ON THE VALUE ADDED OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN A CONTEXT OF HIGH POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONFRONTATION. THE CASE OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY.

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[Email contact is highly commended as I will be staying as a visiting fellow at De Monfort University (UK) until september 2001]
Presentation

Co-operation and partnership among politicians and citizens is a necessary condition to shape and patronise local democracy. Aiming at promoting the appropriate attitudes and necessary conviction among politicians and administrators about the need to implement practices of citizen participation, some colleagues have ended up trying to measure the value added of citizen input. And the acknowledgement that citizens are less and less virtuous —self-reliant individuals concerned and enthusiastic about the public affairs—, and more passive consumers of the politics show business or simple non-participants, has driven others to investigate which are the means to improve social capital and to stimulate the community values.

Certainly, politicians and administrators in our country share the same reasonable doubts on the value of citizen participation than in the other political contexts. They say to us that citizen participation turns the policy-making slower and more complicated; that it raises general costs; and that it adds no extra value to the decision-making process because, lacking expertise on issues that are always fairly complicated, the plain citizen does not foresee the long-term, refers mainly to very personal views and interests and is unreliable when compromise is required. Besides, as he/she is not prone to participation, it is organised interests who, by default, take the lead, and these are, by definition, conflictual and unrepresentative of citizenship at a whole. In short, that citizen participation might be more a problem than a solution for the known limitations of representative democracy (Subirats, 2001).

In such a setting, the great speeches on the crisis of democracy or speaking about a growing democratic uneasiness are not very effective. It is more convincing to contend with the increasing complexity and importance, quantitative and qualitative, of social demands, or the impact of globalisation upon the local decision-making, and the governing crisis that results from both (Arbós and Giner, 1993). But, actually, neither of both speeches discharges us of our obligation to render visible that participation and efficiency are not contradictory concepts but complementary processes. On the contrary, they stress the responsibility that we political scientists have of providing useful reflections and proposals to improve local democracy. In Spain, although it is a new field of research, we already count with some works that focus on that (e.g. Brugué and Gomá, 1998; Font, 2001).

Luckily enough, in the Basque Country we do not experience —or, at least, it is not so severe— the deficit of social capital that concerns so much, among others, the Northern European countries. In fact, it could rather be stated that ours is —or, at least, has been until very recently— a citizen or social movement society (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998); in any case, it matches this description much

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1 This newness is a relative one. In fact, it would be more appropriate to speak of a new encounter with this research object. Some interesting researches were published in the 1980s on the very active and influential neighbourhood movement of the 1970s and the role it played in the democratisation of local government (e.g. Castells, 1986; Urrutia, 1985). The work by Navarro (1999) is extremely interesting to follow the continuities and discontinuities of that citizen participation since then on.
closer than other Spanish or European regions. Citizen groups and social movement organisations engage in frequent mobilisations, also in relation with local policies, and are very influential indeed. However, this bottom-up enterprise does not translate into a greater local democracy, this defined as the institutionalisation or formalisation of consultation and citizen participation in city councils and other local governments.

This paradox guides our research. Our departure point is that the existence of a positive attitude among local politicians and administrators concerning citizen participation and the presence of a wealthy social capital are necessary but not sufficient conditions to propitiate the expansion of local democracy, that other variables, for example context variables like the political confrontation, can deter that process. Obviously, we are also convinced that both groups of actors, politicians and administrators on one side and plain citizens and social movements on the other, hold the energy and ability that are needed to proceed and break through such deterrent circumstances; our duty is assisting them towards a fruitful encounter.

The goal of this paper is to present that paradox. In it, we will proceed the following way. In the first place, we will make a description of the high degree of decentralisation that characterises our country to discover that decentralisation does not always go along with local autonomy. Secondly, we will measure the social and political capital that exists in the Basque Country in comparison with other regions of Spain. Thirdly, we will make a brief presentation of the practices of citizen participation. And, finally, we will venture some explanatory hypotheses about the mentioned paradox. However, it should be noticed that our research is in a very preliminary state and, therefore, that those explanatory hypotheses have not yet been confirmed.

