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Designing advisory councils to do what? Analysing the most common participatory institution in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Advisory councils (ACs) are one of the most common participatory institutions, aimed to provide the authorities with a forum to consult the organized groups at a given territorial or sectoral level. Although they constitute permanent spaces for civic participation, they remain overlooked. This work systematically analyses them from a large-N perspective that goes beyond the best-cases approach. The paper initially reflects on the role and expected benefits of ACs, identifying three important design choices: organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels. Then, the paper maps 2,013 ACs

in Spain and develops a descriptive analysis relying on an original database obtained from the study of official regulations and web pages of 70 ACs. Our first goal is to describe how ACs are. Secondly, a good picture of these councils sets the ground for discussing their performance in terms of inclusiveness, impact in policy-making and democratic control. Combining different statistical techniques the paper shows that: (1) ACs present diverse design features; (2) these characteristics enable the generation of typologies of ACs; and (3) having the explicit goal of influencing public policies positively correlates with being an empowered council. These findings connect with the broader debate on participatory governance.

KEYWORDS

- Advisory councils
- institutional design
- local government
- participatory governance
- citizen participation

1. Introduction

At least since the 1970s, advocates of participatory democracy have been claiming for new mechanisms designed to strengthen the implication of citizens in the social, political and economic realms that affect their lives (Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970). However, 'citizen participation' is an all-encompassing term that allows different institutional developments, from referendums to *mini-publics* based on a random sampling of participants. In this sense, most of the current research on participatory and deliberative arenas focuses on new forms of participation – online voting or deliberative polls, for instance – which implies to overlook other established modes of citizen engagement (Hendricks & Dzur, 2015).

Advisory councils fit within the traditional forms of participation based on organized groups and stakeholders, in contrast with democratic innovations more focused on giving voice to lay citizens (Della Porta et al., 2014; Smith, 2009). From this stance, they constitute a participatory mechanism aimed to provide the authorities with a forum to consult the organized groups at a given territorial or sectoral level. Based on a pluralist approach (Dahl, 1961), the first advisory councils (ACs hereinafter) unfolded a corporatist model oriented to give business and trade unions some voice regarding social and economic policies. This initial structure broadened with the development of an associative model of democracy (Cohen & Rogers, 1995; Warren, 2001) to incorporate other interests beyond the socioeconomic ones.

ACs are one of the most common forms of participatory institution: varieties of them are found in many European countries, the United States, Latin America and even Asian countries (Campos & González, 1999; Cooper & Musso, 1999; Fobé et al., 2013; Serdült & Welp, 2015; Sintomer & De Maillard, 2007). Contrasting with other one-off democratic innovations, ACs represent regular and permanent spaces of participation that tend to last. In addition, the promotion of this type of instruments often constitutes the first step towards more ambitious participatory policies (Hendricks & Dzur, 2015). However, there is a surprising lack of research on ACs from a large-N approach. On the one hand, the generalized perception that ACs' actual impact in policy-making is quite reduced contributes to an extended lack of attention to their results. On the other hand, since they are embedded within the daily functioning of public administrations, their limited attractiveness generates a scarce visibility in the media.

Nevertheless, the knowledge about existing ACs widens our understanding on the broader family of participatory institutions. Therefore, our main goal in this paper is to systematically analyse this mechanism in order to describe its main features: how are ACs designed? Can we identify patterns inside diversity, that means, typologies of ACs? In addition, a good picture of the ACs' design sets the ground for discussing their strengths and weaknesses according to major participatory goods as inclusiveness, impact in policy-making and democratic control.

To do so, we rely on the Spanish case as representative of the participatory tradition in Southern Europe (Alarcón & Font, 2014). On the one hand, ACs constitute a widespread participatory mechanism in Spain that, since the 1980s, institutionally connects the local, regional and state governments with relevant associations and stakeholders (Navarro, 1999). Thus, the Spanish case allows a large-N strategy aimed to deliver systematic and reliable findings beyond the typical best-cases approach. On the other hand, the study of the Spanish scenario contributes to assess the ACs' performance which, in turn, sets the ground for future reforms elsewhere.

The paper unfolds as follows. The next section addresses the role of ACs and presents institutional design a framework to study participatory mechanisms. Three design dimensions – organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels – are presented in order to analyse ACs, also connecting them with a number of goods stated by participatory theory. The third section exposes the paper's methodological strategy. The fourth section shows the empirical results of our descriptive analysis, relying on an original database obtained from the study of 70 ACs in the areas of education, environment, immigration and territorially based policies. Finally, the discussion synthesizes the main findings and connects them with the broader debate on participatory governance.

2. The Nature, Role and Benefits of Advisory Councils

ACs receive different denominations in the compared literature: 'sectoral consultation councils' (Schattan, 2006), 'advisory panels' (Fung, 2003), 'stakeholder consultation' (Della Porta et al., 2014), 'associational bodies' (Hirst, 1994), 'management councils' (Barth, 2006). We use the term 'advisory councils' to highlight the collective nature of these settings – they include government and civil society actors and, sometimes, also experts and representatives of other administrations – as well as their common advisory relationship with public authorities, either providing advice at request or by their own initiative. Normally their advisory role means working as a space for public debates, but sometimes they have binding power. Within this conceptual scope we find *territorial and sectoral* councils, the former focused on general politics in a given territory and the latter related to specific policies or sectors of population. In the second place, there are *old corporatist councils*, devoted to classic socioeconomic issues, and *new social councils*, more focused on concerns like identity or ecologism, and with a higher potential for innovation (Bherer et al., 2016, p. 349). Finally, we can distinguish between councils originated from the initiative of civil society and those created by public authorities (a majority in the Spanish case).

However, apart from Fung's research (2003, 2006), a systematic analysis of ACs based on cross-case comparisons and a common analytical framework is missing.[1] Here, in order to know how ACs really are, institutional design emerges as a powerful research framework on participatory institutions (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Fung, 2003, 2006; Landwehr & Holzinger, 2010; Nabatchi, 2012; Smith, 2009; Rico Motos et al., 2021XXXX anonymized). Thus, by studying the ACs' constitutive rules it is possible to get reliable information on many design choices, like the council's structure, composition, aims, decision rules and so on. Obviously, the fact that some features are stated in the council's regulations – a specific decision-rule or a certain number of meetings per year, for instance – does not secure that they will be put into practice. Nevertheless, the official regulations set the 'game rules' for the actors inside the council and provide information about the intentions of policy-makers when they promote ACs.

In addition, we rely on the participatory literature to point out that the design choices on the ACs' organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels affect their ability to achieve certain democratic goods. At this point, a debate emerges: should we judge participatory institutions in terms of their civic or symbolic benefits or rather prioritize their capacity to improve policy-making? A compelling answer here is to state that trade-offs among goods are frequent in any participatory mechanism (Fung, 2006; Sintomer, 2011; Smith, 2009). Thus, it makes no sense to establish a general standard of legitimacy linked to a generic idea of citizen participation. Instead, we must specify which are the specific goods that a given participatory device is aimed to achieve. For example, ACs might have not been created to raise civic awareness and, therefore, it would not make sense to use this value as an overarching criterium to judge them.

