LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY. A CASE STUDY: BARCELONA

Abstract

Briefly, the paper is focused on the case of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). The first part of the paper describes the Spanish and Catalan territorial structure. The paper then addresses the role of local government since the first democratic elections in 1979 and analyses the present degree of municipal autonomy. Finally, the paper explores the link between local democracy and autonomy through the experience of Barcelona, in particular through the debate about the metropolitan governance, the decentralization process and the Municipal Charter.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Local government in Europe has seen significant changes over the past two decades. In spite of the several differences between the European countries in terms of local autonomy, local government has become a key element in their political systems mainly for two reasons. Firstly, local government organisations are in charge of the delivery of some services such as education, welfare and urban planning. Secondly, the principles and practice of democracy are learnt, developed and reinforced most effectively in the context of local politics, where participation is relatively easy and the rewards more immediate.

Having regard to the principles underlying the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985), the article 4 provides that "public responsibilities shall generally be exercised, in preference, by those authorities which are closest to the citizen. Allocation of responsibility to another authority should weigh up the extent and nature of the task and requirements of efficiency and economy" (Article 4, paragraph 3).

Nevertheless, local government is not the unique actor of the political systems. In fact, there are other levels of government that also have legitimacy and responsibilities. On the one hand, many national governments are reluctant to cede real autonomy to local institutions. On the other, in many States has raised the number of intermediate levels, such as regions or counties. Moreover, there are also supra-national institutions like the EU. As a result, there exist inequalities in the distribution of human and economic resources among the different levels.

In this context, local autonomy should provide local authorities with the power to develop the tasks they have been given, limiting the capacity for central government intervention in local affairs. In addition, local government needs an appropriate financial system and local taxation so as to ensure service provision and to enable local authorities to shape their own destinies (Pratchett; Wilson, 1996).
Apart from the complexity of political systems, western democracies have to cope with the loss of the political institutions legitimacy. There is some evidence that most of western countries citizens are not simply dissatisfied with political practice but also have little knowledge about the functions of different levels of government. Take as indicators, for example, the decline in voting in many western democracies or the distrust expressed by many citizens in opinion polls when asked to assess their democratic institutions.

In spite of current low levels of electoral participation, local democracy is particularly attractive since it decentralises power and provides opportunities for citizen involvement in community affairs. Local democracy should guarantee that different interests are represented in local decisions. Moreover, local representatives should be elected by citizens to become a focus of power highly visible and thus highly transparent. Last but not least, local democracy should introduce mechanisms for improving democratic control of local authorities (Pratchett; Wilson, 1996).

What is then the link between local autonomy and local democracy? From a comparative perspective, we realise that in some countries local government has important responsibilities and also the resources to put them into practice, while in other countries local government has little autonomy. Similarly, in some places citizens participate actively in the management of public affairs and through new democratic experiences –like neighbourhood forums or citizen juries. On the contrary, in other democratic societies bottom-up initiatives are scarce.

So as to find if there is any relationship between the degree of local autonomy and local democracy, we will analyse the situation of local government in Catalonia, and especially the case of Barcelona.
2. THE POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION OF SPAIN AND CATALONIA

When trying to explore the link between local autonomy and local democracy in a specific country, it is important to bear in mind its political structure. The Spanish case draws up some peculiarities because its political system has recently progressed to democracy after the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975), where municipal administration was characterized by a centralist and uniform design. During this period, popular mobilisation against the regime channelled its demands through the local political action and the neighbourhood movement, so the expectations to get a powerful local government were very high.

2.1. Spain

The transition to democracy affected the Spanish basic territorial structure and also the future of local government. Like some other European countries, in Spain the decentralization process resulted in a progressive regionalization or the rise of stronger levels of sub-national government (Keating; Loughlin, 1997). The territorial model adopted was the State of Autonomies, where 17 Comunidades Autónomas (Autonomous Communities) had significant legislative and executive powers over a wide range of areas –housing, urban and regional planning, agriculture, transport, health, education, social welfare and culture– according to the terms of their individual autonomy statutes.

