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Title: Participatory budgeting in the age of post-politics: Examining the discourses of citizens and representatives of expert-political systems in three municipalities in Portugal

Abstract

In the last decades, a growing body of research has discussed and illustrated the so called deliberative speak – or how despite representatives of the expert-political system agreeing with public participation in decision-making processes, in practice, effective public participation barely occurs. To address this, in recent years, new governing tools have been developed and implemented, such as participatory budgeting namely, in the Global North societies. Additionally, we have also been witnessing several profound socio-political and economic changes –the post-political turn and localist agendas, are all part and parcel of a new era of governance and political institutions, which are being increasingly discussed by social scientists as questioning democracy. However, empirical analyses of if and how these changes are being appropriated – reproduced and/or resisted – in the everyday practices of expert-political systems and of citizens and what are their consequences for public participation, have been more neglected. To overcome that, this paper will examine the discourses of citizens and of representatives of expert-political systems of three municipalities in Portugal about their participatory budgeting.

Keywords: public participation; deliberative speak; post-politics; participatory budgeting; discourse analysis; Portugal.

1. Introduction

Research in the social sciences has been very prolific in the last decades in discussing and empirically examining public engagement in decision-making. However, ‘real’ public participation is still more the exception than the rule (Rowe & Frewer 2005; Gonçalves & Castro 2009; Knudsen et al. 2015; Entradas, 2016). Many questions and practical solutions to increase and improve participation are still left unanswered and unidentified, and mainly considering how both the characteristics of democratic and co-evolving socio-political and economic systems have changed in more recent years. Neo-liberal capitalism, localism, third-way politics, right-wing populism, and associated post-political regimes have been extensively discussed by political theorists, political and cultural geographers and other social scientists alike (Blüdhorn 2013; Mouffe 2013; Swyngedow 2011, 2015; Harvey 2006). Nevertheless, empirical analyses that look at how those processes take place, are reproduced and eventually contested in the everyday practices of citizens and of representatives of expert and political systems, and their impacts on public participation, are not so frequent. In fact, a closer look into the practices and discourses that reproduce or perhaps contest void models of public participation might be very helpful in disclosing how does that happens in the everyday in the realms of post-political citizenship and political power. In this paper we perform such an analysis, by paying particular attention to the socio-psychological processes and associated cultural and political factors that might be associated with the lack of public participation practices, almost 30 years after Agenda 21. For that, we focus on a particular case study, paradigmatic of both the radical potential and, as we will illustrate, what might be related to a post-political institutionalisation of public participation, in a particular socio-geographical context: the participatory budgeting in Portugal. This case study was analysed based on the conduction of semi-structured interviews with both citizens and representatives of expert-political systems – mayors and technicians - in three different Portuguese municipalities that conduct participatory budgeting.

2. Public participation, populism and the post-political

In the last decades, public participation has invaded the political lexicon. The perception of a progressive withdrawal of citizens from political life, among other factors (Delgado 2013; Beck 2009), has caused changes – at least formally – in the way in which the representatives of expert-political systems relate with citizens. It is nowadays common to find in strategic documents and public policies the reference to citizens’ engagement or to the idea that the citizens should be placed in the centre of politics (Falanga 2014; Gonçalves & Castro 2009; Lima 2004). The engagement of citizens has therefore assumed a normative expression, being part of treaties, laws and other institutional tools, for incentivising politicians, corporations and experts to involve citizens in the decision-making processes that have an impact in their lives (Agenda 21 1992; Knudsen et al. 2015). It seems then that we are witnessing an appropriation, at least discursive or normative, of public participation by the expert-political system. Public participation has, historically, been associated with societal emancipatory processes (Blüdhorn 2013), based on popular movements in a bottom-up social dynamics, as the emergence of the new social movements in the 1970’s, namely the collective organization of oppressed and under-represented groups such as black, environmental and/or feminist movements (Nunes 2011). These movements have suffered, throughout the last 20 years, successive configurations that have resulted in a set of governance mechanisms that are

often at the service of political efficacy and the survival of who performs political (Castro & Batel 2008) – or scientific (Entradas 2016) - roles, emptying it from its main aims.

The literature on post-politics argues on how some old popular demands, as the feminist and the environmental ones, or even the ones that claimed for more participation in decisions, have been appropriated by the political system. This means that the system instead of promoting a true popular emancipation regarding these popular movements, namely the ones regarding more political participation, began to look at these demands through purely technocratic lens. Instead of giving and sharing real power with these social groups, decision-makers transformed all these demands in legislation and other formal regulation, faking a social and political transformation that did not really happened. In other words, participatory processes as public engagement in decision-making seems to reflect a part of what can be called a *simulated democracy* (Blüdhorn 2013), which is about “performing something, bringing to imagination and allowing some kind of experience of something that is highly desirable but does not and must not have empirical reality” (2013: 28). This is clear in the environmental domain, for which research has been evidencing how despite the fact that expert-political systems agree with public participation at a discursive level, in practice ‘real’ participation seldom occurs (e.g., Castro & Batel 2008; Gonçalves & Castro 2009; Cotton & Devine-Wright 2012; Barnett et al. 2012; Knudsen et al., 2015). For instance, Cotton & Devine-Wright illustrate how transmission network operators in the UK “adopt the rhetoric of deliberative engagement whilst lacking a clear rationale and effective means to incorporate citizen perspectives in long-term network development or specific infrastructure siting proposals” (2012: 17). Also, Barnett and colleagues (2012), concerning the institutional public participation in the decision-making processes for the deployment of renewable energy infrastructures in the UK, discuss the fact that when public engagement happens in that context it is mainly to try to attenuate the potential conflict regarding the deployment of those infrastructures rather than to try to achieve improved decisions (see also Entradas 2016).