On the other hand, even if no participatory mechanism can simultaneously maximize all the values linked to the democratic ideal, some key values must be – at least to a certain extent – embodied in any institution who claims itself as participatory. Here, some authors have developed normative standards. Della Porta et al. (2014, p. 75) focus on three main qualities: 'a participatory quality, linked to their capacity to get citizens involved; a deliberative quality, linked to their capacity to promote high-quality discourse; and an empowerment quality, that is, their capacity to impact on decision-making'. In a similar vein, Smith (2009) highlights four democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. Inclusiveness means that the participatory mechanism allows all affected groups to raise their viewpoints. Popular control refers to the possibility of participants to influence the decision-making process. Considered judgement focus on the enlightened understanding of the problems under consideration. Finally, transparency alludes to the openness of proceedings to both participants and the broader public (Smith, 2009, p. 12).

We have summarized the previous debate by synthesizing three democratic goods that ACs should aim to achieve: inclusiveness, impact on decision-making and democratic control, being the latter understood in our research as the possibility of participants – and, to a certain extent, the broad citizenry – to check what the administration has done with the council's recommendations. Before presenting our analysis on the Spanish ACs, the following subsections connect our studied design choices (organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels) with the democratic good that,

according to participatory literature, can be affected.

2.1. Organizational Structure: Inclusiveness

A principle of democratic fairness obliges the ACs to include all interests affected by the issue under discussion. If an inclusive participation is not achieved, the council will be affected by problems of low representativeness and, additionally, sociodemographic and/or ideological biases (Navarro & Font, 2013). Furthermore, even if the selection procedure secures a representative composition of the council, its actual functioning can reproduce strategic calculations and biases that undermine the ability of some participants to introduce issues in the agenda, voice critical opinions or influence internal decisions.

At this point, the ACs' organizational structure becomes a key point when making all voices being heard. Every council has a plenary as a basic form of organization where all members are present but, apart from that, more complex structures may or may not exist. Elements as having a standing committee (a collegial body in charge of managing the council's core functions between the plenaries) or holding a certain number of ordinary meetings per year show, at least, a concern for achieving a fair participation among its members. Hence, the formalization of a representative standing committee suggests the aim of giving all participants a say in the management of the institution.

On the other hand, inclusiveness works as a precondition for deliberation. Deliberative theory states that truly significant participation implies actual communicative interaction with other viewpoints in shaping political judgements and, at times, changing preferences after a reflective debate (Bohman, 2006; Habermas, 1996). Hence the ACs' organizational structure should introduce deliberative stances where participants exchange information and viewpoints on equal basis, aimed to reach considered judgements. In this sense, having working groups or commissions is not a guarantee of good performance, but it is a signal that there is interest to discuss policy details in a more deliberative setting as compared with the crowded plenary.

2.2. Objectives: Impact in Policy-making

If a participatory mechanism aims to have an actual impact in policy-making, there must be an institutional link that converts the participants' contributions into actual policies. Even if there are other benefits that the council members may pursue (like networking or symbolic rewards), the achievement of impact is a key compensation for the costs of participation. However, the empirical evidence shows that most of participatory processes have a limited influence when it comes to decision-making (Smith, 2009, pp. 172–173; Della Porta et al., 2014, p. 113). The reasons go from the reluctance of politicians to transfer decision power to civil society (Sorensen, 2016, p. 158), to the lack of a real motivation of civil society organizations to adopt a managerial role. It can also happen that political authorities only allow a real empowerment in low-profile issues (Della Porta et al., 2014, p. 107), or even that they try to manipulate the process' outcomes to make them suit their own interests (Font et al., 2018).

Fung's expectation (2006, p. 69) is that participatory processes with merely advisory functions will be ineffective. On the contrary, when a participatory mechanism has a direct impact on public policies their members will be more committed to use it as a forum for deliberation, negotiation and decision, and it is likely that public authorities will be pressured to provide this mechanism with material resources (budget, personnel, technical office, etc.) to secure the fulfilment of its executive functions. From his analysis on the participatory settings on education and policing in Chicago, Fung (2001, p. 75) proposes the concept of 'accountable autonomy' as a variable that explains the good results of some of these experiences. It would be a matter of combining a considerable functional autonomy and decision-making power in a given participatory institution with the presence of an external authority that provides it with resources and, at the same time, forces it to offer explanations and be accountable.

Are the inputs of the Spanish ACs integrated into the decision-making process? Previous studies suggest that ACs rarely have had a strong influence in the design, implementation or evaluation of public policies. For example, in their assessment of participatory institutions in the Spanish municipalities during the late 90s, Gomà and Font (2001) found a stark contrast between a small number of councils with a direct impact on programme design and a large number of merely consultative ACs, perceived by officials as spaces for information and legitimation of unilateral policies. A similar image comes from comparative research: ACs rarely have binding power (Cooper & Musso, 1999).

2.3. Accountability Channels: Democratic Control

Since the ACs' primary goal is to provide advice to public authorities, it is important to check if their constitutive rules establish formal channels of communication with the administration or, contrarily, that communication takes place through

informal channels, often based on the presence of politicians or civil servants as members of the ACs. Also, is that communication bidirectional? Receiving feedback about what the administration has done with the council's proposals is a basic requirement to exert social accountability (Bovens, 2007, p. 457). Are there procedures to check if the participants' recommendations have been considered by public authorities when adopting the final decision? Does the administration offer explanations to the council members when decides to ignore their contribution?

Furthermore, democratic control is not only to be internally exerted. Since ACs represent the voice of relevant groups from civil society, it is interesting to check if they implement channels to make the citizenry aware of their activities (Smith, 2009, p. 25). Here, the public visibility of the council's reports, proposals or minutes – through its official website, for instance – helps the citizens to hold accountable both the groups involved in the process and the administration that receives their advice.

To sum up, the following sections will analyse the design of Spanish ACs in terms of organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels. From this empirical description we will discuss whether these design choices help to achieve the normative goods – inclusiveness, impact and democratic control – traditionally associated to participatory institutions. Before presenting the empirical results, the next section explains the research methods.