In every region two levels of local government where established: the supra-municipal level (provinces, 50) and the municipalities (over 8000) (see Figure 1). The treatment of local government in the 1978 Spanish Constitution is relatively brief, being most of the articles devoted to new regions. The 1985 Local Government Act (LBRL) specifies only the general principles regarding the territory, internal organisation and functions of local government; the more concrete details are left to regional legislation.

The 1988 Local Finance Act (LRHL) fixed the distribution of municipal incomes: 35 per cent comes from local taxes, 30 per cent from state capital grants, 17 per
cent from other taxes and special contributions, 13 per cent from loans and 5 per cent from patrimony incomes. The distribution of public expenditure at different levels of government shows that local institutions get 13 per cent, while the regional government gets 27 per cent and the central government keeps 59 per cent (Mir, 2000).

FIGURE 1: Spanish territorial structures of local government
- CENTRAL GOVERNMENT
  - REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS........................................17
  - PROVINCIAL COUNCILS...........................................50
  - MUNICIPAL COUNCILS............................................8022

2.2. Catalonia

Catalonia, as a historical region, approved its Statute of Autonomy (1979) and also restored the Catalan regional government (Generalitat). In 1987, four laws of territorial organisation (LOT) were put into practice and settled up the current administrative structure of the Catalan region (31895 square km) (see Figure 2): 4 provinces (Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona), 41 counties (comarques, a traditional division) and 946 municipalities. More than a half of these municipalities (526) have less than 1000 inhabitants, resulting in an administrative fragmentation that has been questioned on several occasions.

There exist other administrative bodies to deal with the delivery of services, such as the consortiums (between different public administrations and between

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1 Local associations consider this distribution as unequal and they claim for at least 30 per cent of public expenditure.

2 In fact, a political debate has started due to the publication of a report of the Catalan Parliament in January 2001 that suggests the amalgamation of municipalities of less than 250 inhabitants, the creation of 6 new counties and a new territorial division (6 provinces instead of 4).
public and private non-profit entities), the metropolitan bodies (in Barcelona and its hinterland), and the mancomunitats (association of municipalities).

The main responsibilities of the provinces (whose representatives are elected indirectly and become members of the Provincial Council or Diputació) are the co-ordination of municipal services, the technical, economic and juridical assistance and co-operation with municipalities, the provision of some services and the co-ordination with the regional and national governments.

The territory of the county is defined by grouping together the municipalities included in it and it is run by the County Council (whose representatives are also elected indirectly). The counties have powers over the following matters: territorial and urban planning, health, social services, culture, sport, education and basic environmental services.

Finally, the municipality is the basic entity in the Catalan territorial organisation. The municipalities are governed by town councils (ajuntaments), which are composed of a government commission and a mayor (elected by the councillors of the commission). The powers of municipalities concern basic environmental services (parks, cemeteries, water supply, sewerage, waste collection and disposal), public transport, local security, public markets, social services, traffic and town planning.

FIGURE 2: Catalan territorial structures of local government
- CENTRAL GOVERNMENT
  - REGIONAL GOVERNMENT (Generalitat of Catalonia)
    - PROVINCIAL COUNCILS......................................4
    - COUNTY COUNCILS (comarques)....................41
      - Consortiums
      - Metropolitan Bodies
      - Mancomunitats
        - MUNICIPAL COUNCILS.......................946
          - Neighbourhood Districts (in big towns)
3. 20 YEARS OF DEMOCRATIC LOCAL GOVERNMENT

After the 1950s Spain went through an accelerated economic development which brought rapid industrialization, massive rural exodus and high levels of urban growth. Larger cities were in a state of chaos due to the lax and deficient urban model developed along the last two decades of the dictatorship. The metropolitan areas of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Bilbao suffered from deficits in essential public services and infrastructure in areas like education, health, transport, housing and social welfare. The legitimacy of public authorities, especially local government, decreased progressively as they could not provide even the basic rudiments of paved streets, sewerage and water supply (Page; Goldsmith, 1987).

This context of crisis and change in the early 1970s saw the rise of highly organized protest movements in many of the large towns, mobilised around urban issues. Neighbourhood associations, students, trade unionists and regionalist movements claimed for both the restoration of democracy and an improvement of living conditions in cities (Castells, 1984).

