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**WHAT IS DRIVING THE INCREASING PRESENCE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Nowadays, there is an imperative for governments to be more responsive to community needs and public sector modernization programmes are introducing opportunities for citizen participation. This paper seeks to analyse the diffusion of these initiatives in local governments through the analysis of experiences in OECD and MERCOSUR countries. This paper argues that citizen participation represents the interest of governments in changing either public sector management or the perceived image of government. We also explore whether the administrative culture and other variables contribute to explaining the differences between initiatives. Our results indicate that the search for legitimacy is the rationale to explain the implementation of citizen participation.

**KEY WORDS:** citizen participation, local governments, legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory.

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## WHAT IS DRIVING THE INCREASING PRESENCE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES?

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A common trend around the world is a widespread and growing dissatisfaction with contemporary democratic practice and a decreasing participation of citizens in democratic processes (Smith and Wales 2000; Bouras et al. 2003). There is a perception among politicians and governments that the population has become more and more disenchanted with the traditional institutions of representative government, detached from political parties, and disillusioned with old forms of civic engagement and participation (Smyth and Reddel 2000). After two decades of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, in which the bureaucratic public administration model was strongly criticized, there is, at the moment, a feeling among the citizenry, especially in Anglo-American countries, that 'managerialism' has widened the distance between government and citizens instead of bringing them closer together (Noordhoek and Saner 2004; Oakley 2002) and that there has been a decline of public trust in governments (Welch et al. 2004). This decline has become a challenge to politicians, public administrators and citizens because it implies the loss of public confidence in political and administrative performance (Welch et al. 2004). According to some authors (Nye, 1997; Mutz and Flemming, 1999; Peters 1999), the gap between public expectation and perceived governmental performance is one of the main factors that contribute to the decline of public trust.

As Cooper et al. (2006) argue, this decline of public trust in governments has increased interest in finding out more about the role of civic engagement as a central component of a vital democracy. Citizen engagement could improve citizen trust in government (Cooper et al. 2006; Yang 2005), enhance governmental legitimacy (Fung 2006), and improve the quality of governmental responsiveness (Yang and Holzer 2006). All this has caused a growing re-emergence in academic and political discourse of ideas and values of community, localism and citizen participation (Reddel 2002). As a result, nowadays it is difficult to find a government that is not claiming to be pursuing opportunities for citizen engagement (Dutil et al. 2007).

This growing interest in citizen participation raises important questions about its main objectives and the factors stimulating its development. This paper seeks to acquire a deeper understanding of the diffusion of citizen participation initiatives in local governments through the analysis of experiences in OECD and MERCOSUR countries. By putting citizen participation initiatives into a comparative international perspective, we also explore whether the administrative culture of different countries and some other exogenous variables contribute to explaining the differences between these initiatives at local level. We have chosen local governments for our study because municipalities play an important role in the everyday lives of citizens, both in the administrative and service delivery fields (Torres and Pina 2001) and in the sphere of democratic participation (Musso et al. 2000; IDEA 2001). Local government is where the concerns of the ‘grassroots’ or locality intersect most directly with those of governance and the state (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999) and where the current process for strengthening participatory democracy is more evident (Licha 2002).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 analyses the developments in citizen participation considering the theoretical and institutional contexts which are driving and conditioning the trajectory of citizen participation in the public sector. Section 3 describes the methodology applied in the paper. Section 4 contains the analysis of the results. In Section 5, the results are discussed in the framework of some theoretical driving forces and Section 6 presents the conclusions.

## **2. BEHIND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: WHAT IS DRIVING IT TO THE FORE?**

Decision-making processes in local governments have changed considerably and now involve partners other than public authorities, such as neighbourhood associations, private businesses, NGOs and citizens, and modernization programmes are introducing fundamental changes into local democratic practices with the aim of creating new opportunities for democratic participation (Lowndes et al. 2001). Some authors define these changes as a shift from government to governance (Andersen and Van Kempen 2003) or collaborative civic management (IDEA 2001).

Bingham et al. (2005) argue that this new governance does not simply involve tools but also practices and processes for people to participate in the work of government. So, public managers ought to facilitate greater citizen engagement in the work of government.

Citizen participation is an emerging field involving many players who use varied definitions and have different perspectives (Involve 2005). As citizen participation should not be an end in itself, but a tool to achieve a goal, it is important to define this goal. Table 1 summarizes the objectives of citizen participation that some authors have established. We relate these objectives to the theory that explains their implementation and to the most suitable type of participation to achieve them, considering that participation can be classified into three types (Shand and Arnberg 1996; Martin and Boaz 2000; OECD 2001): information, consultation and active participation (also known as cooperation). As various theories have contributed to explaining the introduction of public management reforms into governments through the identification and analysis of the role and drivers of these reforms and various authors have shown the difficulties of setting theoretical frameworks for explaining public management changes, we have adopted a multi-theory strategy which has allowed us to build a wider explanation of the phenomenon and to expand the range of plausible theoretical interpretations (Smith 1981; Hopper and Hoque 2006).