Decentralisation and local autonomy

Spain is, without any doubt, one of the most decentralised countries in Europe. Although traditionally following the French tradition of a strong and centralised administration, the transition to democracy summoned at least three different forces in favour of a closer link between institutions and citizens. One, the making of the welfare state; its foundations had been laid by the technocratic governments of the late Francoism, but its quick development corresponded to the first democratic governments. Two, citizen mobilisations made of the basic vindication of a substantial improvement of the conditions of life in the cities the primary content of their struggle to restore democracy in general and to establish procedures of local democracy in particular. And three, the restoration of the national identities that had been repressed during the dictatorship developed into the creation of autonomous regional governments and administrations.

These forces resulted in what is known today as the State of the Autonomies, a complex ensemble of political and administrative institutions which brings together autonomous regions with different degrees of self-government (Agranoff and Ramos, 1998; Aja, 1999). As it can be seen in figure 1, this decentralisation has translated in the case of the Basque Country in the coexistence of at least five levels of government and administration. These are the following:
Figure 1. Levels of government and administration in the Basque Country.

(1) A central government and administration that retains the statutory policies of the nation-state (defence, interior and foreign relations), and some major features of the economy, energy, transports and communications. In addition, it supervises that a minimum balance and co-ordination in the development of the policies implemented by the existing 17 autonomous regions is provided;
solidarity is the principle to be enforced: the richer regions should subsidise the poorer ones.

(2) An autonomous regional government and administration that enforces the policies of education and health, and tries to do the same with public order. It is also the normative institution for the Basque Country, regulating, supervising and aiming to co-ordinate the policies that are implemented by the lower governments.

(3) Three territorial or provincial governments and administrations —the Basque Country divides in three provinces or historical territories—, carrying out the economic policies: industry, planning and development, fishing and agriculture, transport and communications, social services, and environment. For historical reasons, the Basque Country and Navarre are the two only regions that benefit from budgetary self-government; they raise the taxes and pay the central government for the services it provides. But also for historical reasons, it is not the Basque government but the provincial or territorial governments who raise the taxes; they provide for the budgetary needs of the Basque government and, to a great extent, also for those of the municipalities.

(4) 249 local governments and administrations, responsible for urban planning, and also some social services.

(5) Cities and bigger towns have created district councils (as required by law) in order to decentralise their policy-making.

All these levels of government and administration apply to a relatively small population, circa 2,150,000 inhabitants. These citizens are appointed to three elections every four years: (1) central parliament and senate, (2) regional parliament, and (3) territorial parliaments and municipalities. In all the cases there are closed lists of political parties or registered electoral assemblies. Governments are constituted out of a majority of elected people. The number of parties that obtains representation is unusually high—seven at the present time, four of them with very even figures of representation—, so governments are always coalition governments.

Referenda are possible in all five government levels, as well as are people’s legislative initiatives, this is law proposals promoted directly by citizen organisations. In addition, being a small country with a community style of life, the political leaders are handy to the citizens. Therefore, we could conclude that, on paper, citizen input enjoys a fairly open political opportunity structure in the Basque Country.

**Social and political capital**

The Basque Country accounts for the highest values of social and political capital in Spain. We think it interesting to differentiate between social capital and political capital. For social capital we basically understand the density of citizen networks (associations) and the traditions of individual and collective concern and involvement in the community affairs. It goes along with values and modes of
collective behaviour oriented to the co-operation, confidence and reciprocity among the different elements of the community and the social structure.

The traditional common environment of decision-making is the group (relatives, friends, neighbours, or companions of study or work) rather than the individual; this enhances the importance of communitarian times and spaces, formal and informal, in governing and running the community. One example of this tradition is the *auzolan* or collective and disinterested work for the well being of the community; cooperatives could be considered a follow-up of that tradition. This focus in community is also promoted in the two large networks or spaces for political socialisation of youth, the Christian environment and the so called Basque Movement of National Liberation; both environments are very large and comprehensive, and also very effective in the fabrication of social and political capital (Ayestarán, 1994).