In Portugal this pattern of participatory processes as a mechanism of faked democracy might be also found. For instance, regarding the governmental decision about the installation of co-incinerators, numerous initiatives have been promoted to consult the population; however, the final position of the Government about the contributions of the public has been that the public could not contest the expert-political arguments. In this vein, the consultation only served the purpose of explaining “the technical, industrial and political aspects of the project to the people, to ensure that it was understood and accepted by one and all” (Gonçalves 2002). More recently, Castro & Batel (2008) also showed how expert-political arguments prevailed in a controversy over the transformation of an XVIIth century Convent into a luxury residential condominium in Bairro Alto, Lisbon. A group of inhabitants of the neighbourhood protested against the transformation and demanded the right to participate in the decision-making process. However, while the experts responsible for the urban rehabilitation of Bairro Alto agreed with public participation in general, they also used disclaimers (e.g., “yes, but...”) to point out the lack of consistency and selfishness of the participation of the protestors, therefore successfully illegitimizing the protests. The authors also point out how the experts often relied in the cultural representation of a “usual lack of education” and “lack of citizenship culture” in “our country” to further highlight the protests as selfish, by pointing out that the group was concerned about this particular decision-making process but not about others, happening elsewhere. In fact, this idea of the Portuguese “civic anaesthesia” (Reis 1994, cit. in Figueiredo & Fidélis 2003), largely justified by the dictatorship existent in

Portugal until 1974, has become pervasive in academic, political and civil discourses alike (e.g. Figueiredo & Fidélis 2003) – which, as illustrated by Castro & Batel (2008), might be used to further reify that lack of participation. Also, Falanga (2014, 2013) has, based on the analysis of the participatory budgeting in Lisbon and of other similar initiatives, extensively discussed the need for cultural and organizational practices in public administration to change for accommodating the engagement of the public, and in a truly socially inclusive way.

Are we in a post-political period?

Research has been showing how, currently, in the public discourse of the expert-political and corporative systems, the idea of public engagement is almost omnipresent, independently of their political-ideological orientation or political affiliation. It is a new participative language – deliberative speak (Hindmarsh & Matthews 2008) or rhetoric of engagement (Entradas 2016) – which, despite being materialized in a discourse of engaging citizens in decision-making processes and in the institutionalization of participation through formal and regulated procedures (Gonçalves 2002; Falanga 2014) – seems to result, in practice, in the persistent resistance to the effective participation of citizens in political decision. Although this pattern has been described already for some years, more recently, several changes have happened in the socio-political and economic contexts of Global North societies that have potentially affected those discourses and practices about participation. Right-wing populism, localism agendas, post-politics have been extensively discussed by political theorists and other social scientists alike as questioning the very democratic model of socio-political regulation (Blüdhorn 2013; Moir & Leishon 2013; Mouffe 2013; Swyngedow 2011). From a governance perspective, we are living the aftermath of the *third way*, enacted, in Europe, by the *New Labour* of the British ex-prime minister Tony Blair, that was based in the integration of the free market with democratic socialism and during which the first experiences of participatory budgeting in the UK were promoted. It is worth referring that in the UK the participatory budgeting functions through the presentation of proposals by local communities, which are then examined by a group formed by experts of the local government who decides which proposals should be funded. These characteristics, besides being a clear example of a neoliberal localism (Tait & Inch 2016), make this participatory budgeting an example of the so called soft paternalism (Colander and Qi Lin Chong 2009), given that it is still the role of local authorities to regulate the context and the process of decision-making (Moir & Leyshon 2013).

More recently, another British prime-minister has launched the idea of the *Big Society*, a project even more ambitious than the one from the *New Labour*, aiming at the construction of a society supposedly self-sufficient at a political level, based in new modalities of citizenship – new localism - in which citizens would have more choice in local decision-making (Moir & Leyshon 2013; Thaler and Sunstein 2008), but while “the hierarchical relationship between the state and society remains in place” (Moir & Leyshon 2013: 1005). The subtlety with which this appropriation of the ideas of citizenship and participation was made seems to reflect its populist dimension if we attend to the fact that it has co-existed, in several European countries, with a strong programme of political and economic austerity (Blüdhorn 2013; Tait & Inch 2016), which has drastically reduced political and social rights in many of these countries, provoking popular protests, such as the manifestation “*Que se lixe a troika*” in Portugal.