**Table 1:** Drivers of citizen participation initiatives and theory supporting the different types of participation.

Author	Drivers of citizen participation Initiatives	Type of participation	Theory
Walters et al. (2000),	1) aid in the search for definitions, alternatives or criteria (discovery)	Consultation	Stakeholder theory
	2) educate the public about an issue and proposed alternative (education)	Information	Legitimacy Theory
	3) assess public opinion regarding a set of options (measurement)	Consultation	Stakeholder theory / Institutional Theory
	4) persuade the public toward a recommended alternative (persuasion)	Information	Legitimacy Theory
	5) comply with public norms or legal requirements (legitimization)	Information / Consultation/ Active participation	Legitimacy Theory / Institutional theory -
OECD (2001)	1) strengthening democracy	Active participation	Legitimacy Theory / Institutional theory –
	2) enhancing transparency and accountability	Information	All
	3) achieving better service delivery.	Consultation / Active participation	Stakeholder theory / Institutional theory
	4) respond to international peer pressure by introducing “cosmetic” measures to improve the interface with citizens without fundamental changes in traditional policy-making processes;	Information	Institutional theory
	5) share responsibility (or shift the blame) for difficult or unpopular policy decisions.	Information / Consultation	Stakeholder theory
	6) defer difficult decisions through extended discussions and debate	Consultation / Active participation	Institutional Theory
	7) stave off protests	Information	Legitimacy theory – Institutional Theory
Involve (2005)	1) governance -e.g. strengthening democratic legitimacy, increasing interest and engagement in politics, accountability, stimulating active citizenship	Information / Consultation/ Active participation	All
	2) social cohesion and social justice -e.g. building relationships, community cohesion, ownership, social capital, justice and equity	Consultation / Active participation	Stakeholder Theory
	3) quality of services -more efficient and better public services that meet real needs and reflect community values	Consultation / Active participation	Stakeholder theory / Institutional theory
	4) capacity building and learning -increased skills, abilities, confidence and empowerment for individuals and organisations, to provide a basis for future growth and development and, especially, to help build stronger communities	Information / Consultation/ Active participation	Stakeholder Theory
Pindado et al. (2002)	1) “participate to legitimize” ;to strengthen the positions, objectives, and interests of government without changing them	Information / Consultation	Legitimacy theory – Institutional Theory
	2) “participate to transform”; what is sought is not to preserve the status quo, but also promote change, or transformation, in which the participation of citizens is considered fundamental.	Consultation / Active participation	Stakeholder Theory

Considering that citizen participation could be one of the tools used to reduce the gap between public expectation and perceived governmental performance, the implementation of citizen participation initiatives can be explained from the legitimacy point of view as a response of public organizations to try to narrow the legitimacy gap<sup>1</sup>. Several theories have focused on how to gain social acceptance and legitimacy: legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and institutional theory.

The legitimacy theory states that, in a situation where organizational legitimacy is threatened, the evidence indicates that organizations disclose strategic information in an effort to re-establish organizational legitimacy (Deegan 2006). Several studies have used the legitimacy theory to explain organizational disclosure behaviour (see Deegan et al. 2002; and Deegan and Unerman 2006). Citizen participation initiatives oriented towards the diffusion of information are used by public organizations to regain the confidence of citizens. In these cases, the diffusion of information becomes an end in itself and attempts to change citizens' perceptions without necessarily changing the functioning of the organization or the decision-making processes.

The stakeholder theory is also based on gaining legitimacy, but focused on the stakeholder view of the organization (Alam 2006). Though the roots of stakeholder theory are in the realm of private sector organizations, there is tremendous interest in applying at least some of the theory's findings to managerial decision-making in the public sector (Scholl 2001). According to the stakeholder theory, accountability is fulfilled by managers following an agent-principal relationship. It is argued that organizations should design the proper mechanisms for controlling managers (agents) so that they act in the interest of the organization's stakeholders (principals), as they have a legitimate or moral right to know about the value created by the organization. As citizens are key stakeholders for the public sector, in general, and for local governments, in particular, citizen participation initiatives, such as consultation mechanisms or active participation

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<sup>1</sup>. The legitimacy gap describes the situation where there appears to be a lack of correspondence between how society believes an organization should act and how it is perceived that the organization has acted (Deegan, 2006). Two major sources of the legitimacy gap are changing societal expectations and a situation in which unknown information about the organization becomes known.

techniques, can be interpreted as the search for managerial tools that better reflect the interests of these stakeholders. Therefore, under this theory, legitimacy would be gained by promoting advanced forms of citizen participation in order to design and execute public policies that follow citizens' preferences.