3. Methods

The research is based in two complementary datasets: a general dataset for mapping the presence of ACs in Spain and a detailed dataset covering four policy fields. For the general dataset, very basic information – territorial level and subject – has been gathered regarding ACs at three territorial levels: local (the 25 Spanish cities above 250.000 inhabitants or above 175.000 inhabitants and being province capital), the 17 regions (regional level) and the state level. A total of 2013 ACs have been identified, mainly consulting the official public administration websites and other complementary sources.[2] It is important to note that all these ACs have been found in Internet but not all of them are active. Nevertheless, most ACs seem to be active.[3]

Departing from this first mapping of ACs, a more detailed dataset has been built. Since analysing 2013 ACs is not possible, we relied on theoretical criteria to select a sample that reduces the number of ACs while keeping their diversity with four policy areas: (a) traditional social policies (school councils); (b) new policies (environment councils); (c) identities (immigration councils); (d) territorially based councils (city centre district councils). Hence, the school councils represent the first generation of *corporatist councils* raised by the administration to address socioeconomic issues like education, health care, economy, or social welfare. These councils share common features like giving voice to strong and organized groups (trade unions, business organizations, doctors, teachers, etc.) who are highly oriented towards influencing public policies. On the other hand, environment and immigration councils are representative of the *new social councils*, more focused on post-materialistic issues or identity politics, respectively. Finally, city centre district councils represent the pure *territorial councils*. This selection aims to reduce the risk of bias when moving from the general to the detailed dataset.

All ACs at the state and regional level have been selected for each policy area, and only one at the local level (selected at random) for each region. Regarding the territorially based councils, all the central district councils have been selected (that means, maximum one per city). This strategy has resulted in a detailed database with 70 ACs: 5 councils belong to the state level, 35 to the regional level and 30 to the local level. In terms of policy areas, 23 are school councils, 12 immigration councils, 20 environment councils and 15 central district councils. Here, each specific council represents a broader category. Thus, the 23 school councils in the sample of 70 ACs (33%) supposes an accurate representation of the weight of classic *corporatist councils* in our universe of 2013 ACs (35%). This logic holds for the other types of councils.

The information for each AC has been collected from their constitutional documents and functioning rules, as well as from complementary Internet searches. The coding of the design characteristics of these ACs have been developed by three coders at the end of 2017, using the same codebook and coordinated through several meetings.

Our empirical approach entails the combination of different statistical methods in order to develop a systematic analysis of ACs in Spain. Therefore, the analysis is structured in five stages, responding to the main research question: How are the ACs? First, we rely on the general dataset to present the general mapping of ACs in Spain, their territorial distribution and their policy areas.

Second, we focus on our detailed sample of 70 ACs in order to analyse their main design characteristics in terms of organizational structure, objectives and channels for accountability. We also explore the relations between these three dimensions through bivariant analysis, selecting some illustrative variables for the sake of simplicity.

Third, we explore to what extent these design characteristics are related. We summarize the information provided for all the previous variables through the exploratory technique of Multiple Correspondence Analysis. This multivariable method converts a matrix of data (in our case, considering the information provided by the 23 variables showed in Table A1 in the Appendix) into a graphical form, summarizing the maximum possible variance (or inertia) in two axis that must be interpreted (Greenacre, 2007). This statistical technique reveals the underlying structure of the data, showing how the different categories of the qualitative variables are linked and generating new dimensions. This technique is similar to the factorial analysis with quantitative variables, and the concept of inertia is equivalent to the explained variance attributed to each factor. The original variables have been recoded in order to accomplish the conditions that this technique requires (all categories must include at least 5% of the cases, the number of categories of each variable should be similar).

Fourth, we identify typologies of ACs. Based on the two dimensions generated by the Multiple Correspondence Analysis, we classify the 70 ACs through a cluster analysis. This multivariate method consists in the sorting of cases (here, ACs) according to their similarity on one or more dimensions, generating groups that maximize within-group similarity and minimize between-group similarity (Henry et al., 2005). We developed the clustering based on Ward's method, that consists of grouping individuals in each stage of the process minimizing the inertia (or variance) loss. The cluster analysis allows us to identify the main types of ACs according to our data.

And fifth, we explore how these identified typologies of ACs are. We represent the ACs and their grouping in the dimensions generated through the previous Multiple Correspondence Analysis. Also, in order to better understand the generation of these types, we analyse through bivariate analysis the relation of these groups of ACs with variables not included in the previous technique, like the year of creation, territorial level or policy areas at stake.

4. Results

We start mapping the ACs in Spain, looking at the territorial levels, policy areas and geographical distribution. Then, we analyse the main design choices in the sample of 70 councils, according to their constitutional rules and other official documents. Finally, we show some differences between the resulting typologies of ACs.

4.1. Mapping Advisory Councils

Since only big cities have been considered, most ACs have been identified at the regional level (1,261 ACs), followed by the local level (629) and, logically, only a small proportion (123) at the national level (see Table 1). The most common policy areas addressed by ACs are economy (19.8%), environment (14.2%) and territorial at the district level (10.1%; or 13.8% if the neighbourhood level is included), followed by education (6.1%) and health care (5.9%). Therefore, the ACs cover the most strategic areas, where different organized actors like unions or business associations engage with representatives and public officers.

Table 1. Number of ACs by territorial level and policy area in Spain (*N* = 2013).

		N	%
Territorial level	State	123	6.1
	Region	1261	62.6
	Municipality	629	31.2
	Economy/Tourism/Economic sectors	399	19.8
	Environment/Forests/Fire/Water/etc.	285	14.2
	Territorial (Districts)	203	10.1
	Education	123	6.1
	Health care/Drugs and addictions/AIDS/Cancer/etc.	119	5.9
	Childhood/Youth/Elders/Family	108	5.4

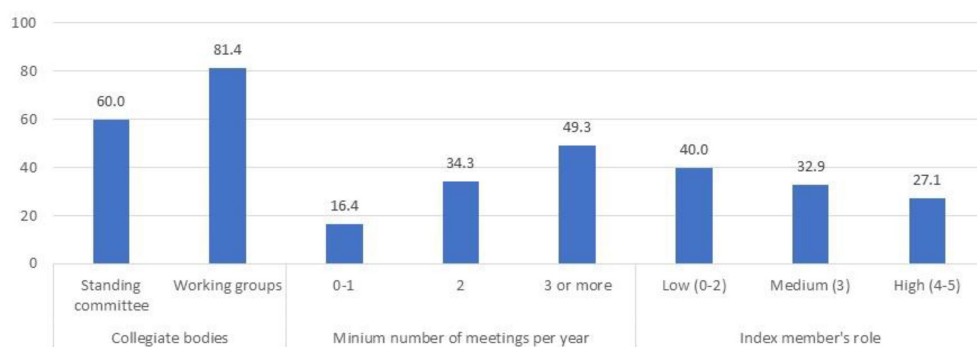|			
	Culture/Heritage/Language issues/Religion	84	4.2
	Public Administration	83	4.1
	Territorial (Neighbourhoods)	75	3.7
	Social welfare (including Economic and Social Councils)	66	3.3
	Sports/Leisure	59	2.9
Policy area	Women	58	2.9
	Foreign Affairs/Development Cooperation	54	2.7
	Citizen participation/Third Sector/Volunteering	47	2.3
	Transports/Traffic/Mobility	46	2.3
	Dependents/Disabled people	44	2.2
	Security	37	1.8
	Immigration/Ethnic and cultural diversity	33	1.6
	Territorial (Social city councils)	25	1.2
	ICTs/Science/Innovation	21	1.0
	Urban Planning/Regional Planning	19	0.9
	Housing	15	0.7
	LGTB	7	0.3
	Others	3	0.1

Source: Authors.