Besides localism agendas and soft-paternalist politics, nowadays governance is apparently locked to a rationale of consensualization between the State and Society

regarding important social problems such as environmental sustainability and public participation. This apparent consensus, materialised in new institutional formats with unclear rules and opaque procedures that are slowly replacing the political institutions of government (Swyngedow 2015), seems to be related with what the literature has called of post-politics (Blüdhorn 2013; Swyngedow 2011, 2015; Žižek 2002), intimately related with post-democracy as already discussed by Badiou and Rancière. More specifically, post-politics refers to current ways of performing politics in which governing is mainly a technical and management activity, torn out of its political dimension (Swyngedow 2011), this is, trying to avoid any conflict and adversarial discussions (Mouffe 2013, Swyngedow 2011). Post-politics is typical of populist right-wing discourses, such as those emphasizing the need to institutionalize climate policy with a view to not connect this issue with any specific political party with the consequent depoliticization of the public debate over it (Blüdhorn 2013; Swyngedow 2015). Post-politics is a consequence of the neoliberal ideological hegemony that pervades nowadays societies (Batel et al. 2016) and which is reproduced by the practices of current economic and political systems such as using “business as usual” approaches to tackle climate change, which reproduce the status quo and social inequalities that, apparently, they try to resolve (Nadaï & Labussière 2017; Barry & Ellis 2011; Swyngedouw 2011; Dalton et al. 2004).

We experience post politics in everyday practices but also at a governmental level, namely concerning citizen involvement that seem increasingly present in political agendas but at the same time less and less effective. On that Kropp reminds us the idea of “simulation in post political third modernity (Blühdorn, 2009, 2014b), where conflicts stem from a lack of true citizen participation and where opportunities for sustainable development may even be decreasing (Blühdorn, 2009, 2014b; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011)” (2018, p. 564). Actually the third-way politics due to their technocratic perspective on democracy was already a political and governmental expression of the post political period namely due to a powerful localist agenda simulating a sharing of power with citizens also through soft-paternalistic mechanisms – the Big Society project but also and specially the participatory budgeting were paradigmatic of this new way of governance (Moir & Leyshon, 2013).

However, and while these changes have been happening in recent years, analyses of how citizens and institutional actors alike negotiate them in their everyday have been neglected, even if they have been abundant regarding the deliberative speak or the rhetoric of engagement (Hindmarsh & Matthews 2008; Entradas 2016; Cotton & Devine-Wright 2012; Barnett et al. 2012; Castro & Batel 2008). In this paper we want to explore if and how have these changes been appropriated, reproduced or contested in the everyday practices of citizens and the expert-political systems and their consequences for public engagement in decision-making processes. For that we will focus on, as a case study, the participatory budgeting in Portugal.

The participatory budgeting in Portugal

The participatory budgeting (PB) comes from the popular initiative of Porto Alegre, Brazil, and it is implemented by the Workers Party, party of the Brazilian left, being therefore surrounded by a strong expectation of greater participation and decision-making power of citizens (Avritzer, 2003; Fedozzi, 2009). However different experiences of participatory budgeting have proliferated around the world, particularly in Portugal, where today the PB has become a paradigmatic example of this new generation of depoliticized forms of government, as we mentioned earlier, strongly affected by the

socio-political changes that have characterized the European context in recent years. On the one hand, the massification of the participatory budgeting throughout the country, regardless of the political party of the local government responsible for promote it, suggests the depoliticization and de-ideologization that characterizes this process; on the other hand, we found this paradox: besides the great appropriation by the representatives of the expert-political system, the participatory budgeting in Portugal remains hardly implemented (Dias, 2013). Following Falanga, in Portugal, in a survey conducted in 2018 by the National Observatory of Participation (www.portugalparticipa.pt/monitoring) there are about 180 PB underway, mostly at municipal level (Falanga, 2018), in a universe of 308 Municipal Councils, with a high *mortality rate* (Dias, 2013).

The participatory budgeting has been proposed at its incept as the paradigm of 'real' public participation, due to its popular origins and the dynamics of the engagement and aggregation of local communities (Avritzer 2003). Nevertheless, and besides criticisms regarding its potential reproduction of social exclusions (Falanga 2013), nowadays it seems to have been institutionally appropriated as just a tool of political management (Baiocchi & Gannuza 2014). For examining current discourses on public participation within participatory budgeting processes we have interviewed citizens and representatives of the expert-political systems of three municipalities in Portugal which conduct participatory budgeting.