Finally, the first local democratic elections after the dictatorship took place in April 1979. Left-wing opposition won in most large Spanish towns, although right-wing parties ruled the central government until 1982. In Catalonia, since the beginning of the democracy the regional government is controlled by Catalan nationalists (CiU), but most of the largest municipal councils and provincial councils are in the hands of Socialists\(^3\). This rivalry has meant some degree of friction between regional and local governments (see further on).

We can distinguish two periods concerning the role of town councils during the 20 years of democratic local government:

\(^3\) However, in the last elections for the Parliament of Catalonia the Socialists obtained more votes than the nationalists did (but fewer seats because of the electoral law). There is great expectation about the next elections in 2003 to see if the Socialists will win for the first time.
3.1. 1979-1989

In 1979, the newly elected municipal councillors had difficulties in meeting the demands of local residents because most of them were in debt and their internal organisation was in crisis. Town councils had the responsibility to provide basic services and infrastructures to the population, who had been actively asking for them through mobilisations and neighbourhood associative movements, especially in big towns (Diputació de Barcelona, 1999).

The first period is featured by the **active role of municipalities** and local élites. The political objectives were focused on solving the basic demands: the role of politicians was closer to management than to politics. There were a great amount of projects to be put into practice\(^4\) and in spite of the lack of economic resources towns experimented important transformations and got better communications and services. In some towns the mayor was so identified with the municipality that has won all the municipal elections since 1979 up to now\(^5\). (Vallès, 1999).

Nevertheless, a process of **demobilisation** of urban social movements started during this period for different reasons. As we have seen, the associative movement played a decisive role taking part in the conception of the city model through mobilisations and demands. After the restoration of the democracy, however, some of these leaders were co-opted for local, regional and national politics, becoming the legitimate leaders to implement these demands.

Moreover, during the 80s new issues of interest raised (environment, women, solidarity, pacifism) and new associations appeared, widening the number and nature of associations. Finally, we found that the more gradually the demands were fulfilled, the less the neighbourhood associations and other organisations participated in the political arena (Diputació de Barcelona, 1999).

\(^4\) During the 80s the town council of Barcelona envisaged its most ambitious project: the 1992 Olympic Games, which resulted in the transformation and modernization of the city.

\(^5\) For instance, this is the case of Pasqual Maragall (Barcelona: 1982-1997); Antoni Farrés (Sabadell: 1979-1999), Manuel Royes (Terrassa: 1979-now), Joaquim Nadal (Girona: 1979-now), etc.
To sum up, with the restoration of democracy and the achievement of the most important demands, the civil society stopped participating actively in the management of public affairs. Moreover, during the 80s the priorities were focused on the resolution of basic problems and the municipalities were regarded as the main actors able to do it, developing a top-down approach.

3.2. 1990-2000

During the 90s, local government had to face new challenges related to a new context. Firstly, the basic services had been covered but new demands appeared. Secondly, the complexity of Spanish administration resulted in overlapping institutions and responsibilities, questioning the political system efficiency. Last but not least, the decrease of citizen participation led the municipalities to implement some experiments to strengthen local democracy. All these circumstances made local government rethink its role and its relationship with citizens.

In the first place, the problems that local government had to cope with during the 80s have changed. For instance, problems related to local basic services or infrastructures have been replaced by problems concerning employment, environment and especially immigration. These problems belong to economic and social trends located in a larger sphere than that of the local level. In consequence, local government not simply has to co-operate with other levels of government but also mediate and lobby between local and regional, national and supra-national authorities (Vallès, 1999).

Moreover, the globalising economy and the emergence of networks has motivated local government to create a supportive and facilitative environment in order to work in partnership with other actors in the field, such as the private sector and also the non-profit associations. For instance, municipalities debate
about the need to promote public-private partnership so as to finance the most important projects.