The geographical distribution of local and regional ACs shows that these participatory institutions are largely widespread. Their presence seems related with the population size and economic strength, but also with the regional institutional promotion of citizen participation (Sintomer & Del Pino, 2014). That means that more ACs can be found in those areas where regional governments have been devoting more institutional resources to civic engagement: Catalonia (308), Andalusia (240), Valencian Community (177) and Basque Country (142), followed by Aragon (125) and Castile and Leon (125). This structure is reproduced with little differences for each policy area.

4.2. Main Design Choices: How ACs are

Once the general landscape of ACs has been described, we focus now on the sample of 70 ACs to identify their organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels.

ACs show relevant differences regarding their basic structure (see Figure 1). Regarding the collegiate bodies, all ACs have a plenary, which according to their constitution is supposed to be called once per year in 16.4% of the cases, twice in 34.3% and three or more times per year in almost half of the ACs. Usually, most of the activity is developed between plenaries in other collegiate bodies. In that sense, 60% of ACs have a standing committee, and 81.4% working groups or specialized commissions dealing with specific tasks. As explained in the theoretical section, deliberative dynamics are more feasible to take place in those commissions, where less participants engage in intense and stable interactions, contrasting with the more crowded and sporadic plenaries. Considered jointly, 14.3% of the ACs do not count with a standing committee nor working groups in their rules, which suggests difficulties for making all the voices being heard (inclusiveness).

Figure 1. Organizational structure of ACs (%) (*N* = 70). Source: Authors.

Standing committee 60.0 | Working groups 81.4 | 0-1 16.4 | 2 34.3 | 3 or more 49.3 | Low (0-2) 40.0 | Medium (3) 32.9 | High (4-5) 27.1

Collegiate bodies | Minium number of meetings per year | Index member's role

Who are the stakeholders that gain a sit in these councils? Table 2 shows the composition of ACs depending on the type of members, both for the plenary and the main executive body.

Table 2. Composition of ACs.

Type of members	Number of members				
	0	1–2	3–4	5+	N
Plenary members					
Associations	1.7	1.7	5.0	91.7	60
Politicians	21.3	59.0	11.5	8.2	61
Business organizations	22.1	41.2	13.2	23.5	68
Trade unions	25.0	30.9	10.3	33.8	68
Public officers	32.3	27.4	9.7	30.6	62
Other public administrations	37.7	15.9	20.3	26.1	69
Experts	50.7	15.9	14.5	18.8	69
Universities/research centres	58.0	23.2	15.9	2.9	69
Other councils	64.2	25.4		10.4	67
Positions of trust	68.7	10.4	3.0	17.9	67
Political parties	72.7		3.0	24.2	66
Others	78.3	13.0	2.9	5.8	69
Lay citizens	98.6	1.4			69
Main executive body members					
Associations	25.0	22.2	33.3	19.4	36
Public officers	25.7	51.4	11.4	11.4	35
Trade unions	35.1	32.4	21.6	10.8	37
Business organizations	47.2	47.2	5.6		36
Politicians	55.6	44.4			36
Other public administrations	64.7	26.5	8.8		34

Others	67.5	20.0	5.0	7.5	40
Experts	67.6	27.0	5.4		37
Universities/research centres	77.8	22.2			36
Other councils	81.6	15.8	2.6		38
Positions of trust	84.2	15.8			38
Political parties	91.4	8.6			35
Lay citizens	97.5		2.5		40

Source: Authors.

Attending to the weight of each type of members, both the plenary and the main executive body show a similar structure. On the one hand, the most common stakeholders are associations, politicians, business organizations, trade unions, public officers and other public administrations. This composition is in line with one of the main goals of ACs: bringing together civil society actors with public officers. Experts and members of universities and research centres are the next members in terms of presence, incorporating the scientific point of view to the council's discussions. On the other hand, the presence of lay citizens is almost inexistent – in line with the associative base of ACs – while political parties as such are present in less than one third of the plenaries.

What is the role of participants in ACs? Can they raise their voice and impact the council's functioning? An index has been built as a proxy of the intensity of the participation, considering how many tasks are attributed to participants in the regulations: add items to the agenda, voice opinions, vote, dissenting vote and others (the Cronbach's Alfa associated to this index is 0.67). While in 27.1% of cases this index is high (members can perform 4 or 5 of these tasks), 32.9% of ACs show a medium level (3 tasks) and 40% a low level (up to 2 tasks).

We also find variability in the number of participants: 30.2% of ACs count on the participation of more than 50 members in plenaries, 46% with 26–50 members and 23.8% with less than 25 participants (see Table A1 in the Appendix). As we mentioned above, it is arguably more difficult to develop deliberative dynamics in the more crowded plenaries, where an intense face-to-face interaction is less frequent. In fact, size matters when designing ACs. The smaller ACs are provided with standing committees and working groups much less than the bigger cases (for example, ACs with up to 25 members have a standing committee in 26.7% of the cases, as compared with 84.2% in councils with more 50 participants). Thus, these bodies work as organizational arrangements that make possible deliberation in big ACs.

Also in terms of resources (not shown in the Figure 1 for simplification), we found evidence that 38.6% of the ACs have their own staff (who could perform a facilitation task), while 35.7% count on an independent budget (useful for easing participation).

Focusing now on their objectives, the consultative character of ACs implies that all our cases have been created to produce recommendations. In the same line, 94.3% of the cases establish the generic objective of promoting participation. But their connection with the decision-making process is not so obvious: only 38.6% have the explicit objective of influencing public policies (see Figure 2). Since most of the Spanish ACs are created by the administration, stating this objective in the ACs' regulations shows an initial intention of policy-makers to take their inputs into account.

