proposals that run against their expressed interests (17 percent of probabilities, Table 3), they clearly listen selectively to inexpensive demands that reinforce their preferences and existing ways of working. Many of the successful proposals would likely have been implemented even if the participatory demand had not existed (Hoppe 2011). The dynamics of cherry-picking proposals are clear.

Future data collection processes that introduce larger contextual diversity (including results in other countries and economic contexts[23]) would be needed to confirm whether the same levels of implementation are found and whether the factors affecting the fate of proposals in different environments are similar. Comparative research has pointed to the Spanish participatory context as bearing strong resemblances to the rest of Southern Europe (Talpin, 2011), but differences with the Anglo-American and Scandinavian traditions may be larger (Alarcón and Font, 2014) and cross-national comparison would show whether national-level characteristics come into play. Other relevant policy effects could exist, for example through agenda-setting processes. Alternative research designs that further differentiate stages in the policy cycle (e.g., decision versus implementation), explore the diversity of forms of partial implementation or capture additional chractaristics of proposals (e.g., their policy relevance) could also yield further insights. Given the demanding resource implications of collecting data on proposals across multiple contexts and processes, a meta-analysis of the numerous existing studies of participatory

[23] A specific analysis of how the context of economic crisis has affected the fate of proposals shows small (but significant) differences due to the crisis context (ANON). The analysis of the pre-crisis processes confirms the same cherry picking dynamics isolated here.

processes or cases on platforms such as Participedia would appear to be an attractive propostion. However, this is not possible because such studies and cases rarely provide an analysis of the fate of all of the proposals that are generated by a particular process.

Commented [GS19]: Reviewer 2

Our findings have important implications. The systematic empirical assessment of the degree of implementation of a diverse set of proposals questions both the commonly held impression that proposals from participatory processes tend to be ignored by public administrations, as well as very positive results based on a few exemplary processes displaying strong democratic qualities (e.g. Smith 2009). This evidence needs to be tempered, however, with our second broad finding: even if substantial implementation of proposals prevails, cherry-picking exists and it tends to follow a quite rational pattern, reinforcing the existing power of local authorities. This finding should inform our assessments of the potential and pitfalls of local participatory processes.

Commented [GS20]: 3.6. The reviewer wants another paragraph or two about implications. I tried to write something longer, but it simply repeated things that had already been said above.

We could say something more about whether it is right that decisión makers have room for manoevre, whether their interests should take priority over those of the public, etc., but this would be rambling and taking away from the power of the simple argument.

We could change the last sentence to something like the following, but I am happy to leave it as it is.

This finding is significant. It raises challenging questions about how to couple more effectively participatory processes with political institutions in ways that might ameliorate such systematic selective responses by authorities. It is a finding that certainly needs to inform our assessments of the potential and pitfalls of local participatory processes.

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Table 1. Accomplished sample composition

	N	%	Average number of proposals per process
Nº of participatory processes in the municipality			
Three or more	24	61.5%	16.6
Less than three	13	33.3%	14.8
No info	2	5.2%	10.5
Process design			
Participatory budget	8	20.5%	19.7
Strategic planning	14	35.9%	19.2
Other permanent	8	20.5%	11
Other temporary	9	23.1%	10.7
Municipality size			
Less than 10,000 inh.	11	28.2%	16.2
10,000 to 50,000 inh.	12	30.8%	15.7
More than 50,000 inh.	16	41.0%	15.3
Region			
Andalusia	19	48.7%	15.8
Catalonia	10	25.6%	18.8
Madrid	10	25.6%	12.3