3. Context and Method¹

For examining the discourses of citizens and representatives of expert-political systems regarding public participation within processes of participatory budgeting, we selected three Portuguese municipalities that had already conducted those processes: Palmela since 2002 (it was the first Portuguese municipality implementing the participatory budgeting); Cascais, since 2011; and Torres Vedras since 2015. The criteria for choosing these three municipalities were having an active participatory budgeting process and having different political parties running the municipal executive board. Cascais is governed by a right-wing coalition (Social Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Centre, both belonging to European Popular Party in the European Parliament); Palmela is governed by the Communist Party; and Torres Vedras by the Socialist Party, in the centre of the political spectrum. Besides the different political orientation, these three municipalities have different participatory budgeting experiences from the point of view of the process - deliberative model (Cascais and Torres Vedras), decision is up to the population, versus consultative model (Palmela), decision is up to the local government. Finally, they correspond to a very different territorial contexts, namely in terms of geographical location and population size, factors that must influence the local budgeting policy itself. Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews with: inhabitants of the municipalities who were aware of

¹ In this study we adopted a critical, socio-constructionist perspective, as in our analysis we sought to focus on factors such as the socio-political context, the role of ideology and also the impact of asymmetric power relations at stake. Our analysis has sought to address recent socio-political transformations and their possible impact on how public participation takes place. This socio-constructionist perspective considers this type of analysis necessarily political and normative, although without forgetting ethics and methodological rigor.

the participatory budgeting and had actively participated in it or not (N=28); the Mayor of the Municipalities (N= 3); and the experts responsible in each municipality for the participatory budgeting (N=3; Total of interviews = 34). The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2017 and the interviews with inhabitants lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and with experts/politicians between 60 and 90 minutes. These interviews sought to explore participants' opinions on participatory budgeting and their main expectations towards participatory budgeting and their motivations to develop this process and to participate in it. Participants were also asked about public participation in general, and its current role in our societies. Interviews were audio-recorded in full, transcribed, and anonymized, except for the Mayors of the three Municipalities who were specifically informed about the need for their identification regarding the present analysis.

Regarding data analysis, we followed the principles of thematic discourse analysis (see Taylor & Ussher 2001; Clarke & Braun 2013). First, we examined the participants' discourses to identify the main themes and sub-themes constituting them so that, in a second stage, we were able to perform a more fine-grained analysis of those discourses, that allowed identifying the discursive devices used in the discourses and the functions they served. The original extracts from the interviews, this is, in Portuguese, can be found in the Appendix.

4. Analyses

1) What is participation? Corroborating old results.

Following previous research (e.g., Castro & Batel 2008; Cotton & Devine-Wright 2012), one of the main themes that emerged in the participants' discourses revealed that perspectives over what is (proper) participation are still very entangled with NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) representations. In the present case the NIMBY representations are much linked to the specific NIMBY dimension related to how well-informed citizens must be to participate and, mostly, how emotional lay citizens are in expressing their opinions. In other words, in several instances, both citizens and representatives of the expert-political systems of the three municipalities emphasize that citizens need to be well informed about the issues at stake to participate and that most citizens only participate when those issues directly affect them or refer to projects to be built near the place where they live. Here are some examples: [1] *“even if I think that it [participation] is positive, sometimes citizens do not have the same information, do not have the same gathered expertise to be able to perform an evaluation”* [Mayor of Cascais]; [2] *“citizens that get close to participatory budgeting unfortunately do it because they are navel-gazing... It is because they are navel-gazing. The majority of them, 80%...”* [Expert of Cascais Town Hall] [3] *“No, everything that relates... as long as you have a minimum knowledge, obviously people should be heard, undoubtedly”* [Citizen#1, Cascais]. On one hand these extracts highlight not only how NIMBY representations continue to be part of the practices of expert-political systems, but also that they are perversely reproduced by citizens – at least regarding the dimension of information as an essential criterion to participate. In fact, in what regards the emotional/proximity dimension of participation, some citizens' discourses are clear in highlighting that it makes sense that people will participate more regarding places where they live and that are proximate to them due to place attachments and related emotional relations (Devine-Wright 2009). This is evidenced in this extract: [4] *“People come to*

live here because it is 'posh', and the closed condominiums are very nice and the beach is great (...), those don't care to participate. The others that have lived here for already several years, those would [Citizen#6 Cascais].

Another theme points out to the continued reproduction of discourses that are based in views of representative democracy instead of deliberative democracy, as they endorse forms of participation that involve information sessions and consultation ones (see Rowe & Frewer 2005; Knudsen et al. 2015), but not 'proper' deliberation. What Arnstein (1969) has called participation tokenism continues to be common practice for engaging citizens, as evidenced in the following extracts: [5] “[participation is good for] situations in which, let's say, the politician is not that comfortable with taking a certain decision and so he/she wants to consult his/hers community, so the referendum model is interesting (...) ‘that would be better like this or like that, look I have this query regarding this or that aspect ‘we explain, the person gets enlightened e then we close the process”[Mayor of Torres Vedras]. This idea that citizens should participate to be enlightened and not to influence the process in an effective way is then reflected and once again, as found in other contexts (e.g., Knudsen et al. 2015; Castro & Mouro 2016), in the discourses and practices of citizens: [6] *Interviewer – and do you think that if people participate they can influence the decision-making processes? Interviewee – No, no (...) it is useless [Citizen#3, Cascais].*