Figure 2. Objectives of ACs (%) (*N* = 70). Source: Authors.
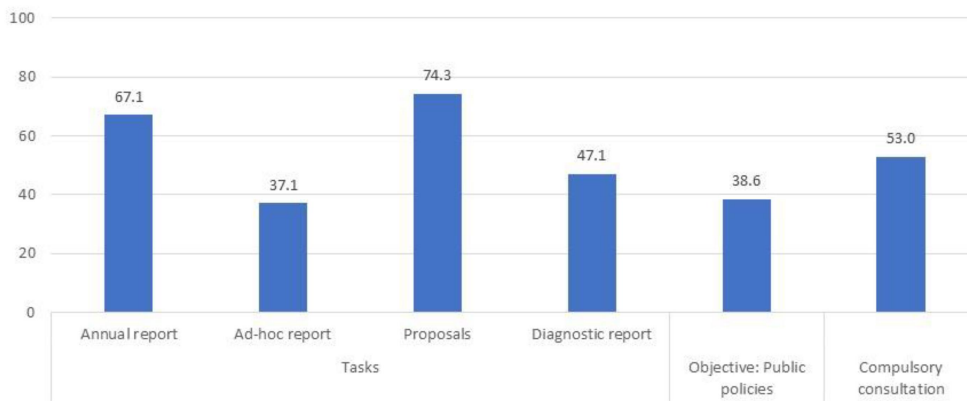
Differences can also be found regarding the specific products that ACs are expected to elaborate: 74.3% are devoted to produce proposals, 67.1% an annual report, 47.1% diagnostic reports and 37.1% *ad-hoc* reports. This evidence suggests that many ACs generate regular advice but it is relevant that, as these outputs become more specific (*ad-hoc* and diagnostic reports), there are less ACs that produce them. Also, in 53% of our cases it is compulsory for the public authorities to consult the ACs, usually regarding new regulations or strategic planning, which presumably will end in the elaboration of some of these products (a diagnostic or *ad-hoc* report, for instance). As we will see latter, these tasks are related with the organizational structure and main objectives of ACs.

Finally, are there channels for accountability in the ACs? We use some proxies to understand this reality, focusing on the internal accountability (relations between ACs and public authorities) and the external visibility (open presence in Internet that allows the citizens to be aware of their activities and outputs) (see Figure 3). Regarding internal accountability, in less than half of ACs (48.6%) the constitutive rules specify the communication channels with public authorities, while in the rest this process is not formalized and would depend in a big extent on the individual will of the politicians and public servants attending the meetings and translating the recommendations to the corresponding authority. Most importantly, once the ACs' proposals are issued to public authorities, formal follow-up mechanisms are only present in 11.4% of ACs, which suggests a very low level of internal accountability: the explanations of which suggestions have been adopted by the administration and which ones have not and why would depend on the will of individual politicians or the tenacity of participants asking in the meetings about the fate of previous recommendations.

Figure 3. Accountability channels in ACs (%) (*N* = 70). Source: Authors.
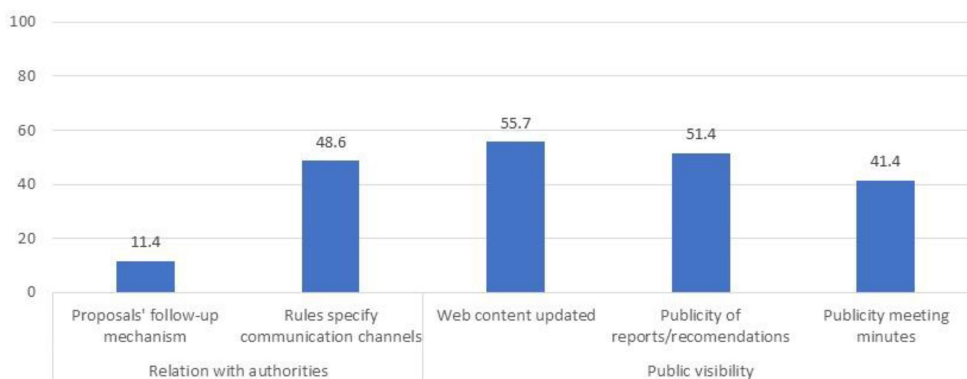
The visibility of ACs has been addressed focusing on the Internet presence. This institution has embraced the use of new technologies: only 5.7% of ACs do not have a web. Concerning the rest, 61.4% have a section on another website (usually the domain of the correspondent public administration), and 32.9% have their own website. The web content is updated in 55.7% of the cases. However, reports and recommendations are only available in 51.4% of the ACs, while the meeting minutes are published in 41.4% of the cases, allowing, not only participants, but also the broad citizenry being aware of their discussions and recommendations. In this sense, we find a varied level of public visibility.

The next step is to analyse to what extent these design characteristics are related to each other. For example, is there any connection between the organizational structure of a council and its objectives? We would expect that the more resourceful ACs will be assigned with more tasks. For illustrating this, we compare the ACs with a standing committee (as an indicator of a complex structure) and also those whose explicit objective is influencing public policies (as an indicator of the link with the policy-making process) with the rest.

As a result, Figure 4 shows a clear pattern: those ACs with standing committee are more oriented towards influencing public policies, significantly develop more tasks, perform a follow-up of proposals and update the web content to a higher degree than the rest. If we compare those ACs with working groups and the rest, the results point in the same direction. Therefore, in order to produce more results, it seems necessary – or at least useful – a higher organizational complexity.

Figure 4. Characteristics of ACs depending on the existence of standing committee (%) (N = 70). Differences are statistically significant at 0.01 level for all variables except for proposals' follow-up mechanism (0.05 level). Source: Authors.
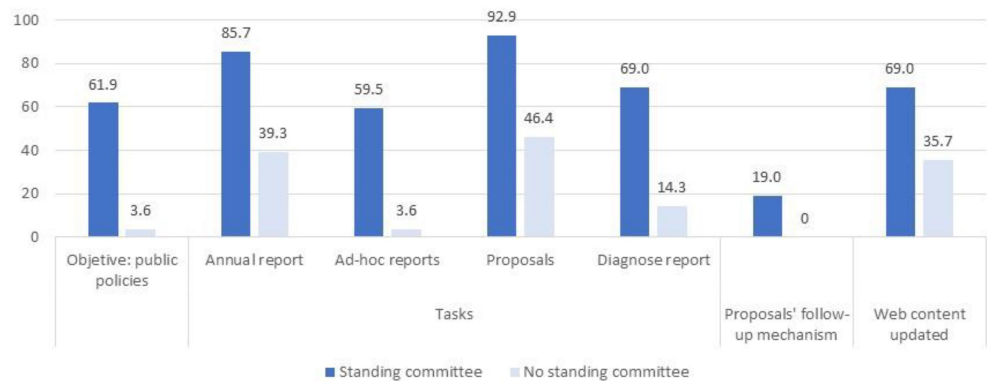
In a similar way, Figure 5 shows that, significatively, those ACs with the explicit objective of influencing public policies develop far more tasks (including specific products as *ad-hoc* or diagnose reports, closely related with the policy-making process), follow-up of the proposals and web content updates. Again, the way in which policy-makers conceive the objectives of ACs is related with their specific results.