The institutional theory has also been extensively used in recent years by academics for interpreting the adoption of managerial innovations and voluntary disclosures (Ribeiro and Scapens 2006; Johnsen 2005). It has a degree of overlap with a number of other theories, notably the stakeholder and legitimacy theories (Deegan 2006). As Brignall and Modell (2000) argue, institutional theories assume that a primary determinant of organizational structure and behaviour is the pressure exerted by external and internal constituencies on the organization to satisfy a set of expectations to gain legitimacy and so secure access to vital resources and long-term survival. A common means of gaining legitimacy is alignment with some rationalized institutional myths (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), which is occasionally manifested by the adoption of structural attributes displayed by other significant organizations through some isomorphic processes (DiMaggio and Powell 1983)<sup>2</sup>. According to this theory, the adoption of citizen participation initiatives can be viewed as a process of formal compliance with the wishes and expectations of the stakeholders. This separation, intentional or not, between the external image and actual structures and procedures, has been referred to as 'decoupling' (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Scott 1985). Following the institutional theory, organizations would adopt citizen participation initiatives as a symbol of responsiveness and "good management", expecting them to be interpreted by citizens as improvements in transparency and accountability, and not necessarily as the search for greater efficiency and citizen satisfaction, as the stakeholder theory states.

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<sup>2</sup>. Three classifications of isomorphism are proposed (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991): a) coercive, results from both formal and informal pressure imposed on an organization by legal, hierarchical or resource dependence (in the case of local governments, from central or regional governments); b) mimetic, in which organizations imitate practices and models of leading organizations in their institutional field in an attempt to get greater recognition, becoming, in this case, passive adopters of innovations; and c) normative isomorphism stems from environmental pressure for transformation from stakeholders such as politicians, financial institutions, scholars and multilateral organizations, as well as from specialized groups within a profession who try to define the conditions and method of work.

Together with the theoretical context, another issue which has often been used to understand the features of public management innovation processes is the public administration culture in which each public entity carries out its activity. As some authors have pointed out (Hood 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Torres 2004), the dissemination of public sector management innovations is influenced by their organizational and administrative culture, historical background and legal structural elements. Among the countries of this study, we can identify five broad styles of public management: Anglo-American, Nordic, Germanic, Southern European and Latin American styles.

Anglo-American countries emphasize efficiency, effectiveness and value for money, and they have been leaders in the introduction of public sector reforms (Hood 1995). They are more likely to introduce market mechanisms and notions of competitiveness and envisage the citizen primarily as a consumer of services, as a client. These countries have undertaken important initiatives of devolution -territorial decentralization and creation of agencies- and they have adapted private sector experience to the public sector. Public participation has become a major element of national and local government policy-making in these countries.

Nordic countries also belong to a public administration style concerned with meeting citizens' needs. Policy-making tends to be based on the building of consensus and interest groups have traditionally been considered to have a strong influence on policy. According to Allegretti and Herzberg (2004), the drivers of citizen participation in Nordic countries have to do with modernisation and with the improvement of efficiency in the public sector. Nordic countries have been leading countries at setting citizen participation as an explicit goal of their e-government policies (OECD 2001).

Germanic countries have usually been considered laggards in public sector reforms (Hood 1995; Torres 2004), as their bureaucratic model remains basically Weberian in the framework of a federal system with complex interrelationships between the different levels of government. In this model, administrative practice is marked by an overriding legalistic philosophy ('Rechtsstaat') and a strong hierarchical system (Hammerschmid and Meyer 2005). Notwithstanding, Germanic



countries have a long-standing tradition of consultation with social partners (OECD 2001)<sup>3</sup>. In fact, Germany is, to date, the European country in which there has been the greatest use of participative budgets. However, the main objective of citizen participation has been transparency, whereas making citizens true participants in public decisions, especially through the consultation of citizens as ‘consumers’, has been a secondary goal (Allegretti and Herzberg 2004).

The Southern European public administration model is built around administrative law, which implies the existence of highly bureaucratic structures and a very legalistic framework for administrative decision-making, based on the ideals of due process and equality of treatment (see Guyomarch 1999). Central government defines overarching state rules for field services and there is a unitary treasury system which receives almost all fiscal revenues on behalf of all central, regional and local public authorities. Even in countries with a high degree of decentralization, the central government sets common service features for the whole country, collects most tax revenues and maintains offices in provinces and regions in order to guarantee the uniformity of policies and the same level of services throughout the state (Torres 2004). According to Allegretti and Herzberg (2004), in Southern European countries, the motives that have driven citizen participation in policy-making are usually political.

Latin American countries have inherited most of the Southern European public administration legalistic traditions because of the strong Spanish and Portuguese cultural heritage (Schneider 2007). These countries have been pioneers in the introduction of participative budgets. According to Allegretti and Herzberg (2004), in Latin American countries, the drive behind citizen participation initiatives has been of a social nature: the need to rebalance economic gaps by constructing fairer procedures. For Schneider (2007), citizen participation in these countries is the result of a profound economic crisis instead of being a consequence of political leaders’ conviction of the benefits of a strong local democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about German activities in citizen participation see:  
<http://www.buergerorientierte-kommune.de>

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The data for this study was collected through an e-mail questionnaire<sup>4</sup> that was sent during February and March 2008 to OECD and MERCOSUR local governments with more than 500,000 inhabitants or to the principal cities of each country selected (in order to include at least 5 cities per country)<sup>5</sup>. The questionnaire was sent to 136 local governments and 30 answers were received. Therefore, the response rate is 22.1 percent. The final sample includes cities from the following public administration styles: Anglo-American –Ireland (1) and Canada (4)–, Germanic –Germany (9), Austria (2) and Switzerland (1)–, Nordic –Netherlands (1) and Denmark (2)– Southern European –Luxembourg (1), Spain (2) and Belgium (1)– and Latin American –Argentina (1), Brazil (4) and Uruguay (1)–. The questionnaire was made up of 22 questions covering the following issues: legislation, existence of a citizen participation department, main objectives of citizen participation initiatives, resources dedicated, mechanisms of citizen participation, areas using citizen participation, groups targeted, barriers to citizen participation and monitoring techniques.