In the second place, the complexity of the Spanish territorial organisation has had some negative consequences concerning the level of efficiency achieved by local administrations, as well as the transparency and accountability of local institutions. As a result, the Spanish process of decentralization has raised up some critics and projects of renewal of public administration. The ideas of a single administration and subsidiarity are taking hold. For instance, the **single window** approach takes in consideration three main goals to achieve: provide a better service to the citizen, prevent administrative units from duplicating their personnel and functions and diminish the overlapping and cost of administration (Batley; Stoker, 1991).

In fact, local councillors support the idea that it is necessary to simplify the relationship between the administration and the citizen, basically by reducing the number of forms, procedural steps, overlapping permissions, certificates and documents. In this direction, some experiences like the single administration and one-stop-shop businesses have been set up in several parts of the country, taking profit of the advantages of new technologies and communications.

Other initiatives to improve the decentralization policy are related to **staff** training and the simplification of wage system. From this point of view, in order to ensure appropriate staffing levels throughout the administration, staff needs to be trained and paid commensurately with its level of responsibilities and conditions of employment. As a result, it is necessary to unify the working conditions and homogenise the management criteria of the staff contracted by the National General Administration (MAP, 1997).

Another requisite of an effective and workable decentralization policy includes developing criteria and indicators for performance appraisal and measurement. The **evaluation of efficiency** is defined as an internal and flexible system of self-evaluation for each centre, measuring periodically and objectively the
relation between the human and resources and goods of the organisation and the results related to the activities developed, as well as the analysis of indicators and series of management recognised, obtained through adequate manager information systems. The goal is to provide information to managers on the basic indicators on the results of the activities carried out in their organisations. Moreover, giving public information of these indicators makes administrations more transparent and accountable for citizens (MAP, 1997).

Finally, the idea that local government is more than a local administration is also taking hold. In fact, most of the municipal activity pointed out modernization, efficiency, organisation and service provision, placing political issues in the background. Local authorities have been involved in the day-to-day management and have left aside their political dimension. Indeed, the current challenge of local government is to improve the communication and involvement of the population in public affairs, to make citizens overcome their role of service consumers and feel as active members of a political community. In other words, to recover their political role and strengthen the relationship between government and civil society (Brugué; Gomà, 1998).

In the same direction, some municipalities are implementing new practices in order to promote citizen participation. In Catalonia, for example, different municipalities have put into practice citizen juries, discussion forums and consultative citizen committees. The aim of these experiences is to involve citizens to take part in discussion on policy-relevant issues such as the Local Agenda 21 or the use of public infrastructures.

In conclusion, the current challenge of local government is to combine an effective management and a redefining relationship of local government with citizens based on renewing trust between local communities and local councils.
4. THE CITY OF BARCELONA

Barcelona must be placed in the context described above, but has also some special features derived from its condition as the capital of Catalonia (with 1.5 million inhabitants) and as one of the largest Spanish metropolitan areas (with 4.5 million inhabitants). The City of Barcelona is an excellent example to explore the link between local autonomy and local democracy through its history and in particular through three experiences: the debate about the metropolitan governance, the decentralization process and the Municipal Charter.

4.1. The metropolitan governance

The 20 years of democracy in Catalonia have been featured by the political rivalry between the most important political parties: the conservative Catalan nationalists (CiU) and the Socialists (PSC). The former has been the dominant political force of the regional government (Generalitat), while the latter is more powerful in the local councils of the towns surrounding the City of Barcelona and the City itself.

These two political parties represent two historical different visions of Catalonia and have been represented by two leaders: on the one hand, Jordi Pujol has been the President of the Generalitat since 1980; on the other, Pasqual Maragall was the mayor of Barcelona from 1982 to 1997 and now is the socialist candidate for the regional elections.

Barcelona has traditionally been the economic motor of Catalonia and its political and cultural capital. Moreover, the City and its surroundings have attracted the location of industries, services and population, shaping a metropolitan area that represents 75 per cent of the Catalan population. In the 70s, the boundaries of the metropolitan area (or the “real city”) were larger than the administrative limits. In order to give discretion to this human and economic area, there have been several attempts.
The first attempt was in 1974, when the Metropolitan Corporation of Barcelona \((\text{Corporació Metropolitana de Barcelona})\) was created. It was the first step towards a political organism that could represent the interests of the metropolitan area and provide it with the adequate services. However, the Francoist regime obstructed the development and political action of the metropolitan authority (Borja, 1995).