Figure 5. Characteristics of ACs depending on the objective of influencing public policies (%) (N = 70). Differences are statistically significant at 0.01 level for all variables except for annual report and web content updated (0.05 level). Source: Authors.
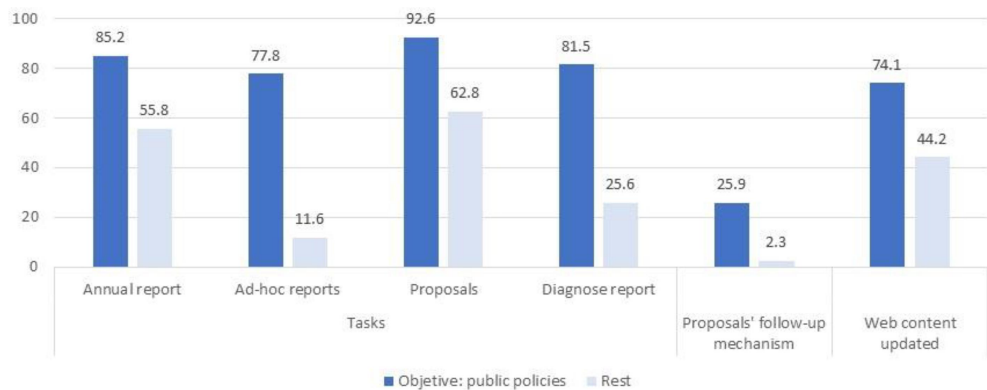
4.3. Multivariant Analysis: Synthesizing the Information and Generating Typologies

The next step is to delve in the relation between the different characteristics of ACs through the multivariant analysis. The main objective here is to examine the correlations between variables through an explanatory logic (without assuming the existence of independent and dependent variables). We have shown that a significant diversity exists regarding the design features of ACs, but are all these characteristics closely and coherently related or not? Can we observe typologies according to the information described above?

For doing so, the Multiple Correspondence Analysis technique considers all the variables jointly (see Table A1 in the Appendix). The information provided by these 23 variables is therefore summarized in two dimensions. Once applied the Benzécri correction to better estimate the explained variances, the first and more relevant dimension contains 71.7% of the inertia (or variance) and the second dimension contains 10.3% (therefore, 82.0% of the total inertia or variance is explained by these two factors).

The grouping of categories shows a coherent correlation between ACs design choices. As Figure 6 shows, the first and more relevant dimension (represented horizontally in the *x*-axis) opposes weak organizational characteristics and objectives (like

not having working groups or standing committee or no generating products like proposals or reports) to stronger characteristics (like generating different products, a higher index of members' role, counting with own budget, staff or following-up mechanisms). We have identified this dimension as empowerment, that is, having less or more resources, understood in a broad sense: material and organizational resources, but also concrete goals as having the explicit objective of influencing public policies.

Figure 6. Results of the Multiple Correspondence Analysis (*N* = 70). Source: Authors.
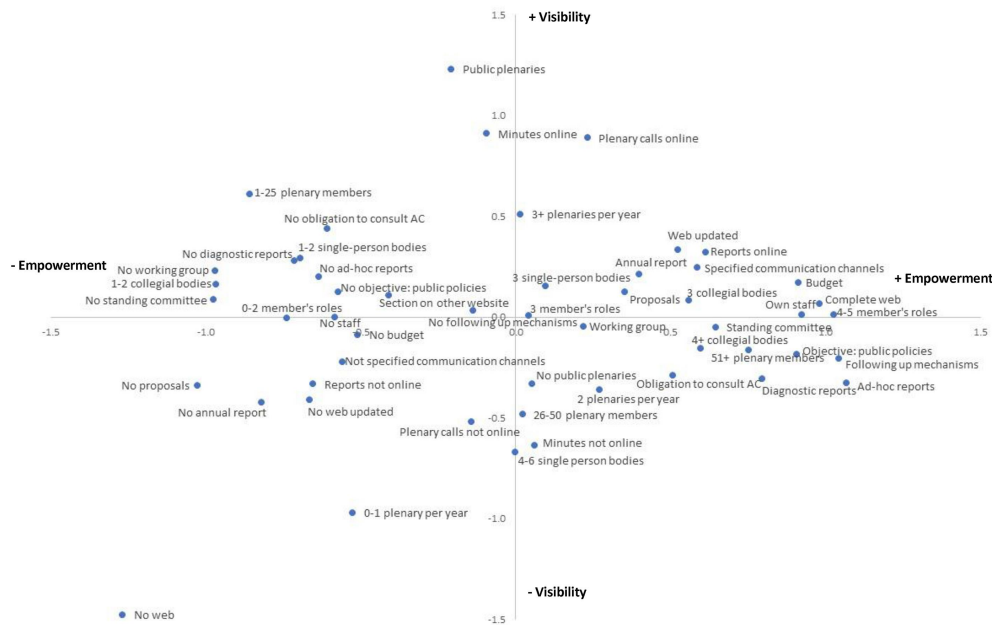
On the other hand, the second and statistically less relevant dimension resulting from the multivariant technique (represented vertically in the *y*-axis) opposes having public plenaries and the publicity of plenary calls and minutes online, on one side, versus not having web, having one or no plenary meetings per year or not publishing online the plenary calls and minutes. We have labelled this dimension as visibility.

We can see that the ACs design choices are closely and coherently related, generating two explanatory dimensions. But can we identify clear typologies of ACs based on those features? Once generated both variables (or factors) from the results of the previous technique, a cluster analysis has been carried out in order to generate groups of ACs based on the empirical evidence. With this analysis, the ACs have been grouped, merging the most similar cases and minimizing the variance loss.

As a result, three quantitatively similar groups have been generated (see Table 3). The main distinction is between one group of ACs with high scores in the first (and the most important) dimension and the rest. We have identified this group as the empowered ACs (with more resources), corresponding with 31.4% of the cases. The rest of ACs have worse punctuations in the first dimension, therefore we have considered them as disempowered or weaker. In turn, the difference among those disempowered ACs appears in terms of the second dimension, so we have identified a group of weak but visible ACs (38.6% of the cases) and weak and not visible ACs (30% of the cases).

Table 3. Weight of the three groups of ACs and punctuations in the two dimensions.

| Clusters	Average in first dimension: resources	Average in second dimension: visibility	*N*	%
Group 1: Empowered	1.28	−0.20	22	31.4
Group 2: Weak but visible	−0.57	0.99	27	38.6
Group 3: Weak and not visible	−0.61	−1.05	21	30.0

Source: Authors.

The empowered group differs from the other groups specially in terms of having an own budget and staff, standing

committee and working groups, a higher index of members' role, the compulsory character of the consultation for the public authorities, the explicit objective of influencing public policies, the assignation of more tasks and the follow-up mechanisms for internal accountability. Hence, it seems that, among ACs, those better organized and provided with resources are at same time more connected with the policy-making process. Regarding the disempowered ACs, the main differences between the two groups point toward the publicity of the meeting minutes, meeting calls, reports and recommendations, and the presence in Internet with a website, also with an updated content.