Source: own elaboration

Table 2. The explanatory factors of proposals' success

Level	Variables	Operationalization: response categories	Mean (Standard deviation)
Characteristics of the proposals	Challenging or not challenging	0 (not challenging); 1 (challenging)	0.41 (0.492)
	Implementation cost	0 (no cost) to 3 (high)	1.40 (1.088)
	Availability of external funding for implementation	0 (no), 1 (yes)	0.34 (0.474)
	Degree of support in local institution	0 (none or only one of politicians and public servants strongly support); 1 (both strongly support)	0.90 (0.304)
Characteristics of the processes	Quality of participation	0 to 3. Number of criteria fulfilled among the following: presence of facilitators, external consultants and high quality information	1.94 (0.802)
	Type of participatory process	1 (participatory budgeting); 2 (strategic planning); 3 (other permanent processes); 4 (other temporary processes)	Nominal
	Number of proposals per process	Numerical. Values between 1 and 131	53.24 (35.144)
	Other administrations involved	0 (no), 1 (yes)	0.52 (0.500)
Characteristics of the municipalities	Size of municipality (inhabitants)	Numerical. Values between 4,229 and 3,233,527	220,766.8 (583,612.3)
	Resources available: income per capita	Numerical. Values between 499 and 1,655	1,067.03 (286.467)
	Density of participation	1 (only one participatory process) to 6 (six or more)	3.45 (1.792)
	Participation plan	0 (no), 1 (yes)	0.60 (0.491)

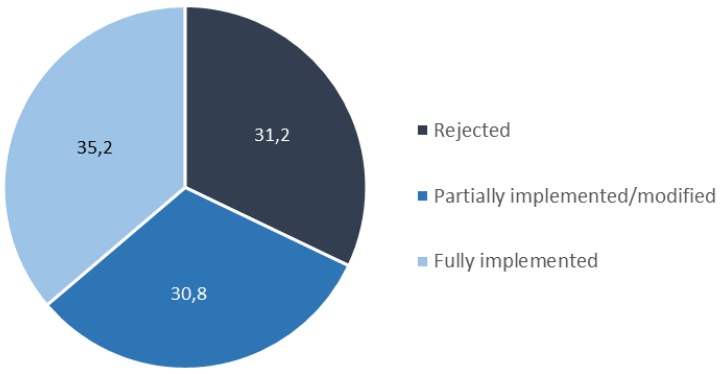
Source: own elaboration

Table 3. Predicted probabilities of degree of implementation

		Rejected	Partially implemented/ modified	Fully implemented
Challenging character	Not challenging	.24	.33	.42
	Challenging	.40	.34	.26
Cost	Low	.21	.30	.49
	High	.44	.32	.24
External funding	No	.36	.33	.31
	Yes	.21	.31	.49
Internal support of politicians and public servants	None or only one support	.50	.33	.17
	Both support	.20	.34	.46
Quality of participation index	0 criteria	.44	.32	.24
	3 criteria	.23	.31	.45
Participatory budgeting	Participatory budgeting	.19	.30	.51
	Other	.36	.34	.30