In the new context of democracy, the Metropolitan Corporation of Barcelona was a real entity that was ruled by councillors from left-wing parties. The power of such a large area was considered by the Catalan nationalists –who controlled the regional government– as a threat for its interests. Taking advantage of the discretion that the Spanish Constitution gives to the Autonomous Communities, the Generalitat abolished the Metropolitan Corporation in 1987. In order to manage the metropolitan area \((600\text{ square km})\), three different metropolitan bodies were created, none of them having real autonomy nor political legitimacy. For instance, each metropolitan authority covers a different number of municipalities\(^6\).

The case of Barcelona is similar to the history of the English Metropolitan Counties ended in 1986 when the Conservative government abolished them and replaced them with ad-hoc structures for a small number of services. Both experiences show that but over and above problems of political legitimacy, there is the question of the constitution process of metropolitan governments.

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\(^6\) The first metropolitan body is the Association of Towns in the Barcelona Municipal Area \((\text{Mancomunitat de Municipis de l'Àrea de Barcelona})\), which gathers 30 municipalities. Its goal is to act jointly by means of co-operation between municipalities based on the principles of solidarity, territorial redistribution and the correction of economic and social imbalances.

The second body is the Metropolitan Authority of Transport \((\text{Entitat Metropolitana del Transport})\), formed by eighteen municipalities. It provides joint public passenger transport services in its area.

Finally, the Metropolitan Environmental Authority \((\text{Entitat Metropolitana del Medi Ambient})\) covers 33 municipalities and is responsible for two areas of management, one being water supply and sewage disposal, and the other urban waste treatment.
and its consequences on local democracy. The imposition of these metropolitan governments on the local actors did not encourage their acceptance and they were often considered as institutional products, manufactured entirely from the outside. This naturally left scars in the relationship between the local actors and the new institution (Stoker, 1991).

In the United Kingdom, the new Labour government proposed setting up a new local authority, the Greater London Authority (GLA), similar in scope to the former Greater London Council (GLC). The GLA has since May 2000 a strong governing structure based on four main elements: a directly elected Mayor (Ken Livingstone), a separately elected Assembly (London Assembly), a number of full-time officials (operating under a Chief Executive) and a number of administrative and functional agencies (responsible for the delivery of transport, economic regeneration, strategic planning, environment and emergency services) (Stoker, 2000).

It is too soon to prove if the legal institution of the metropolitan authority will strengthen local democracy. A good sign would be that the elected Mayor and its team are exercising some influence over the policy direction and practice of the large functional agencies through their legitimacy and visibility. Indeed, having the autonomy should make easier the development of local democracy.

Summarising, the need for metropolitan-level management approaches remains a major issue in the dialogue with many cities. In Barcelona, the abolition of the Metropolitan Corporation and the imposition of another structure by the Catalan Parliament is an example of the interdependence between local autonomy and local democracy, having the new metropolitan bodies neither autonomy nor legitimacy.
4.2. The decentralization process

The first municipal elections in April 1979 gave the majority to left-wing parties in Barcelona. There existed a high degree of consensus on the fact that Barcelona had to renew its internal organisation and also its relationship with citizenship. The personal and political links existing between those political forces and urban social movements made possible that the development of the decentralization process got on the top of the municipal agenda (Brugué; Gomà, 1994).

The process of decentralization, which was simultaneous to the modernization of the City Council’s organisation, was not reduced to a simple bureaucratic deconcentration of management. The objectives to achieve had both an **administrative and a political dimension**. On the one hand, there were three objectives related to management: improve and increase services, bring the management closer to the citizens, introduce new technology and rationalize municipal administration. On the other hand, there were two main objectives concerning a political dimension: fight inequalities among different groups and areas in the city, promote citizen participation (Amorós, 1995).