We can see therefore how the diversity found in the previous analyses sketches out three different types of ACs. Less than a third would correspond with the empowered ones. The rest would differentiate mostly according to their visibility, which allows the citizens' monitoring. For illustrating this reality, Figure 7 shows the graphical distribution of the 70 ACs according to the two dimensions generated by the Multiple Correspondence Analysis. The empowered ACs represent the most homogeneous group: all the cases are more similar to each other than the rest, which appear more widespread in the graph.
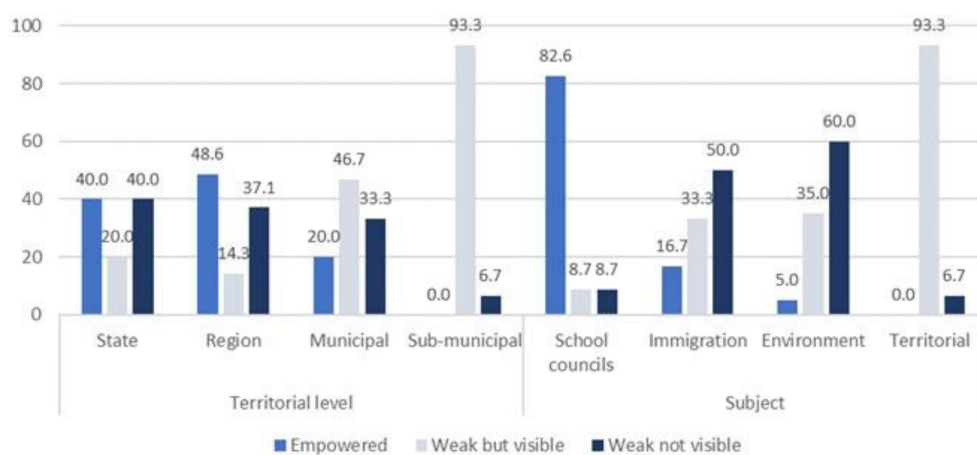
Figure 7. Distribution of the three typologies according to the Multiple Correspondence Analysis factors. Source: Authors.
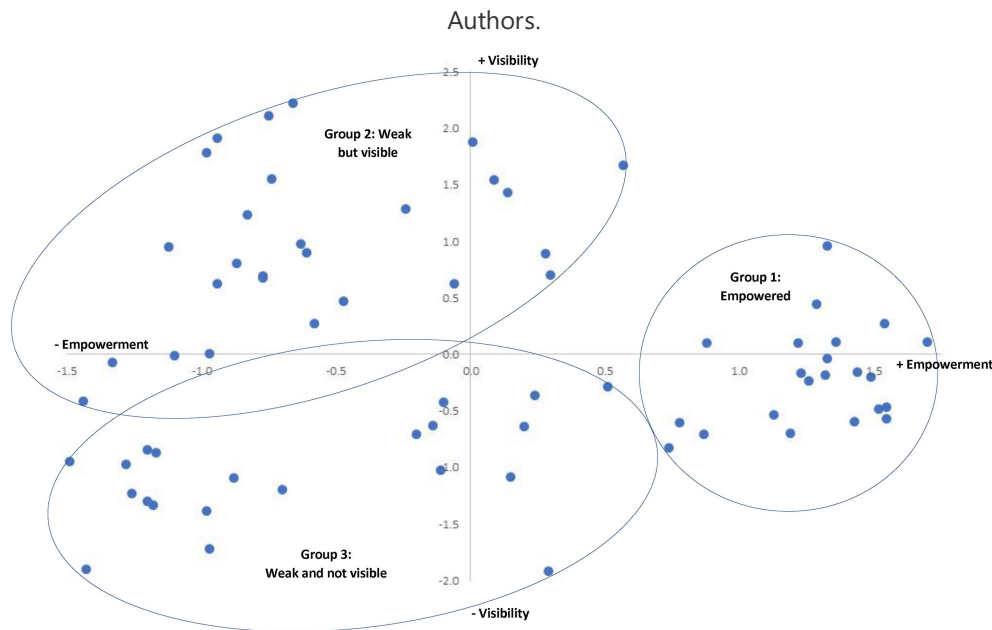
Finally, in order to better understand the generation of different ACs, we compare these three typologies according to their year of creation, territorial level and policy area. Here, we find that the empowered ACs are also the more stable mechanisms: they were created an average of 25 years ago (standard deviation = 6.69), while the other groups were created an average of 17 years ago (standard deviations = 8.58 and 5.96, respectively).[4]

In addition, Figure 8 shows that at the local and specially at sub-local level (where, in general, less resources are available) not many empowered ACs can be found. In contrast, in the regional and state level the presence of the three groups is more balanced. Nevertheless, when we focus on the policy area, a clear and strong pattern appears: 82.6% of the school councils belong to the empowered type, in contrast with immigration and especially environment councils, where the weaker ACs prevail. This finding suggests a clear difference of institutional resources devoted to the establishment of ACs depending on the policy issues at stake. In fact, school councils are more closely connected to the policy-making process than the rest: public authorities are obliged to consult them in all cases before adopting certain regulations, and 78.3% of them have the explicit objective of influencing public policies. These features help to understand the differences with the rest of ACs.

Figure 8. Groups of ACs by territorial level and policy area (*N* = 70) (%). The differences between the groups of ACs are statistically significant at 0.01 level (Cramer's V = 0.405 for territorial level and 0.655 for subject). Source: Authors.

Chart showing percentages for Empowered, Weak but visible, and Weak not visible across Territorial level (State, Region, Municipal, Sub-municipal) and Subject (School councils, Immigration, Environment, Territorial):

- State: Empowered 40.0, Weak but visible 20.0, Weak not visible 40.0
- Region: Empowered 48.6, Weak but visible 14.3, Weak not visible 37.1
- Municipal: Empowered 20.0, Weak but visible 46.7, Weak not visible 33.3
- Sub-municipal: Empowered 0.0, Weak but visible 93.3, Weak not visible 6.7
- School councils: Empowered 82.6, Weak but visible 8.7, Weak not visible 8.7
- Immigration: Empowered 16.7, Weak but visible 33.3, Weak not visible 50.0
- Environment: Empowered 5.0, Weak but visible 35.0, Weak not visible 60.0
- Territorial: Empowered 0.0, Weak but visible 93.3, Weak not visible 6.7

■ Empowered   ■ Weak but visible   ■ Weak not visible

5. Discussion

How are ACs designed? Can they compete with other participatory mechanisms in providing valuable democratic goods? In this paper we have described the landscape of the ACs in Spain from a large-N perspective that goes beyond the typical case-study approach. Our exploratory analysis provides findings that could be useful for improving the ACs' performance. In this sense, our research shows that institutional design is crucial to understand a quite overlooked reality.

Surprisingly, the analysis has found a lack of isomorphism in the Spanish ACs. Although it would be expectable that sharing a common role forces design choices to be constant, the constitutive rules in our sample of 70 ACs show significant diversity concerning their organizational structure, objectives and accountability channels. These differences, like the existence or not of standing committees and working groups, can affect the ACs' performance in terms of inclusiveness and deliberation.