In the world of the citizen associations we think it is important to distinguish between associations producing private goods, economic or professional, and associations producing public goods, assistance-related and philanthropic. Boix and Posner (1996) maintain that the associations producing public goods—which any individual of the community can benefit from, no matter whether he/she takes or not part in the association that provides them— produce a stronger type of social capital than the associations producing private goods—which only those who participate in them can benefit from—. The associations producing private goods would imply co-ordination and those producing public goods would imply co-operation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomous Region</th>
<th>Number of assistance-related and philanthropic associations for every 10,000 inhabitants</th>
<th>Index of participation in associations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basque Country</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.4858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navarre</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Rioja</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.4299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murcia</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>−0.8771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.0048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantabria</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>−1.8180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balearic Islands</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.1398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla-La Mancha</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.0074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalunya</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aragón</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.9619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla y León</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>−0.6718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andalusia</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>−0.4112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremadura</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>−1.3225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Valenciana</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.6547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canary Islands</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>−1.0856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galicia</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>−0.6169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asturias</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>−0.0652</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of assistance-related and philanthropic associations for every 10,000 inhabitants and index of participation in associations (data taken from Mota and Subirats, 2000).
We are conscious that the value of social capital is better measured if we take into account both the altruistic actions of the citizens—degree of solidarity in the community—and the co-ordinated actions of the individuals when pursuing their personal interest, but in our case we have considered that the amount of associations producing public properties provides us with a more essential definition of social capital; furthermore, it discriminates better between regions and communities. The figures displayed in table 1 confirm our previous statement about the very high values of co-operative social capital in the Basque Country.

It could be argued that the number of associations does not represent the real value of the civic commitment networks, that the proportion of citizens actively participating in those associations would be more accurate. Well, the data on active involvement confirm that there is a positive correlation between this and the number of associations, and again the Basque Country takes the lead, followed by Navarre, the Rioja and Madrid (Mota and Subirats, 2000).²

This leading position also exists when we measure the political capital. We define political capital as the information and concern that citizens show about the political issues in general. We could regard participation in elections as a measure of political capital but high political polarisation and prospects of close results usually result in higher participation in the case of the Basque Country or elsewhere; uncertainty about the election output stimulate the participation of people with very little concern about the political issues and discussions.

Mota and Subirats (2000) have produced an index of individual attitudes and behaviours concerning the public affairs that could very well be an operationalisation of what we take for political capital. That index results from a factor analysis of three measures: (a) percentage of citizens who show a high concern about politics; (b) percentage of citizens who have a large amount of political information on government performance; and (c) percentage of those who read daily newspapers (which in Spain include large doses of political information). As we observe in table 2, the Basque Country takes the lead once more.

This political capital is actually translated into a high level of citizen mobilisation, largely related with the social movement sector. A recent mapping of this area of political action and organisation quantifies in 1193 the altruistic NGOs and social movement organisations that exist in the Basque Country—most of them local but at least 45 are major regional and national organisations—; they count for 180,000 affiliations, which would be an 8% of the total population (Joxemi Zumalabe Fundazioa, 1999). In addition to that, these are very effective organisations with powerful mobilisation structures, holding a good position in