The bases of decentralization were set up in the **period 1979-85**. The Regulations of the Municipal District Councils (1979) allow each District –or territorial division unit– to have its own governing bodies and powers that were decentralized from the Municipality’s central authorities over time. In order to assess the decentralization, two bodies were created: the Area of Municipal Decentralization (to co-ordinate the process) and the Citizens Commission (to assess the process, being composed of representatives of the regional government, prominent citizens and different associations) (Brugué; Gomà, 1994).

In 1984, after a consultation process, the city was divided into **10 Districts** (see Figure 3). The population of each District ranges from 90.000 to 280.000 inhabitants (with an average population of 165.000 inhabitants, one of the highest densities of Europe), and their surface goes from 4 to 20 square km.
The current division, based on historical and social characteristics, represented the recognition of the neighbourhoods as key territorial units to social integration (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1983).

The **second phase (1985-87)** represented the implementation of the agreements achieved in the first period: the transfer of functions towards the Districts. The main actor in this phase was the Municipal Commission for Decentralization and Citizen Participation (MCDCP), which was the gatekeeper of the correct transfer of functions to the decentralized units. The Regulatory Norms for the Organisation of the Districts and Citizen Participation passed in 1986, with both administrative and political dimensions (Borja; Castells, 1998).
From an administrative perspective, Districts were given powers over several areas\(^7\) and had three ruling bodies: the District Council (made up of 15 District Councillors elected according to the electoral results of the particular District), the President of the District Council (chosen by the most voted party in each District) and the Governmental Commission (the executive body).

The political functions of the Districts are to elaborate and manage the annual budget, assess the needs of the District and inform and approve the municipal projects that affect the District. In order to fulfil these aims the District also counts on Working Commissions and the Consultative Forum of District Associations and Organisations. The main role of the Working Commissions is to follow up the day-to-day implementation of the District policies and allow citizens to control it. Through the Consultative Forum, citizens can discuss the main lines of specific issues so as to influence on the design and evaluation of public policies (Borja, 1995).

The Norms of Participation also set up a range of District democratic mechanisms: Public Audience (which allows citizens to receive information from the governmental bodies and to propose to them the need for some agreements); Referenda (a mechanism of consulting citizens opinion); Petition Right (which allows citizens to ask the authorities to carry out a particular activity); Public Information (which enables citizens to receive information from the authorities in those matters in which they are not obliged to by law); Citizen Initiative (which allows citizens to propose to the municipal bodies to carry out some activities, but the resources needed will be provided by the citizens) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1987).

\(^7\) The powers are over the following areas: security in public places; traffic regulation; fire brigades; urban planning; historical monuments; environment protection; public markets; public transport; graveyards; social services; water and electricity supply; street cleaning; cultural and sport resources; participation in the management of public schools (Regulatory Norms for the Organisation of the Districts and Citizen Participation, Art. 5).
The period 1987-91 represents the practical fulfilment of the transfer process and the organisational modernization of the Districts. Every District was divided into several areas (see Figure 4). Every area is composed of various Organic Nuclei, which represent the grouping of staff from different departments acting upon the same target. The administration of the Districts is under the command of a President who is assessed by a Service Co-ordinator or Manager (who is responsible for the management of services and for assuring their quality).

**Balance of the decentralization process**

The process of municipal decentralization for the City of Barcelona was based upon two fundamental concepts: that the most effective administration is the one that operates in close liaison with its citizens, and that democracy requires the participation of citizens in public affairs. 20 years later, the first objective seems to have been successfully achieved, while the second one appears to have been just partially fulfilled (Amorós, 1995).

From the perspective of the transfer of functions and services, 93,5 per cent of the responsibilities likely to be decentralized are today managed by the Districts.
The amount of economic resources that are transferred from the City Council to the Districts depends on the needs of each District, trying to fight the inequalities between them. The average of the percentage of budget devoted to Districts out of the whole municipal budget is 11-12 per cent from 1993 (Ajuntament de Barcelona: 126, 1999). In relation to the staff employed in the Districts, it has grown from 669 people in 1986 to 1,903 people in 1997 (Ajuntament de Barcelona: 124, 1999).