After a descriptive analysis of the data obtained, which gives a general vision of citizen participation initiatives in these cities, we have gone deeper into the main factors which may cause the divergences in citizen participation between local governments. To do so, we have analysed the relationships that exist between certain exogenous variables and four different participation indexes, applying multivariate regression analysis. These participation indexes have been constructed as follows:

- 1) Information index: adding the number of mechanisms used to diffuse information about the local government and dividing by the maximum possible of 6 (the mechanisms

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<sup>4</sup>. The questionnaire was sent either in English, Spanish, French or German, to the e-mail address of the citizen participation department, when possible, or to the general email address of the city council, in which case we asked it to be passed on to the appropriate department. In order to obtain as many responses as possible, reminders were sent a month later, where necessary.

<sup>5</sup>. We sent the questionnaire to cities in Ireland, the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Spain, France, Belgium, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

analysed were: Web pages, local radio station, press, boards at local government offices, local government publications and Web streaming –audio or video).

- 2) Consultation index: adding the number of mechanisms used to consult citizens opinions and dividing by the maximum possible of 10 (surveys, referenda, citizen/user panels, interviews with stakeholders –face to face and by phone–, open days to talk to staff, public meetings, policy debate or forums, workshops and other mechanisms).
- 3) E-consultation index: adding the number of mechanisms used to consult citizens' opinions through the web and dividing by the maximum possible of 8 (complaint/suggestion boxes, chat or instant messaging, e-rulemaking, blogs, forums, surveys and e-petition systems).
- 4) Global participation index: adding up all the mechanisms referred to above and dividing by the maximum possible of 24.

Four regression analyses –one per participation index– have been run. The independent variables used in the regression analysis refer to internal characteristics of the entity (population of the city, specific citizen participation department, number of employees working in citizen participation and existence of a specific budget) and contextual factors (public administration style, existence of legislation on citizen participation, existence of punishments or rewards for not using or using citizen participation and corruption level of the country). These variables were coded as follows: 'public administration style' is a dummy variable with values of '1' for Anglo-American and Nordic public administration styles and '0' for mainland European and Latin American administration styles<sup>6</sup>; the size of the city has been measured with the logarithm of the city population; 'legislation on citizen participation', 'punishments or rewards', 'specific citizen

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<sup>6</sup>. This division has been made on the basis of the background information provided in the previous section. Anglo-American and Nordic cities have a long-standing reputation of citizen engagement and consultation. On the contrary, Germanic, Southern European and Latin American cities belong to a more legalistic tradition and have been considered as laggards in public sector reforms.

participation department' and 'specific budget' are dummy variables with value '1' for those cities with any kind of regulation at local or supralocal level, any kind of punishments or rewards for carrying out any kind of citizen participation initiatives, having a citizen participation department or a specific budget for citizen participation initiatives, respectively, and '0' otherwise; the variable 'number of employees' takes the value '1' if the city has 10 or more employees working exclusively on citizen participation issues and '0' otherwise; and, lastly, the data for the variable 'corruption' has been obtained from the Corruption Perception Index elaborated by Transparency International in 2007.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

##### **Objectives and uses of Citizen Participation**

If we look at the most important objectives for citizen participation highlighted by local governments (Table 2), in the 5 first positions we find objectives that are related to consultation - "learning about citizen preferences", "adapting local government initiatives to citizens' needs", "improving existing services"- and active participation -"fostering citizen influence in decision making" and "achieving better customer satisfaction levels"-, with no objective related to the information stage, giving an idea of ambitious goals for citizen participation initiatives.

This contrasts with the uses that are finally given to citizen participation (see Table 2), since all the objectives related to consultation or active participation lose importance when they are considered as uses. The most extended real uses of citizen participation initiatives are "complying with legislation" and "informing citizens about what is going on". Therefore, the most frequent use of citizen participation is related to the diffusion of information. Citizen participation mechanisms are also commonly used to consult citizen opinions -"learning about preferences", "adapting to citizens needs" and "improving services"- . These objectives are usually related to carrying out satisfaction surveys. Among the top uses, there is just one related to active participation, the last

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<sup>7</sup>. This index ranges from 0 (highly corrupt) to 1 (highly transparent). Report retrieved from: <http://www.transparency.org> (Accessed 12 June 2008).

and most difficult step in citizen participation (Martin and Boaz 2000), which is “fostering citizen influence in decision making”.