Another important recurrent theme that corroborates previous analyses is regarding the cultural representation of the lack of citizenship and participation culture in Portugal – for explaining why citizens do not participate more (Castro & Batel 2008). As referred to in the Introduction, this civic anaesthesia (Reis 1994, cit. in Figueiredo & Fidélis 2003) can be a powerful discourse to be used by the expert-political system to justify why they do not engage more with citizens (Castro & Batel 2008). This is evident in the next extracts: [7] “we still do not have, from a cultural point of view, we the Portuguese, we do not have a big adhesion to that public participation, often public participation is just used for political-party issues” [Mayor of Cascais]; [8] “but I think that the citizens has not yet... the Portuguese is still not very much used to that” [Citizen#6, Cascais]. It is important however to note how this representation is so reified that it does not seem to have been challenged, neither in the discourses of the expert-political systems nor in those of the citizens, by recent events that might be seen as contesting that perspective, such as the protests of the 15th of September 2012, fostered by a movement created through social media and called “Que se Lixe a Troika” and against the austerity measures imposed to Portugal during that period.

2) What is participation? Old practices in new (dis)guises.

In the last section we have illustrated how some of the same practices of resistance to a 'real' inclusion of public participation in decision-making processes that have been identified in the literature in the last decades, are still persistent nowadays and specifically in the context of participatory budgeting in Portugal. However, and as highlighted in the Introduction, several socio-political and economic changes have happened in Global North societies in more recent years which arguably warrant the exploration of if and how they are shaping and being used by citizens and expert-political systems to position themselves regarding public participation. These changes have arguably even reinforced more the need for discourses to embrace public engagement, given the post-political climate that have been shaping them. Here are some first illustrations of this depoliticization: [9] “*Citizens are politicians, in my*

opinion. That story that there are citizens and there are politicians, no... citizens are politicians. They are politicians. It is clear that who has the responsibility to decide and has to be judged by his/her decisions is whoever has been elected to perform a certain mission, isn't it? But his/her mission is also to work with the citizens. And for the citizens “ [Mayor of Palmela]; [10] *“the participatory budgeting is an exercise, a citizenship exercise, so if citizens, if politicians, if representative democracy can decide about all the issues, why cannot citizens also decide about all the issues?”* [Expert of Cascais Town Hall]. In the extracts presented there is a full appropriation – at least at a rhetorical level – of the deliberative, ‘real’, involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. In fact, this discursive appropriation seems different to the discursive devices normally pointed out in the literature such as the “yes, but...” and other similar ones (see Castro & Batel 2008; Cotton & Devine-Wright 2012; Barnett et al. 2012). There seems to be simultaneously more clarity and strength in expressing support for public participation, and a subtler way of doing it as what is endorsed is a deliberative type of participation which leaves no space for doubts regarding what type of participation is being supported to be raised (see Castro & Batel 2008; McClymont & O’Hare 2008). If we draw a parallel with other areas examining discrimination, such as research on racism, we might say that also in relation to public participation there was a change in the last decades from a flagrant rejection to a subtle one (see Vala, Brito & Lopes 1999). However, currently this rejection – or resistance – is now disguised as an ‘anti-participatory pro-participation’ discourse, or, to draw again the parallel with racism, an ‘anti-racism racist’ one. These discourses are paradigmatic of the post-political space, as they emphasize and ascertain that there is a consensus over the importance not only of any public participation but of a ‘true’ participation – therefore closing the space for the need of more debate and conflict over this issue, as is happening for instance with the debate around climate change (Barry & Ellis 2011; Swyngedouw 2011). But these new disguises of resistance towards public engagement in decision-making show up in several forms. Another recurrent theme was the identification of different stages of decision-making processes and highlighting the essential character of participation in some of them, but not in all (see also Falanga 2013; Entradas 2016). This is exemplified in these extracts: [11] *“Interviewer – And what does it mean to participate in the decision-making process? It is that the citizens are called to participate as much as possible taking into account technical and legal issues...”* [Mayor of Cascais]; [12] *“I am not going to ask citizens about if they want me to relocate human beings of a black race near where they live, isn't it? What kind of question would this be? (...) So I am sorry but democracy has its limits and for me these are the limits of democracy”* [Expert of Cascais Town Hall]; [13] *“For instance, to build a road somewhere, if it does not damages things around, I do not think citizens have to give an opinion, I do not think that is a subject regarding which citizens need to give their opinion about”* [Citizen#13, Torres Vedras]. The second extract in particular is very interesting from a discursive analysis point of view, as while it apparently discusses something important – the limits of democracy over morally and ethically charged decisions – it does so by making an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986), which by presenting an extreme case makes the importance of actually establishing limits to participation impossible to challenge.