Another example that proves that the decentralization has succeeded in bringing the management closer to the citizens is the implementation of the Citizen Attention Offices (CAO). These decentralized offices, placed in every District, put into practice the single window approach. The offices not only give information to the citizens but also prevent citizens from going to the City Council for bureaucratic procedures such as the handing over of documents or changes in the register. Moreover, the City Hall’s website and on-line service is another way to simplify the relationship between the administration and the citizen.

Conversely, the political objectives seem to be partially achieved, especially those related to improve local democracy. As we have seen, the Regulatory Norms of Citizen Participation established a set of participatory devices. However, none of them means a transfer of relevant decision making powers to the citizens or community groups (Amorós, 1995).

Although there exist some Consultative Forums specialized in a single issue – women, youth, elder citizens– the use given to these instruments has been very scarce. The indefinition regarding the scope of participation, the non-favourable positions sustained by local managers and the period of crisis and reorganisation of associative movements may explain the poor balance in this aspect (Brugué; Gomà, 1994).

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8 However, the complete use of the “e-administration” will not be achieved until the whole citizenship has access to the new technologies of information (which is far away from the current reality).
As other municipalities, the City Council of Barcelona has tried to strengthen its relationship with citizens through different mechanisms. In the first place, giving information to the citizens, basically by carrying out periodical surveys—on citizens needs and opinions—and using indicators of self-evaluation—on public transport, environment or security. In addition, the municipality not only publishes official bulletins, gazettes and magazines but also provides information through its own media (press, radio and television).

Taking advantage of new technologies and communications, some Districts have their own website (apart from their radio and television channel). The objective is to enhance the use of citizen networks and to keep citizens aware of their District’s news, especially the young ones. There have been interesting initiatives in the most deprived neighbourhoods of the city trying to involve the youth, basically by giving them the opportunity to participate actively in the design and contents of the neighbourhood website.9

The City Council has also tried to involve the civil society through some experiments for democratic practice. For example, in 1988, during the process of decentralization, the Council of Barcelona decided to frame a multi-dimension urban strategy—the PIR or Pla Integral Roquetes—in a peripheral and deprived area in the Nou Barris District. The neighbourhood movement of Roquetes and other citizens participated actively in the design and decision-making process of the PIR through two platforms: the Working Commissions and the Monitoring Commission (Brugué; Gomà, 1994).

Another similar experience was developed in 1999 in another neighbourhood of Nou Barris (Trinitat Nova). Citizens were divided into discussions groups in order to give ideas to the project that would improve the neighbourhood’s standard of living (Pla Comunitari). However, these initiatives are exceptional and they can not be regarded as a common practice. In fact, since 1999 the

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9 For instance, Raval Net (in Ciutat Vella, the oldest neighbourhood) and Nou Barris Net (in Nou Barris, a new District created in the 60s).
City Council has not promoted any other similar experience to promote public participation.

Another weakness of the political dimension of decentralization is related to the **electoral system**. Nowadays, the City of Barcelona is run by a forty-one member City Council. The councillors are elected for a period of four years according to the D'Hont Law system where the citizens vote for closed lists of party candidates. The Mayor – Joan Clos since 1997 – is elected by the Council among the councillors, whose number depends on the city’s population. In other words, the lists of candidates are the same in all the Districts and the electoral campaign is held at the city level. This means that the Districts do not play a political key role in the elections.

To sum up, the process of decentralization executed in Barcelona during the 80s allowed citizens to participate in the management of public affairs at the District level. That is to say, the conditions for local democracy were set up after an institutional change. However, the use given to the instruments has been scarce. This proves that the strengthening of local democracy depends also on other variables, such as the democratic culture of citizens.

### 4.3. The Municipal Charter

The City of Barcelona developed in the 90s its own model of organisation, known as the “Barcelona model”, which was based on the process of decentralization. Nevertheless, cities are in permanent transformation and new demands and needs are to be covered. In order to face the challenges of the new millennium (such as the improvement of local democracy), the City Council

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10 This model includes urban and strategic planning (thanks to the challenge of the 1992 Olympic Games), efficiency through partnership strategies (like mix-firms), a high quality of life and delivery of services (Borja, 1995).
has elaborated a Municipal Charter which was approved by the Municipality of Barcelona on 1997 (and by the Catalan Parliament on 1999).