² The index of participation in associations has been calculated following a main components factor analysis including twelve types of associations: sports, local and regional traditions, religious, educational and cultural, youth-related (scouts, etc.), social-charitable, environmental, labour unions, political parties, human rights, peace groups, and women groups. This classification is more comprehensive than the assistance-related and philanthropic one; hence, the poor correspondence between the two variables. Nevertheless, we have considered that including it is interesting because it confirms the leading position of the Basque Country, Navarre and the neighbouring Rioja, which are three regions with strong economic, social and even cultural connections.
the political networks (Tejerina, Fernández and Aierdi, 1995). Its mobilisation capability excels the national standards. In the specific *insumisión* mobilisation against conscription, possibly the most extensive and influential mobilisation in the past ten years, the *insumisos* in the Basque Country were ten times more than in the rest of Spain (Agirre, Ajangiz, Ibarra *et al.*, 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomous Region</th>
<th>High concern about politics (%)</th>
<th>Large amount of political information (%)</th>
<th>Daily reading of newspapers (%)</th>
<th>Index of political capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basque Country</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2.0109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navarre</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1.7136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Rioja</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1.0480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalunya</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0.8686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrid</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.4934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Valenciana</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.1683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balearic Islands</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aragón</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0.0224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galicia</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.0147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canary Islands</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>– 0.0399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andalusia</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>– 0.3758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asturias</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>– 0.3758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla y León</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>– 0.5979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremadura</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>– 1.0650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantabria</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>– 1.1121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murcia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>– 1.3349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla-La Mancha</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>– 1.3966</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Index of political capital.

It is interesting to contend if this social and political capital is a bridging capital or if, on the contrary, the polarisation that characterises politics in the Basque Country splits that capital in separate, differentiated, and even confronted blocks, which would lead us to speak of bonding or non-bridging capital. Indeed, the existence of two antagonistic and even hostile mobilisations in favour of peace, with separate and clearly defined recruitment networks, and matching the two environments of political socialisation above mentioned, seems to confirm that hypothesis (Funes Rivas, 1998). However, mobilisations that attempt to bridge these two worlds are very frequent and most social movement sectors are led by this bridging type of organisations (Grau and Ibarra, 2000).

### Practices of citizen participation

In spite of the high degree of decentralisation, the large number of administrations and levels of government, and the high values of political and social capital, practices of citizen participation are very scarce; we will make a

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3 Interest and information have been taken from the study 2286 of the CIS (1998) and reading of newspapers appears in *Indicadores Sociales 1998* by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística.
In this presentation we will follow a two-variable classification: (a) type of participation (information, consultation, co-decision and co-management), and (b) basis for such participation (individual, mixed and associative). Table 3 summarises this classification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual participation</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Associative participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information</strong></td>
<td>* Issue forums, focus groups, visioning exercises or consensus conferences in which a few citizens participate as individuals.</td>
<td>* Issue forums, boards, or committees, aimed to consultation, of citizen groups and associations, e.g. consejo verde o de medio ambiente, consejo de juventud, consejo de igualdad.</td>
<td>* Neighbourhood or district councils including associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consultation</strong></td>
<td>* Public meetings or sessions in the neighbourhood, district, town or city, periodical or occasional.</td>
<td>* Territorial (neighbourhood, district, town, city) forums, boards, committees, aimed to consultation, with citizen groups and associations of various kinds, e.g. mesa o asamblea de asociaciones del barrio.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-decision</strong></td>
<td>* Discussion forums in the Internet.</td>
<td>* Regular complaints/ suggestions schemes.</td>
<td>* Neighbourhood or district councils including associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Regular complaints/ suggestions schemes.</td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
<td>* Neighbourhood or district councils including associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-management</strong></td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
<td>* Decision public meetings and audiences in the neighbourhood, district, town or city.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Issue forums, boards, or committees, aimed to consultation, of citizen groups and associations, e.g. consejo verde o de medio ambiente, consejo de juventud, consejo de igualdad.</td>
<td>* Decisive public meetings and audiences in the neighbourhood, district, town or city.</td>
<td>* Neighbourhood or district councils including associations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Public meetings or sessions in the neighbourhood, district, town or city, periodical or occasional.</td>
<td>* Participative budgeting.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Discussion forums in the Internet.</td>
<td>* Individual but representative participation schemes, e.g. citizens’ panels or juries, deliberative polls, núcleos de intervención participativa, consejos ciudadanos.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Regular complaints/ suggestions schemes.</td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
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<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
<td>* Citizen access to district or city councils and boards or issue commissions.</td>
<td>* Strategic and development planning with the participation of citizen groups and associations in the decision-making, e.g. declaración de área de rehabilitación integrada en barrios degradados.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Classification of citizen participation practices.