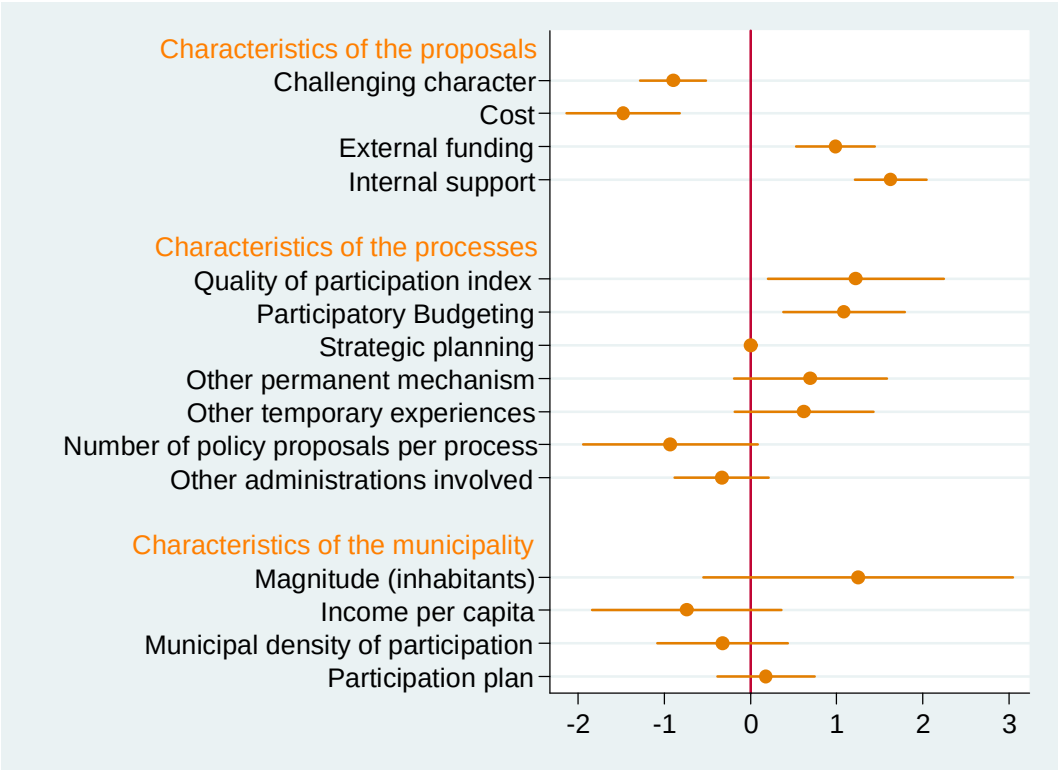
N = 540

Figure 1. Distribution of fate of proposals



N = 571 (2.8% are missing values)

Figure 2: OLS Coefficients of Independent Variables (model 6)



N = 540.

Appendix

Table 4. Multilevel estimation of the implementation of proposals

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Null model	**Policy factors**	**Process factors**	**Municipality factors: Sociodemo**	**Municipality factors: Participatory culture**	**Municipality factors: all**
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Characteristics of the proposals						
Challenging character		-.921***	-.894***	-.897***	-.887***	-.896***
		(.195)	(.195)	(.194)	(.195)	(.195)
Cost		-1.328***	-1.424***	-1.505***	-1.403***	-1.474***
		(.326)	(.328)	(.334)	(.330)	(.335)
External funding		.867***	.915***	.976***	.925***	.987***
		(.231)	(.230)	(.233)	(.231)	(.234)
Internal support		1.608***	1.618***	1.610***	1.624***	1.625***
		(.212)	(.211)	(.211)	(.212)	(.211)
Characteristics of the participatory process						
Quality of participation index			1.039*	1.271*	1.014~	1.221*
			(.519)	(.521)	(.522)	(.519)
Type of process: participatory budgeting			.823*	.963**	.908**	1.087**
			(.331)	(.334)	(.348)	(.360)
Type of process: other permanent mechanism			.554	.636	.603	.694
			(.463)	(.450)	(.464)	(.452)
Type of process: other temporary experiences			.620	.534	.691~	.621
			(.403)	(.397)	(.411)	(.411)
Number of proposals per process			-.768	-.919~	-.773	-.929~
			(.521)	(.517)	(.521)	(.517)
Other administrations involved			-.503~	-.356	-.480~	-.331
			(.280)	(.280)	(.280)	(.279)
Municipal context						
Magnitude (Inhabitants)				1.224		1.247
				(.868)		(.915)
Income per capita				-.623		-.740
				(.550)		(.560)
Municipal density of participation					-.184	-.322
					(.393)	(.384)
Participation plan					.199	.182
					(.283)	(.288)
N	555	540	540	540	540	540
N2	39	39	39	39	39	39
-2LL	-580.817	-508.594	-500.710	-499.445	-500.430	-499.005
df		4	1	12	12	14
AIC	1167.635	1031.187	1027.420	1028.890	103.860	1032.009
BIC	1180.591	1061.228	1083.211	1093.263	1095.234	1104.966

*Standard errors in parentheses. Method: Maximum Likelihood. ~ p<.1 * p<.05 ** p<.01, *** p<.001*
Constants omitted. All non-dichomous variables are standardized so as to range between 0 and 1.
N (first-level number of observations), N2 (second –level number of observations), Deviance (-2 log likelihood), df (degrees of freedom), AIC (Akaike Information Criterion), BIC (Schwarz's Bayesian Information Criterion).
Reference category for "Type" of process: strategic planning