Also, we have found different levels of internal accountability and public visibility. Here, one of the most negative findings points to the lack of internal accountability: only 11.4% of ACs have formal mechanisms for follow-up the fate of their proposals. Given that they produce a considerable amount of proposals, reports and recommendations, politicians could benefit from this opacity and cherry-pick among them those that will end up becoming public policies (Font et al., 2018).

An explanation for the diversity of ACs would be related to their ambiguous nature. There are different interpretations of what having an 'advisory role' means which, in practice, generates different councils with different aims and, consequently, different designs and resources. In this sense, a significant difference across ACs comes from their actual impact in public decisions, which is one of the key axes in Fung's democratic cube (2006). Our research has shown a wide range of variation, with the empowered councils ranking high in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, while the disempowered ones getting closer to the tokenistic rungs that correspond with consultation and/or information. In fact, only 38.6% of the studied ACs explicitly state the objective of influencing public policies, which confirms previous research in Spain (Gomà & Font, 2001) and abroad (Cooper & Musso, 1999). A clear distinction arises between a minority of councils oriented towards having an actual impact on public policies, and a majority of councils in which the 'advisory' role is understood in a loose way. The former ACs count with a complex organizational structure, are assigned more tasks and concrete products and show more internal accountability.

Connected to Fung's (2001) 'accountable autonomy' approach, we found a link between the functions of ACs and their resources: following a logic of 'path dependence', when public authorities are obliged to consult the ACs (for example before the ratification of a new legislation or strategic plan), these participatory mechanisms tend to be provided with generous organizational resources in order to fulfil their task. In this sense, little less than a third of ACs in our sample present strong organizational structures and a clear connection with the policy-making process. These empowered councils seem to be the most stable and they are especially present in the policy area of education. The explanation probably lies in the fact that school councils – a type of first-generation *corporatist councils* – give voice to strong and organized groups (unions, teachers, student associations, etc) and were raised from the beginning by the administration to shape public policies on their sectoral scope. Participants conceive these councils as a forum for negotiation and decision aimed to improve laws and regulations with their expert advice. Thus, sharing this specific role seems to provide these ACs with the institutional isomorphism that is largely absent in the general sample.

On the other hand, more than two thirds of ACs present weaker organizational structures and are oriented towards a generic call for participation. Here, our research connects with the broader debate on the goals of participatory democracy (Warren, 2001): to improve decision-making or to listen different social voices independently of the outcomes? This could

be the case in *new social councils* – more focused on postmaterialist or identity politics – that are not so clearly involved in policy-making and develop other symbolic or expressive functions. Further research is needed to check if this apparent divergence between the institutional design of *old corporatist* and *new social* councils also stands in other countries.

The positive effects of civic engagement could reverse if participants perceive that taking part in a poorly organized experience has been a waste of time. Nevertheless, impact may not be the only criterion to judge the ACs' performance. Here, it is interesting to note the contrast between the skeptical assessments of many scholars on the ACs' role and a more positive perception of their members, who often give credit to the civic or expressive dimensions of participation (Fobé et al., 2013; XXXX anonymized; Font et al., 2021 XXXX anonymized) **[Q4]**. Here, Innes' work on consensus building highlights other 'intangible products' of cooperative engagement as it is, for instance, the social capital that comes from the mutual trust and strong personal relationships fostered by these processes (Innes & Booher, 1999, p. 414). Thus, these devices are valued for quite different reasons, ranging from merely being a forum where associations get information, express their views, create networks and dialogue with public officers; to constitute an effective tool for policy-making.

To conclude, a limitation of this research is that, except for data on public visibility, the empirical evidence about the ACs' characteristics is based on their official regulations and other complementary online documentation. We can assume than, generally speaking, a good design will produce a good practice, but this is not always guaranteed. In this sense, our exploratory analysis calls for further empirical research.

Notes

1 Addressing this gap was the main aim of the research project 'Associative democracy: Accountable autonomy, participatory bias or vicious Circle?' (AssoDem) (XXXX anonymized), developed between during 201 67–2018. This paper analyses the data generated by that project and also benefits from the complementary research project AssoD-And (PY18-2785). More information can be accessed here: https://associativedemocracy.wordpress.com/the-project-2/ (XXXX anonymized). ✗

2 Our definition of AC covers those councils that: (1) have formal existence and links to public administration; (2) are permanent; (3) allow citizen participation, normally through associations. ✗

3 We found that 14.8% of an initial sample of 101 councils were inactive. ✗

4 The difference of means between the empowered ACs and the rest are statistically significant at 0.01 level. ✗

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s **[Q5]**).

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Appendix

Table A1. Description and frequencies of the variables regarding ACs (*N* = 70).

Group	Variable	Categories	*N*	%
Organizational structure	Number of single-person bodies (presidency, secretary, coordinators, etc.)	1–2	7	10
		3	49	70
		4–6	14	20
	Number of collegial bodies	1–2	25	36.2
		3	21	30.4
		4 or more	23	33.3
	Standing committee	No	28	40.0
		Yes	42	60.0
	Working groups or specialized commissions	No	13	18.6
		Yes	57	81.4
	Total number of individual members in plenary	1–25	15	23.8
		26–50	29	46.0
		51 or more	19	30.2
	Minimum number of ordinary meetings per year	0–1	11	16.4
		2	23	34.3
		3 or more	33	49.3
	Public plenary meetings	No	55	78.6

	Public plenary meetings	Yes	15	21.4
	Index member's role (add items to agenda, voice opinions, vote, dissenting vote, others)	Low (0-2)	20	40.0
		Medium (3)	21	32.9
		High (4–5)	29	27.1
	Clear evidence of independent budget	No	45	64.3
		Yes	25	35.7
	Clear evidence of own staff	No	43	61.4
		Yes	27	38.6
Objectives	Public policies as declared objectives	No	43	61.4
		Yes	27	38.6
	Task: annual report	No	23	32.9
		Yes	47	67.1
	Task: ad-hoc report	No	44	62.9
		Yes	26	37.1
	Task: proposals	No	18	25.7
		Yes	52	74.3
	Task: diagnostic reports	No	37	52.9
		Yes	33	47.1
	Public authorities obliged to consult the AC	No	31	47.0
		Yes	35	53.0
Accountability	Mechanisms for following up and assessing proposals	No	62	88.6
		Yes	8	11.4
	The rules specify the communication channels with public authorities	No	36	51.4
		Yes	34	48.6
	Web content updated	No	31	44.3
		Yes	39	55.7
	Presence on the Internet	Complete web	23	32.9
		Section on another website	43	61.4
		No web	4	5.7
	Publicity of reports and recommendations	Not available	34	48.6
		Available online	36	51.4

	Publicity of meeting calls	Not available	44	62.9
		Available online	26	37.1
	Publicity of meeting minutes	Not available	41	58.6
		Available online	29	41.4

Source: Authors.