**Associative participation**

(1) [Co-management] It does not really exist. External contracts are common in the area of social services, often with charitable organisations that use contract personnel and volunteers. Also, gaztetxes or self-managed spaces for young people exist; they began as squatting, but local governments have finally consented and provide for some expenses. In some municipalities,

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4 The following data come from a very preliminary survey among qualified informers and must be regarded as approximate and provisional.
mainly rural, farming and tourism related co-operatives are being promoted. But in no case we can properly speak of co-management of public services like they are being carried out in Catalunya.

(2) [Co-decision] District councils, required by law in cities and major towns, include representatives of neighbourhood associations, but councilpersons or political parties’ appointees count for three fourths of their constituents; this dilutes co-decision. In any case, most of the decisions, not to say all, are adopted in the city council plenary sessions. This actually turns the district councils into consultative bodies with little citizen input. We know only one experience of a district council that is open to all citizens; it is held in a town governed by Herri Batasuna, a movement-party with great experience in open forums management.

(3) [Consultation] The law requires the constitution of territorial consultation boards in the case of planning of rehabilitation of specially deteriorated areas or districts, and so they exist. In most of the cases this constitution has resulted from the mobilisation of citizen groups. The participating associations have indicated us that, as time passes by, council members fail to attend the meetings. It is known the case of a participating council member that, after being chose MP in Madrid, is reversing the plans that she had previously agreed in the consultation board. In any case, the habitual procedure with plans of special importance, for example urban planning, is the group by group consultation. This facilitates the negotiation and also helps in the identification of the commendable people to co-opt for later occasions.

(4) [Consultation] In some major cities, there exist issue consultation councils with the sector associations (young people’s council, senior citizens’ council, development and co-operation council, environmental council, etc.). These councils are usually promoted by minority political parties or city mayors with a great public projection; in the case of the young people’s councils, their promotion is framed in an interinstitutional action plan devised by the Basque government (Gazte Plana). No case of sector consultation council of representative kind is known.

(5) [Consultation] Local Agenda 21 is, without any doubt, the frame in which a greater formal participation is being promoted; this process requires the formation of a participation forum on consultation basis. At this very moment there are 28 municipalities involved in AL21, most of them at a very early stage in the process. The Basque government is developing a special follow-up of the implementation of this agenda in nine municipalities, three in each province (Udaleku programme).

Individual participation

(1) [Co-decision] There exist some horizontal and open decision-making practices (asambleas or batzarrak) in very small town councils; these practices, which draw out of tradition, are mentioned in the local government law. No case of participative budgeting is known and only two cases of referendum have been recorded.
(2) [Co-decision/consultation] Deliberative experiences like the Núcleos de Intervención Participativa have been carried out in eight municipalities, most of them in Gipuzkoa. A consulting company is behind its promotion.

(3) [Consultation/information] Information to the public, claim opportunities, and public hearings in connection with certain plans and issues are required by the law. Hence, they are formally provided, but it is not rare that, especially when major plans previously agreed between several administrations are involved, these opportunities are offered in improper dates and fashions. Access to plenary sessions at the city council is codified in the law in a very detailed way, and expulsions of the attending citizens are common.

(4) [Consultation/information] Until very recently citizens received no answer (unless it were positive) to the claims and complaints that they presented before the council services. So called negative silence was the regular procedure. Today, local governments are committed to answer to all the claims and complaints in reasonable time, but they require them to be registered at the local offices; those presented by the Internet do not receive answer. In any case, the Internet services are underdeveloped; only 18 municipalities have a web page.

(5) [Consultation/information] Opinions and satisfaction surveys, as well as the more qualitative sociological studies (discussion groups, semistructured interviews) are very rare. Commanding councilpersons allege that they are very expensive.