Another recurrent theme that reveals the new uptakes of public participation, is reflected in those discourses that clearly presents participation and/or the participatory budgeting particularly in an instrumental way (Bludhorn, 2013) – but in a completely open, explicit manner. This is illustrated in this extract: [14] *“For the politician and*

from an election point of view, the participatory budgeting is highly profitable... I would even say that it is pure dumbness for politicians not to conduct participatory budgeting, no matter what their political colour is [Mayor of Cascais]. In fact, this open embracing of the instrumental character of the participatory budgeting and of its normativity is very evident throughout the discourses of participants of all municipalities: [15] *“because it is on fashion, we share a little bit of power and a little bit of the budget, here it is, get yourselves entertained, make something that gives you pleasure and if we like it and so, and what about other people voting”* [Mayor of Palmela]; [16] *“the words that were in fashion before these, in the political discourses and similar ones, were excellence and reference, these are now not very used, now everything is participative and inclusive”* [Citizen#21, Torres Vedras].

This materialization of modernity in the political realm also becomes clear with discourses presenting the participatory budgeting as an incubator of innovative ideas, as if entrepreneurship and innovation (see also Tait & Inch 2016), by being supported by the State and the municipalities, would attract foreign investment to drive economic growth and enhance competitiveness (see Barry & Ellis 2011). This is evidenced in the next extracts: [17] *“One has to be at one and the same time active, participative and an entrepreneur and really has to like what s/he is doing, undoubtedly”* [Citizen#2, Cascais]; [18] *“Projects [presented in the context of the participatory budgeting] should be more innovative, I think it has to improve in that direction, more innovative projects...”* [Mayor of Torres Vedras].

Another example of the effect of neo-liberal and soft-paternalist politics is their impact on representing participation within a localist perspective or as community vigilance (Moir & Leyshon 2013; Tait & Inch 2016), or in other words, equating citizens taking care of their neighbourhood and assuming responsibility for tasks that would be otherwise of the responsibility of the local authorities, as participation. This is exemplified next: [19] *“we have more than 100 neighbourhood tutors, it is also a form of participation... We are developing mechanisms, electronically, that will allow each citizen to individually help to better manage the municipality, ‘Look, I have a hole in the street at my front door, I have any problem, a tree has fallen...”* [Mayor of Cascais]; [20] *“that’s why we have in parallel the neighbourhood agent program... this was the reason why a space that was not gardened became gardened and maintained by the local dwellers association”* [Mayor of Palmela]; [21] *“when Spring arrives, painting the village white, the public spaces, here it works a lot based on voluntary actions”* [Citizen#3, Palmela].

Finally, another important aspect of the analyses related with the analyses already presented before was the pervasiveness of an ideal of depoliticization and lack of ideology that should define citizens’ participation in decision-making, such as exemplified in this extract: [22] *“The profile of the politician is not being right-wing or left-wing. It is a person who is involved in politics, he is not a politician, s/he is involved in politics, s/he knows it is temporary, that this is not an end in itself”* [Expert of Cascais Town Hall]; [23] *“I think that nowadays it is not possible to segment by ideology”* [Mayor of Cascais].

3) Some counter-narratives.

Despite the themes and discourses just discussed being recurrent throughout the interviews, there were some exceptions, namely of counter-narratives, this is, discourses that actually seemed to endorse a more participative participation, a more deliberative,

transparent and open relationship between expert-political systems and citizens. This is illustrated in this extract: [24] *“there wasn’t capacity for the municipality itself to make investments, it was in a stage of financial recovery and we thought it was legitimate not to chit chat just for the sake of it or to make a model where decision had already been taken and there would be no possibility for citizenship to influence them”* [Expert of Palmela Town Hall]”. Some of these discourses also acknowledged that participation is not only instrumental but actually helps improving the quality of the decision-making processes [25] *“I think that even when there are some difficulties and delays, the results are always better when they are deeply discussed”* [Mayor of Palmela]; [26] *“now I do think that whoever wants to take participation seriously, is someone that has to be very interested in truly sharing power. Otherwise, participation will be completely fake”* [Expert of Palmela Town Hall]. As Stirling (2005) argued, and Entradas (2016, 2016a) emphasized ‘under a normative view, participation is just the right thing to do’. From an instrumental perspective, it is a better way to achieve particular ends. In substantive terms, it leads to better ends (2005: 220). The last extract also highlights how the core issue behind the expert-political systems’ resistance to more public engagement is the sharing of power, as extensively illustrated by research (Castro & Batel 2008; Entradas 2016).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, we sought to show through the discourse thematic analysis of interviews with citizens and representatives of the expert-political systems of three municipalities in Portugal, that participatory budgeting (PB), being an institutionalized participatory mechanism might be functioning, namely in Portugal, as a depoliticization instrument, which would explain the low civic adherence to this process. Specifically, we interviewed local inhabitants, the Mayor and the Municipal Experts responsible for PB in Cascais, Palmela e Torres Vedras searching for discursive patterns and rhetorical resources used to construct their visions and attitudes towards participatory budgeting, public participation and democracy.