**Table 2:** Level of importance of Objectives and Uses of Citizen Participation.

	<i>Purposes of Citizen Participation</i>	Objectives	Uses	Change
Active Participation	Fostering citizen influence in decision making	1	5	▼
	Achieving better customer satisfaction levels	4	7	▼
	Mobilizing an active constituency of citizens who would support proposed plans and policies	10	11	▼
Consultation	Learning about citizen preferences	2	3	▼
	Adapting local government initiatives to citizens' needs	3	4	▼
	Improving existing services	5	5	=
	Tapping citizen knowledge and experience	7	9	▼
	Analysing the level of satisfaction with services	8	10	▼
Information	Informing citizens about what is going on in the local government	6	2	▲
	Complying with legal requirements	9	1	▲
	Improving the image of the local government	11	8	▲
	Other	12	12	=

**Notes:** Each cell shows the importance of the purposes of citizen participation when they are considered as ‘Objectives’ or ‘Uses’ (1 being the most important objective or use and 12 the least important).

The last column, ‘Change’, shows the evolution in the importance of the purposes of citizen participation when they are considered as ‘Uses’ instead of ‘Objectives’.

Only 43 percent of the local governments have formally established the objectives of their citizen participation initiatives, showing that it is an area in development where there are still many steps to be taken and suggesting that participation is not used as a means to achieve other objectives but that it is an end in itself. This is consistent with the statement made by the cities of our sample when they are asked about the uses of citizen participation, as the most important use is “complying with the legislation” (see Table 2). It seems that, in many cases, the objectives are being established by legislators instead of managers. This situation of initial developments in citizen participation is also seen in the existence of manuals of citizen participation, as only 57 percent of the cities have one.

**Table 3:** Local government framework for Citizen Participation

	YES (%)	NO (%)	N/A (%)
Formal document establishing these objectives	43	50	7
Document describing a catalogue of Citizen Participation mechanisms	57	40	3
Legislation establishing requirements to introduce Citizen Participation	90	10	---
- supralocal	80	20	---
- local	50	---	50
Rewards	17	73	10
Punishments	23	63	13
Specific department	67	27	6
10 or more employees working exclusively in Citizen Participation	40	37	24
Specific budget	67	23	10

### Creating an environment that promotes citizen participation

**Legal requirements.** The great majority (90 percent) of the local governments analysed are legally required to implement citizen participation initiatives. In 80 percent of the cases, a supralocal regulation exists, while in only 50 percent of the cases is there a local regulation that develops the mechanisms of citizen participation more specifically. Although only 10 percent of the local governments do not have formal requirements for citizen participation, the percentage of local governments with a document that describes the mechanisms of citizen participation applied, as stated before, is only 57 percent. So, it seems that local governments are not interested in describing the mechanisms that they should be using to engage citizens in decision-making processes in more detail.

**Rewards and Punishments.** A small proportion of local governments are subject to rewards (17 percent) or punishments (23 percent) for complying or not with citizen participation requirements. Only two cities have simultaneous rewards and punishments. In one case, the rewards are economic, and the other cities are rewarded or penalized with other kinds of provisions.

**Resources: Financial and human.** Two thirds of the local governments of the sample confirm that they have a specific department in charge of citizen participation issues and, similarly, 63 percent of the local governments have staff working exclusively in the citizen participation area.

A relationship does not seem to exist between the population of the city and the number of employees dealing with citizen participation. It can also be noted that the staff dedicated to citizen participation takes extreme values. In 50 percent of the local governments that reported this figure, 10 or more employees work only in citizen participation and, in the other 50 percent, between zero and four people are dedicated to citizen participation. The Anglo-American cities perceive the lack of human resources as a possible problem for making progresses in citizen participation while, for Southern European cities, this issue seems to be less important (see Table 4).

Regarding economic resources, 67 percent of local budgets have a specific entry for citizen participation and there is a high level of correlation between the existence of separate departments and budgets for participatory initiatives. It is within Anglo-American, Germanic and Nordic cities that the existence of specific departments and budgets is less common. Only 43 percent of the local governments polled gave the amount dedicated to citizen participation initiatives but, from the available data, it can be concluded that there is a direct relationship between the population of the city and the budget dedicated to citizen participation initiatives. While Southern European cities do not perceive financial resources as a problem for implementing their participatory initiatives, Latin American local governments find this issue one of their biggest barriers (see Table 4).

*Difficulties.* It has to be highlighted that, when local governments are asked about the problems in implementing citizen participation initiatives, none of them feels that these problems are very important. Lack of citizen interest is the one that seems to have hindered citizen participation initiatives most (see Table 4). This can be considered a paradox: those that benefit most are the principal obstacle to the development of participatory initiatives or, at least, this is what local government officials think. This lack of interest is especially perceived in Southern European cities, while Germanic cities show the highest levels of citizen interest. In Germanic cities, the mean value for “lack of examples to learn from” is very low, so these local governments have been able to identify examples which with to compare themselves and find possible ways to improve their citizen participation initiatives. In this aspect, Southern European cities show the

most negative perception. Also in this group, resistance to change and the lack of political will are considered as two important difficulties.

The Germanic and the Nordic cities are those with the fewest perceived difficulties for implementing citizen participation initiatives, Southern European cities are found at the other extreme, followed by the Latin American, two groups with evident interrelationships in their public administrative structures. Anglo-American local governments are in an intermediate position with regard to their perception of the difficulties related to the implementation of citizen participation.