In summary, the possibilities offered by the law as far as participation and consultation are concerned are not fully devised; the procedures required by law are observed in general terms, but with obvious reserve. Information and limited consultation is the master frame, and co-decision and co-management are avoided as much as possible. As for the type of participation, associative participation is more common than individual participation, presumably for two reasons: (a) organised interests fit better with the tradition of an influential collective action and also with the everyday relation whatsoever with interest and pressure groups; and (b) comments or proposals by individual citizens are considered neither representative nor comprehensive —however, representative schemes of citizen participation are not tried either—. Indeed, the image we may recall is that of a local government that protects itself from a citizen participation that is understood as conflictual and troublesome.

Some hypotheses to explain this paradox

From the previous data it can be gathered that, while in other countries the public institutions, the State, is interested in promoting citizen participation to improve the legitimacy and representativeness of public management, those very institutions in the Basque Country understand citizen participation as lessening the legitimisation and representativeness that ballots have sanctioned. They have chosen to ignore the very good values of social and political capital that define Basque society, and the existence of very many citizen associations and social movement organisations, fully capable of undertaking responsibilities in
consultation, co-decision and, more interestingly, co-management. Why? In these early stages of our research, the following explanations are what we are thinking of and trying to verify; they will probably be complementary.

One first hypothesis has to do with the dominant definition of democracy. Concerning this, the character and development of the Spanish transition to democracy has left its legacy. It is widely known that the Spanish transition developed into an arrangement among the elites that blocked the demand of sound democratisation that existed in society. Shortly after, the very many political parties that run the first municipal elections made of competition between parties the master frame of local democracy. One of their strategies to acquire social legitimisation was the selective co-optation of local leaders. Then, once installed in the local government, they labelled remaining mobilisations as improper, conflicting, disordered and not representative of the citizenship as a whole; any claim had to be presented before the corresponding councilperson or body in a more adequate and orderly manner.

Consequently, the bottom-up venture of citizen mobilisation perished before a closed and self-referred system of political parties. Since then, in spite of the effort of social movements and citizen groups in favour of a more participative democracy, representative democracy is the master frame among the elites, politicians and the mass media. In other words, voting in the elections has become the expression of citizen participation. That is perfectly agreeable with the companion definition of participation as citizen collaboration with governmental policies. However, any extension of the contents and command of participation (consultation, co-decision or co-management) is portrayed as conflict and trouble making. The modification of this master frame is, therefore, a necessary condition to introduce citizen participation in local government.

One second hypothesis has to do with the prevalence of party politics and the professionalisation of the polity, growingly engaged in management and marketing as well. The once vocational politicians developed after the years into politics professionals, public position holders who also dominate their political party structure and whose way of life depends ultimately on the election results. The term political class is in itself expressive enough.

In addition to that, distinctly from the rest of Spain, the high number of surviving political parties in the Basque Country is forced to a fierce competition that reinforces the present tendency towards the catch-all-party and makes out of election time the moment where harvested loyalties and management performances have to render the appropriate results. This is what rules their management and that is why image and marketing are so important, more in the case of the state or Spanish parties, with smaller rank-and-file. The customary coalition governments do not break this trend because they are not co-operative governments but allotment governments in which each party holds and governs its areas and departments with total autonomy.

In this setting, citizen participation becomes a risk to avoid, that of antagonists or third parties taking advantage of the given opportunities to inflict harm on the party’s management or, even worse, on that particular position holder’s management. The endless chain of movements and social mobilisations
that characterises politics in the Basque Country does not do but confirm the insufficiency of formal channels for citizen participation. Although contentious politics has obvious costs — mistrust, stress, and also frequent concessions —, party politics has become a gentlemen’s agreement to draw a certain separation between the world of the politicians and the world of the plain citizens, in order to secure a precarious but minimum shield against outer menaces to the polity’s way of life.