One of the main goals of the Municipal Charter is to surmount the limitations that the Local Government Act puts on the governance of large cities like Barcelona. In other words, the Charter represents a new framework that provides the city with larger local autonomy and should enable citizens to take part into the local public affairs. On the one hand, the Charter claims for different autonomous and state government powers so as to guarantee a larger municipal discretion in urbanism, infrastructures, education, social services and culture. On the other hand, significant clauses of the Charter are related to taxation (more state capital grants, more local taxes) (Longo, 1999).

In addition, the text sets a new juridical framework in order to regulate the relationship with public and private institutions. Intervention mechanisms are reinforced in matters like urbanism and security. Furthermore, the consortium is the formula to achieve the joint management between the autonomous Catalan government and the Municipality of Barcelona. Last but not least, the set of proposals includes the creation of the Municipal Justice of Barcelona to solve minor conflicts. The normative framework to implement the Charter and to appeal the laws that counteract local autonomy to the Constitutional Court is established as well.

Concerning local democracy, the Charter extends participation devices, strengthens control mechanisms of municipal management and reinforces the delimitation of functions between the Municipal Council and the executive organs (mayor and government commission). The Charter also reinforces the functions, internal organisation and resources of the Districts, but it does not deal with the metropolitan question\textsuperscript{11} (Longo, 1999).

\textsuperscript{11} Here again the debate about the metropolitan governance is an obstacle to achieve the consensus among all the political parties. In the Charter, the metropolitan question does not appear to avoid a possible blockade by the Catalan Parliament. However, the approval of the Municipal Charter can be the first step towards the creation of a Metropolitan Charter.
The implications of the Municipal Charter are profound since they aim to influence and change the underlying attitudes and political culture of citizens. In other words, the Charter tries to encourage them to become more politically aware and active. If achieved, the change in political culture has implications not simply for local government, but also for other public, voluntary and private organisations. If citizens develop a more democratic and political active role, the relationship between state and its citizens is appointed to change.

In conclusion, the Charter represents an excellent opportunity to provide the City of Barcelona with mechanisms that may enhance both local autonomy and local democracy. The implementation of the Municipal Charter depends now on its approval by the Spanish Parliament and can be considered as a reform strategy to face up to contemporary realities of large cities.
5. CONCLUSIONS

Within the context of two decades of democratic local government, the emerging world of local governance presents in Spain both potential drawbacks and opportunities. The case of Barcelona has showed the existing interdependence of local autonomy and local democracy, basically through the examples of the debate about the metropolitan governance, the decentralization process and the Municipal Charter.

Firstly, the relationship between local government and local democracy at the metropolitan level has been problematic. The abolition of the Metropolitan Corporation by the Catalan regional government and the imposition of new metropolitan bodies has resulted in a legitimation deficit and a lack of political accountability. In this case, the lack of local autonomy has had implications for the development of local democracy.

Secondly, the decentralization process of Barcelona represents the achievement of a framework that enables local autonomy and enhances local democracy. Nevertheless, the case of Barcelona shows that in spite of having the appropriate instruments, the objectives related to the improvement of local democracy were not fulfilled. The main reason to explain the low citizen participation stems from the political culture amongst the population.

Finally, the City of Barcelona has tried to set a new framework—the Municipal Charter—both to reinforce its political dimension and the citizens involvement in public affairs. The aim of the municipality is to achieve a larger degree of local autonomy that enables the creation of mechanisms to improve the democratic control of local authorities and encourage citizens to take an active role. Underlying this initiative is the idea that renewing democracy requires a new framework for the local polity.
To sum up, the case of Barcelona provides both a theoretical and practical discussion of the problems and opportunities facing contemporary local government. Underpinning this argument is the reaffirmation of local government as the heart of democratic processes, acting as the catalyst for democracy at the local level and as the focus for political activity in localities. Nevertheless, without a certain degree of local autonomy it is unlikely that local democracy will be completely developed.
6. REFERENCES


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