**Table 4:** Problems related to citizen participation.

	N	Mean	Germanic	Nordic	Anglo American	Latin	Southern European
Lack of citizen interest	30	2.03	1.58	2.00	2.00	2.17	3.25
Lack of financial resources	30	1.83	1.75	1.67	2.00	2.33	1.25
Lack of human resources	30	1.80	1.67	1.67	2.20	2.00	1.50
Resistance to change	30	1.70	1.50	1.67	1.40	2.00	2.25
Lack of political will and drive	30	1.57	1.33	1.33	1.60	1.50	2.50
Lack of examples to learn from	30	1.17	0.75	1.00	1.20	1.50	2.00
<b>Mean</b>			<b>1.43</b>	<b>1.55</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>1.92</b>	<b>2.13</b>

**Notes:** 0: Not at all; 1: Seldom; 2: Some extent; 3: Great Extent; 4: Very great extent. We also offered the possibility of explaining other problems related to citizen participation, but no city indicated any.

### Information, Consultation and Active Participation

The disclosure of information to citizens is a pre-condition to achieving meaningful citizen participation through consultation and cooperation mechanisms. As Table 5 shows, the disclosure of information is widespread in almost all the areas considered. In ten areas, the information stage, at least, has been reached by more than 75 percent of the cities. Only in agriculture and cooperation for development are communication mechanisms being used by less than half of the cities –perhaps because these two areas are beyond the scope of the local governments studied: agriculture because we are analysing urban and not rural areas and cooperation because most actions are taken at upper levels of government. The percentages are lower when we move on to higher levels of participation, decreasing, on average, from 71 per cent in *information* to 50 percent in *cooperation*.



**Table 5:** Areas using citizen participation techniques.

	Information (%)	Consultation (%)	Cooperation (%)
Culture	83.3	66.7	53.3
Sports	83.3	73.3	60.0
Leisure	80.0	66.7	46.7
Health and social care	73.3	66.7	53.3
Education	73.3	60.0	46.7
Environment	80.0	70.0	60.0
Business	63.3	46.7	36.7
Agriculture	43.3	33.3	23.3
Tourism	53.3	40.0	36.7
Youth matters	83.3	80.0	66.7
Gender issues	70.0	66.7	60.0
Older people	80.0	80.0	63.3
Disabled people	80.0	73.3	63.3
Children and family	80.0	66.7	56.7
Housing	66.7	60.0	50.0
Urban planning	83.3	76.7	63.3
Transport	76.7	70.0	53.3
Infrastructures	73.3	56.7	43.3
Press communication	56.7	40.0	30.0
Citizen relationships (Neighbourhood associations)	66.7	63.3	56.7
Cooperation for development	43.3	36.7	33.3
<b>MEAN</b>	<b>71.1</b>	<b>61.6</b>	<b>50.3</b>

Only in three areas –youth matters, older people and urban planning– is the percentage of cities consulting citizens over 75 percent. Less than 50 percent of the cities are consulting citizens about business, agriculture, tourism, press communication and cooperation for development. In none of the areas are cooperation mechanisms being used by more than 70 percent of the cities. The areas in which the integration of citizens' opinions and views into local government planning processes is more frequent are sports, environment, youth matters, gender, older people, disabled people and urban planning, with percentages around 60-70 percent.

**Table 6:** Participation indexes by city.

	Information Index (%)	Consultation Index (%)	E-consultation Index (%)	Participation Index (%)
Aalborg	100.0	70.0	75.0	79.2
Graz	66.7	80.0	50.0	66.2
Differdange	100.0	50.0	62.5	66.7
Edmonton	83.3	80.0	37.5	66.7
Köln	83.3	50.0	62.5	62.5
Amsterdam	66.7	70.0	50.0	62.5
Montevideo	100.0	90.0	0.0	62.5
Innsbruck	83.3	70.0	37.5	62.5
Essen	83.3	80.0	12.5	58.3
Bern	83.3	70.0	25.0	58.3
Vancouver	83.3	80.0	12.5	58.3
Manaus	83.3	80.0	12.5	58.3
Zaragoza	100.0	50.0	37.5	58.3
Dormund	66.7	50.0	50.0	54.2
Fortaleza	66.7	60.0	37.5	54.2
Rosario	83.3	60.0	25.0	54.2
Toronto	100.0	60.0	12.5	54.2
Berlin	100.0	50.0	25.0	54.2
Hamburg	100.0	40.0	37.5	54.2
Leipzig	83.3	60.0	12.5	50.0
Amberes	66.7	60.0	25.0	50.0
Campinas	83.3	40.0	37.5	50.0
Guarulhos	83.3	60.0	12.5	50.0
Aarhus	66.7	60.0	12.5	45.8
Barcelona	66.7	50.0	25.0	45.8
Stuttgart	66.7	50.0	25.0	45.8
Bremen	33.3	50.0	25.0	37.5
Galway	66.7	50.0	0.0	37.5
Montreal	50.0	30.0	12.5	29.2
Düsseldorf	66.7	20.0	0.0	25.0
<b>MEAN</b>	<b>78.9</b>	<b>59.0</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>53.7</b>