There is mistrust also in the other side of this equation. A sequel of that authoritarian style of government is an unusual prevention about institutional politics in general, and also — perhaps to a lesser extent — about local politics, of many of the associations and citizen groups most interested in promoting citizen protagonism and deepening democracy by means of participation. They do not think that local politicians and administrators are really for new and alternative modes of democratic participation and, when they move in that direction, like when they call in for consultation, the former interpret this move as a mean to deactivate the social mobilisation that they are leading. Any attempt to promote local democracy will need of measures to build confidence between the two worlds.

One third hypothesis has to do with the competition between administrations. The administrative decentralisation described above was implemented at the same time that the making of both the welfare state and formal democracy. This coincidence led to a competition between administrations to procure sufficient policies and resources and grow legitimate before their administrated. Thus, the central, regional, territorial and local governments applied themselves, simultaneous but uncoordinatedly, in the construction of the welfare state. The central government was reluctant about transferring policies and aimed at imposing its law-making superiority. But the regional governments, specially the Basque one, moved faster and began to pass laws and perform policies before any general policy programme had been sanctioned by the central parliament. The territorial governments inherited former structures and began their policy-making on their own. And the first democratic city and town councils, who were the first running governments under the new regime, and were being urged by the citizens to provide elementary services, became very active from the beginning and embarked into rising debts other administrations would have to deal with. One outcome of this wild competition between administrations was the duplication of structures and welfare services. Today, there are still five police bodies (two state ones, one regional, one territorial, and, besides, the local police) in the Basque Country.

After twenty years, the process is still unfinished. In fact, swords still show. Litigation between the Basque and Spanish administrations drives the Constitutional Court to saturation. The Basque government aspires to exceed the autonomic ceiling and the central government retains policies that should have been already transferred. Basque and territorial governments are also struggling against each other: the Basque government appeals to its law-making superiority and outlines major sectorial plans but the territorial governments, true executive powers, do not follow when those plans clash with their interests; as a matter of fact, the territorial governments tend to agree policies among them, away from the central and regional governments’ concerns. These territorial governments also
govern many aspects of the municipal life. A series of sectorial plans—water supply, waste disposal, social services, industrial and technological development areas—have taken over duties that pertained to the municipalities; the city and town councils’ budgets, in any case, have always been paid for by the territorial governments. The major city councils, politically influential, are the only ones that have relatively survived this expansion of the territorial governments; they have done it by mounting debts and using the prerogatives they have on urban planning.

Multi-administration governance is the usual way to regulate this competition. Partnerships and consortiums are arranged to conduct the big sectoral or planning policies. This governance is awfully complicated because it must include all the government levels. For example, Bilbao Ría 2000 is participated by the central government, the Basque government, the territorial government of Bizkaia, and eight major municipalities. On top of that, we must consider the lack of internal consensus that exist in those governments and administrations. Being coalition governments, departments or government areas emerge as actors in that governance. This puzzle of many administrations and many ruling parties forces endless bilateral negotiations. The fact that those inter-institutional agreements are very difficulty is, without a doubt, a good argument to sacrifice citizen participation: there are already too many complications to be looking for more trouble.

Therefore, decentralisation does not agree with local autonomy in this case. We could say that this governance has prevented decentralisation from reaching the local governments and, very obviously, citizen participation. On the one side, the major city councils tend to centralise instead of decentralise in order to better compete with higher governments. On the other, today’s running global plans of territorial ordering aim at a top-down aggregation of municipalities that will drain more policies out of the smaller town councils. This obliterates the possibility of bottom-up aggregation, in the form of counties and mancommunities of services, that is mentioned in the constitution of the Basque Autonomy and did never developed as it happened in other regions. Interestingly, the municipalities still retain their symbolic value of political representation—sanctioned by the ballots—and, maybe because they have less and less policies to enforce, they are increasingly appealing to it. Initiatives like Uema, Eudima and Udalbiltza confirm that the municipalities are using that legitimacy to shape new political spaces.

One third hypothesis has to do with the confrontation and the polarisation that characterise politics in the Basque Country. We have said that the political representatives share a general prevention about incorporating new individual or collective actors to the policy-process. They are uncertain of how those new actors will act, and they fear that they will use participation to criticise and, perhaps, to discredit parties or politicians, which endangers one of their fundamental concerns: being re-elected. But, on top of that, many of those politicians are convinced that those participation processes are going to be used by anti-systemic groups or social movements or by the parties that support them (Herri Batasuna, of course) to mine their reputation and public management.