Our analysis suggested that resistance to public participation as already studied in different fields (Castro & Batel 2008; Cotton & Devine-Wright 2012; Delgado 2013; Entradas 2016a) continues to be reproduced in some of the old ways – for instance, through NIMBY representations of protesters – but also to a large extent in new disguises, or in a subtler way. Discourses materialized the socio-political and structural changes that have been happening in more recent years suggesting the adoption of post-political practices evident in consensualization, localist, entrepreneurship and soft-paternalist discourses (Tait & Inch 2016) regarding public participation. This idea is yet more present in Cascais and Torres Vedras, rather than Palmela, which may be explained by the length of the process in this municipality, and the ongoing reflection made by traditional decision-makers rejecting NIMBY motivation for involvement.

The existence of this participatory rhetoric in the speeches of representatives of expert-political systems, as we have seen in the analyzes in the previous section, disguises, however, a latent resistance to citizen involvement, which seems to look at this participatory movement as a technocratic political solution rather than a necessary development in societies that claim to be more democratic. Related to this issue Slavoj Žižek wrote that “...advocates of New Labour like to emphasize that one should take good ideas without any prejudice and apply them, whatever their (ideological) origins.

And what are these ‘good ideas’? The answer is of course, ideas that work” (1999: 236). Public participation appears to be such an “idea that works”.

In fact, the various interview extracts analyzed show a great agreement with the citizen participation, with representatives of expert-political systems embracing public participation as their own, however, at the same time, the criteria established to participate seems to not consider the resulting democratic benefits but only possible competitiveness profits. This is exemplified by the general recommendation to be innovative, creative and entrepreneur at the time of participation. Also, there are several references to participation as tokenism (Arnstein 1969), meaning that citizen involvement is seen only from an instrumental perspective according to a legal framework which imposes public consultations in certain issues. Given the occasional citizen participation in these new institutional formats of governance developed by the representatives of the expert-political systems, at the same time the latter encourage a post-political discourse on participation assuring that such participation will not threat the *status-quo*.

Public participation has the power of transforming societies, namely if citizen acquires increasing influence over decision-making (Arnstein 1969). This constitutes a risk soon avoided by the representatives of the expert-political systems who deals with participatory budgeting and similar participative initiatives in depoliticized manner, without political opponents nor ideological struggle (see Mouffe 2013). Instead of encouraging more politicized citizens who intervene more actively in public and political affairs the expert-political systems foment a post-political politics putting the citizen as a State assistant managing public welfare in general but also small daily tasks. This localist perspective of participation seems to feet perfectly in the Panoptic described by Foucault (1975) as if the State that everything and everyone watches, now gives place to the super-vigilant citizen, who contributes to this increase disengagement of the State in public life management.

The interviews analysis also leads us to a deeper thought on the Democracy limits. In fact, besides the apparent consensus around public participation there is, at the same time, a justified concerned towards citizen involvement in every political issue. Public participation may have no moral, ethical, political, social or cultural limits. Using an extreme example, the expert from Cascais Town Hall, when speaking about the rehousing program that occurred a few years ago in that municipality did it to show a specific issue that perhaps should not be at citizen decision. In the Portuguese case, the fact that public participation is limited to European framework establishes some political and institutional barriers to participation preventing citizens from exceeding those moral or ethical limits. However participatory democracy within Europe is tainted by this depoliticization ongoing process producing ‘fake’ participatory processes. The expert-political systems must become much more transparent regarding their relationship with citizens. Instead of developing superficial participatory mechanisms those who have political responsibilities should be truly convinced of the resulting democratic added value and less worried with their own political gain and power. This involves challenging the capitalist system and its neo-liberal politics to replace it by more democratic, equal and just societies.

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APPENDIX

[1] *se eu acho que é positivo por vezes o Cidadão não tem a mesma informação, não tem as mesmas competências reunidas para poder fazer uma avaliação* [Presidente de Cascais]