The participation indexes elaborated (see Table 6) also show that the greatest percentages are found in information, while the consultation and e-consultation levels have been achieved to a lesser extent. We can also see that the cities with higher scores in consultation and e-consultation are those which present higher values in the information index, confirming that information is the preliminary step for cities that want to promote citizen participation initiatives with higher levels of engagement. Just 8 cities show a total participation index over 60% and, as can be seen in Table 6, cities from the five public administration styles analysed can be found in the first 10 positions of the participation indexes. Therefore, citizen participation initiatives seem to fit well into any kind

of public administration style. However, strong variations can be found within most countries and public administration styles. As an example, two Germanic cities occupy the second and the last positions according to the total participation index. On the contrary, Latin-American cities present higher levels of homogeneity, with scores ranging from 50% (Guarulhos, Brazil) to 62.5% (Montevideo, Uruguay).

### **Regression analysis**

The regression analysis aims to go deeper into the factors that could explain the level of development of citizen participation initiatives. The participation indexes are related to a series of independent variables explained in the methodology section. As can be seen from Table 7, none of the variables proposed is a significant predictor of the level of disclosure of information to citizens. In the second model, which takes the consultation index as its dependent variable, we can see that the existence of a specific budget is an explanatory variable of the development of the mechanisms used to consult citizens' opinions. This is consistent with the increasing need for resources as citizen participation mechanisms become more complex. As regards the use of the Internet to consult citizens' opinions, we can see that the existence of legislation on citizen participation, rewards or punishments for using or not using citizen participation and the number of employees (with a negative sign)<sup>8</sup> are explanatory factors of the level of diffusion of these techniques. Lastly, if we take the global participation index as the dependent variable, it can be appreciated that the three factors driving citizen participation initiatives are the existence of punishments or rewards, the number of employees (with a negative sign) and the existence of a specific budget.

Surprisingly, the existence of a specific department is not significant. The explanation of this can be found in that citizen participation initiatives may also be developed by each individual department.

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<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the fewer employees, the higher the number of mechanisms used to consult citizen opinions through the Internet. In this way, cities with fewer employees working exclusively in citizen participation become aware of the possibilities offered by the Internet to consult citizens' opinions without their scarce staff having to dedicate so much time to these tasks.

By contrast, variables such as the population, the public administration style, the existence of a specific department or the level of corruption are not significant in any of the models. Therefore, regression analysis results confirm that the level of development of citizen participation initiatives does not depend on public administration style. The level of corruption shows that Latin American cities, where corruption is higher, are not different in the development of citizen participation.

**Table 7:** Regression analyses results.

<b>Standardized Regression coefficients and statistical significance</b>					
	<i>Information Index</i>	<i>Consultation Index</i>	<i>e-consultation Index</i>	<i>Participation Index</i>	
Constant	(0.836)*	0.692	0.390	(0.627)**	
Public Administration Style	-0.114	0.140	-0.012	0.038	
Log population	-0.076	-0.011	-0.144	-0.113	
Legislation on citizen participation	-0.010	-0.160	<b>(0.383)**</b>	0.113	
Punishments or rewards	0.281	0.133	<b>(0.372)**</b>	<b>(0.384)*</b>	
Specific citizen participation department	0.062	-0.168	0.241	0.054	
Number of employees	0.135	-0.294	<b>(-0.440)**</b>	<b>(-0.372)*</b>	
Specific budget	0.101	<b>(0.497)**</b>	0.273	<b>(0.485)**</b>	
Corruption	0.024	-0.118	-0.194	-0.170	
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.142	0.345	0.552	0.493
	N	30	30	30	30

Note: \*\* p < .05; \* p < .10

## 5. DISCUSSION

Citizen participation initiatives are being increasingly implemented around the world. Nevertheless, they are not always developed to the same extent –information, consultation and cooperation– or using the same mechanisms of participation. On the one hand, information initiatives are widely used because they do not require fundamental changes in traditional decision-making processes and implementation costs are low. On the other hand, consultation and active participation, the initiatives that require stronger commitment from managers and politicians, and also from citizens, are still in their infancy, in most cases.

The real uses that local governments are making of citizen participation initiatives – complying with legislation and informing citizens about what is going on– demonstrate that the main priority which is driving these developments is the search for legitimacy, from the legitimacy theory and institutional theory (coercive isomorphism) points of view. So, legitimacy and institutional theories better explain the adoption of citizen participation techniques as an attempt to change the perceived image of government without deeper changes in the decision-making processes to actually incorporate citizen views. Therefore, for most local governments, these theories help us to understand why this increasing interest in citizen participation has taken place. On the contrary, not many local governments openly recognised that complying with legal requirements is one of their top priorities, perhaps because this is not the image that they want to show to their citizens. As main objectives, local governments prefer to report those that could be considered “politically correct” while the actual uses show a greater importance of legitimating actions and reveal that citizen participation is at an early stage of development. All this raises important questions about the role of supralocal legislation in promoting citizen participation because, as institutional theory argues –coercive isomorphism–, local government may be promoting “soft” citizen participation initiatives in order to comply with these norms without really changing decision-making processes or giving up decision power to citizens. As Walters et al. (2000), the OECD (2001) and Pindado et al. (2002) show, legitimation without transformation of processes is also an objective in citizen participation. In this way, citizen participation becomes an end in itself that searches for improvements in legitimacy by changing the perceived image that citizens have of governments.