Indeed, citizen groups attached to the radical Basque nationalism, active in many associations and, specially, social movements, maintain a historical and
peak confrontation with the other political parties—moderate Basque nationalists and definitely non Basque nationalists—that usually hold the municipal power. This theatre of confrontation dyes with distrust any initiative that goes beyond the routine management of the local public affairs. Actually, this confrontation explains those decisions contrary to common sense that the city councils occasionally make. The great axis of political confrontation between parties or political forces that should be untangled in the great representative forums (central government or Basque government) ends up governing the local policies. The leverage of a polarised political culture makes the activation of mechanisms of citizen participation at the local level extremely difficult.

**On the value added of citizen participation in the Basque Country**

Some good reasons exist to engage in citizen participation at the local government. The credibility and legitimacy of local institutions improve when the citizens notice that their wants and interests are truly considered in the decision-making process because this very process is participated by them. Also, citizen participation (a) favours the promotion of the citizens’ concern about the public issues, that is to say, neighbours feel more co-responsible of the well-being of their community and, consequently, address their behaviour towards the resolution of the problems that affect that community; and (b) empowers the local community and the individuals. In short, it produces social and political capital. Independently of a hypothetical greater effectiveness and/or efficiency in the implementation of the public policies, it is obvious that participation has an important political value. In any case, as the new localism argues, local democracy is the necessary counterpart of the modernisation and rationalisation of administration that is being pursued today all throughout Europe.

In our opinion, effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of public policies has more to do with the existence of good values of social and political capital and its involvement in the policy-process than with the modernisation of the administration. Actually, in the present context of budget crisis of the welfare state, dealing with that capital is almost a compelling necessity. In the case of the Basque Country, two good reasons exist to promote co-decision and co-management of public services with a citizenship that is demonstrating to be capable of undertaking that responsibility: the crisis of the welfare state and the projection on what the future of our country is about. As far as the welfare state is concerned, we enjoy higher standards of welfare services in the Basque Country in comparison with the rest of Spain—to a certain extent thanks to the community values and active demand of services of the citizens—but we are still far away from the northern European standards and it could be worse in the future: the families are now draining the reservoirs of welfare they accumulated in passed better times. And, on the other hand, the design of the future Basque Country that the administrations are implementing is strongly oriented to tourism and the provision of third sector services. In both cases, the collaboration of a motivated and responsible citizenship, who feels the protagonist of its own future, can make the difference.

Secondly, citizen participation is an important resource at the time of recovering local autonomy and also to reinforce the position of the weakest
municipalities in the existing power-oriented governance. The association of municipalities that has resulted from some citizen initiatives supports this expectation. Citizen participation may even facilitate an alliance between the municipalities and the Basque government versus the all-powerful territorial governments. As a matter of fact, the Basque government is bridging with the municipalities to implement those interinstitutional programmes that require citizen co-operation.

And thirdly, and most interestingly, citizen participation can help to overcome or neutralise the political polarisation that affects the Basque Country and, with it, perform a big step towards the political resolution of the Basque conflict. Three prospects support this idea. One, the participation of a greater number of citizens in public affairs —and, hence, one decision-making focused in concrete and tangible policies— will compel the political actors to make out of the vital interests of plain citizens the governing principle of their political action and somehow put aside the abstract political constructions they are now fighting about. Two, starting from the local level but arriving much higher, some citizen initiatives have proved capable of bringing together parties from both sides of the barricade; in fact, only the citizen initiatives seem to have the ability to do so. Basque social capital seems to be a politically bridging capital as well. And three, the most creative and hopeful processes for the resolution of the Basque conflict have always had two common features: the involvement of many political and social actors (also some individuals), and the choosing of the local arena as their initial locus of implementation.

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