- [2] *Cidadão que infelizmente se aproxima do O.P., aproxima-se apenas porque tem umbigo... É porque tem um umbigo. A maior parte 80%...* [Técnica de Cascais]
- [3] *Não, tudo o que diz respeito... e desde que se tenha um conhecimento mínimo claro que devem ser ouvidos, sem duvida nenhuma* [Cidadão 1 - Cascais]
- [4] *“Agora as pessoas q vêm para aqui pq é bem e o condomínio é mto bonito e a praia é ótima e q a Lili Caneças mora ali na Bicuda, esses estão-se ‘maribando’, passo o termo, para participar. Os outros, enfim q já estão cá há uns anos como eu, é q efetivamente poderiam.”* [Cidadão 6 - Cascais]
- [5] *“situações que digamos que o político pode não estar tão confortável quanto isso para tomar a decisão e que quer auscultar a sua comunidade, o modelo do referendo é interessante”* [Presidente de Torres Vedras]
- [6] *“E tu achas que as pessoas se participarem conseguem ter influência nas tomadas de decisão? C3 - Não, não. M - Então é inútil. C3 – E”* [Cidadão 3 - Cascais]
- [7] *“...nós não temos ainda do ponto vista cultural, nós portugueses não temos uma grande adesão a essa participação pública, muita das vezes a participação pública é aproveitada, lá está também para, mais para questões de político-partidárias”* [Presidente de Cascais]
- [8] *“mas penso q o Cidadão ainda n... o português ainda n está mto habituado a isso.”* [Cidadão 6 – Cascais]
- [9] *“Os Cidadãos são políticos, na minha opinião. Esta história de que há os Cidadãos e há os políticos, não... os Cidadãos são políticos. São políticos. É evidente que quem tem a responsabilidade de decidir e tem que ser julgado pelas suas decisões é quem foi eleito para desempenhar uma determinada missão neste momento, não é? Mas a sua missão também é trabalhar com os Cidadãos. E para os Cidadãos.”* [Presidente de Palmela]
- [10] *“O O.P. é um exercício, um exercício de cidadania, portanto se os Cidadãos, se os políticos se a democracia representativa pode decidir sobre todas as matérias porque é que os Cidadãos não podem decidir sobre todas as matérias?”* [Técnica de Cascais]
- [11] *“É na medida que seja possível também do ponto de vista técnico e do ponto de vista legal que os Cidadãos sejam chamados, pronto.”* [Presidente de Cascais]
- [12] *“você está a brincar comigo isto é contra os direitos humanos, eu não vou deixar esta decisão aos Cidadãos, não vou perguntar aos Cidadãos se eles querem que eu faça realojamento de seres humanos de raça negra à porta deles, mas o que é isto? Que pergunta é esta? (...) Portanto, desculpe mas a democracia tem os seus limites e esta para mim é os limites da democracia.”* [Técnica de Cascais]
- [13] *“Por exemplo, criar uma estrada no sítio qualquer, se não implicar ou estragar ali à volta alguma coisa, acho que não têm, não é que não tenha que dar a opinião, acho que isso não é um assunto que o Cidadão tenha que dar opinião”* [Cidadão 13 – Torres Vedras]
- [14] *“O orçamento participativo para o político do ponto de vista eleitoral é altamente rentável...Eu até diria, é uma pura estupidez quem não desenvolve o orçamento participativo, seja de cor for.”* [Presidente de Cascais]
- [15] *“porque está na moda nós partilharmos um bocadinho do poder, partilhamos um bocadinho do poder e um bocadinho do orçamento, está aqui, entretenham-se e escolham, façam uma coisa que vos dê prazer e se nós gostarmos e tal e se as pessoas votarem, tudo bem »* [Presidente de Palmela]
- [16] *“as palavras que estavam em moda antes destas era nos discursos autárquicos e políticos e outros afins que era de excelência e de referência, caíram em desuso, agora é tudo participativo e inclusivo,...”* [Cidadão 21- Torres Vedras]

- [17] *“A pessoa tem que ser ao mesmo tempo activa e participativa e empreendedora e tem realmente gostar daquilo que está a fazer, sem dúvida. [Cidadão 2 - Cascais]*
- [18] *“os projetos sejam mais inovadores, acho que isso tem que passar por essa via, projetos mais inovadores...” [Presidente de Torres Vedras]*
- [19] *“nós temos mais de 100 tutores de bairro, é também uma forma de o Cidadão participar...Estamos a desenvolver mecanismos para que o Cidadão individualmente possa ajudar a gerir melhor o município, através de meios eletrónicos, ‘Olhe tenho um buraco à frente da minha porta, tenho um problema qualquer, caiu uma árvore, tenho uma árvore aqui...’ [Presidente de Cascais]*
- [20] *“por isso que nós temos em paralelo o agente do bairro e que de facto com agente do bairro...foi por isso que um espaço que não estava ajardinado, passou a ser ajardinado e mantido pela própria Associação de Moradores” [Presidente de Palmela]*
- [21] *“quando chega a primavera, cair a vila, os espaços públicos e aqui funciona-se muito como regime de voluntariado... [Cidadã 3 - Palmela]*
- [22] *“o perfil do político aí talvez seja mais fácil e não é de direita ou de esquerda que ...é uma pessoa que está na política, não é político, está na política, sabe que está de passagem, que isto não é um fim em si mesmo.” [Técnica de Cascais]*
- [23] *“eu acho que hoje não dá para segmentar por exemplo por ideologia...” [Presidente de Cascais].*
- [24] *“não havia capacidade do próprio município realizar investimentos, estava numa fase de recuperação financeira e achou-se legítimo não fazer conversa, só por fazer conversa ou fazer um modelo empolado já com as decisões, que estavam tomadas portanto que não haveria possibilidade da cidadania ter alguma influência” [Técnico de Palmela]*
- [25] *“faço questão de mesmo quando às vezes daí decorrem algumas dificuldades e alguns atrasos, eu acho que os resultados são sempre melhores quando são bem discutidos” [Presidente de Palmela]*
- [26] *“agora eu acho que quem quer levar a participação a sério, primeiro lugar é alguém muito interessado em partilhar poder, verdadeiramente. Porque senão é completamente falso a participação.” [Técnico de Palmela]*