Notwithstanding, there are also local governments that are using citizen participation for consulting and promoting active participation, showing that, in some cases, stakeholder theory is more suitable for explaining the adoption of citizen participation techniques that help managers to better satisfy the stakeholders. Some of the local governments analysed use citizen participation to transform decision-making processes (Pindado et al. 2002), to achieve better service delivery and

to strengthen democracy (OECD 2001), to improve the quality of services (Involve 2005), and/or to discover citizens' views (Walters et al. 2000).

The results of the regression analyses do not show any clear patterns that explain the development of citizen participation initiatives at a basic level of diffusion of information, because almost all the local governments of our study have accomplished this first stage. The regression analysis reinforces the assumption derived from the descriptive analysis that the public administration style is not a determinant for the development of citizen participation initiatives, though it has been a main element for explaining the evolution of other areas of public sector reforms<sup>9</sup> and recent developments in public sector management, such as e-government<sup>10</sup>. Based on the theoretical framework proposed in Section 2, we expected Anglo-American and Nordic cities, more inclined to conceive citizens as consumers of services –clients– and more worried about citizen satisfaction and engagement, to have developed more advanced citizen participation mechanisms that foster citizen contacts with the Administration and accountability to the citizenry to a greater extent. On the contrary, we also expected Southern European, Germanic and Latin American local governments –where bureaucratic principles and traditional values of public administration are still deeply rooted and which have not traditionally appreciated contacts with citizens and clients– to present less-developed citizen participation initiatives. However, our findings do not confirm this expectation since local governments from the five public administration styles are evenly distributed in our participation rankings

As stated previously, the great majority of the local governments analysed are legally required to implement citizen participation initiatives. However, legislation on its own is not helping to promote more advanced citizen participation initiatives. As regression analysis has shown, what seems to be effective in order to promote advanced levels of citizen participation is the existence of punishments or rewards for not using or using this kind of mechanisms. The existence of a specific budget could also be considered a facilitator of higher levels of citizen

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<sup>9</sup> See Hood 1995, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000, Torres 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Torres et al. 2006, Pina et al. 2007 a and b.

participation –consultation and active participation– as they require more resources. The existence of this budget could also help us to distinguish the local governments that have initiated citizen participation and will advance towards higher levels, from those with only the intention of changing “perceptions” and that very probably will remain at the communication stage.

The negative sign of the coefficient for the variable “number of employees” may be explained by the fact that some local governments do not have staff dedicating all their time to citizen participation issues, but the staff working in each department may devote some of their time to citizen participation. In addition, the specific department may not be significant because citizen participation initiatives may also be developed by each individual department. Besides, sometimes a specific department may be created without real intentions of promoting citizen participation initiatives. It seems that local governments are devoting attention to citizen participation, not with a specific department and personnel, but integrating citizen participation with other processes.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

Citizen participation is a developing area in the local government setting that has re-emerged with additional strength as a result of citizen dissatisfaction. There are three stages or levels of citizen participation and most local governments are in the lower level. Although citizen participation should not be an end in itself, but a means to achieve other objectives such as strengthening democracy, enhancing transparency and accountability or achieving better service delivery (OECD 2001), some local governments are using it only as a way to achieve greater levels of perceived legitimacy. In fact, the search for legitimacy is the rationale to explain the implementation of citizen participation either as a means or as a goal.

Legitimacy theory explains why local governments promote citizen participation from the information perspective: they consider it an effective way to change their perceived image. Citizen participation is the means through which local governments attempt to change citizens’ perceptions without having to change their policies or management. In fact, local governments that are in the information phase usually do not have a specific budget for citizen participation initiatives. Under

the name of citizen participation, they mainly provide information to the public in an effort to regain the legitimacy lost by showing a ‘new image’ of government.

However, in some cases the stakeholder theory can also be applied. In some cities, high levels of citizen participation have been achieved, in terms of having introduced consultation and/or active participation mechanisms. From the stakeholder theory perspective, in these cases, the introduction of these techniques can be justified as the search for techniques that better reflect the expectation of the principals, so they can be considered the way through which the needs of stakeholders, in this case citizens, are met.

Arguing that citizen participation is about regaining legitimacy in an environment of decreasing levels of trust, institutional theory also explains the introduction of citizen participation initiatives. In particular, coercive isomorphism explains how local governments are searching for compliance with legislation and not changing the structure of power or decision-making processes unless they have real incentives to do so (in the form of punishments or rewards).

From the sample of our survey, some trends in the implementation of citizen participation have been identified. The actual uses of citizen participation techniques show that local governments are mainly disclosing information to narrow the legitimacy gap caused by citizen distrust, and that only in very few cases are decision-making structures being changed. As citizen participation initiatives will continue to grow in the following years, future research should analyse their effects, or the lack of them, on public sector legitimacy and, as a result, on citizen trust in government.



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