

STATE-OF-THE-FIELD REVIEW

Can participatory democracy become “inclusive”? Class, mobilization and voice in participatory institutions

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Abstract

This article discusses reproductionist perspectives that assume there is little local participatory institutions can do to address the underrepresentation and the domination of some social groups. While there is also empirical basis to be skeptical, the evidence suggests that, occasionally, the reproduction of class inequalities can be counteracted. This encourages us to consider the conditions that favor greater participation of working-class, economically and culturally disadvantaged people. Comparing evidence from various studies in a range of countries, the article argues that certain contextual factors and inclusion tools produce higher rates of mobilization and more egalitarian deliberations. Specifically, the article focuses on the effects of three conditions: a) special mobilization efforts; b) design choices and inclusion tools; and c) the broadening of the political subject through cultural mobilization. As well as reflecting on the shortcomings of these factors, a new research agenda for social equality in participation is also proposed.

Keywords: Participatory democracy; participation; inclusion; social inequalities; social class; education

Introduction

Empirical research commonly finds that current socioeconomic inequalities have a profound impact on the political involvement of citizens, restricting the type of people engaging with new participatory and deliberative institutions (Ganuza and Francés, 2012; Alarcón and Font, 2014; Pape and Lim, 2019; Dacombe, 2021). Indeed, working-class people and other oppressed social groups have limited possibilities for everyday involvement which, according to some theorists, points to a contradiction between capitalist social dynamics and widespread active citizenship (Fraser, 1990; Meiksins Wood, 1995). The reproduction of political inequities remains a central question, especially for institutions aiming to promote inclusion (Isaac and Heller, 2003).

This paper goes to the heart of this issue: the idea that social inclusion and equality in participation represent a challenge in recent efforts to boost participatory democracy. In this respect, Piven and Cloward (1979) argued that the creation of new participatory institutions in the United States required the establishment of direct negotiation with popular movements, led by oppressed groups and their leaders. Carole Pateman was inspired by similar proposals to write *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) after studying workers' participation in Yugoslavia. Since then, a number of questions have come to the forefront: Can democratic innovations incorporate those who have been historically excluded? What circumstances would have to be in

place for this to happen? Is it a realistic and beneficial aim? (Fung and Wright, 2001; Baiocchi, 2003b; Cornwall, 2008).

In addition, Piven and Cloward also argued that it was necessary to consider under what circumstances institutional participation might be useful for popular sectors. Young (2000) and Fung and Wright (2003), among other authors, showed that people can make a crucial contribution to the design of policy measures, providing everyday experience of services and work processes. However, this paper only discusses the other side of the problem: the possibility of creating more egalitarian and (class) inclusive democratic processes.

To consider the extent to which participatory institutions are egalitarian in terms of social class, radical democratic theorists have drawn on concepts such as inclusion (Young, 2000), inclusiveness (Smith, 2009), participatory equality (Fung and Wright, 2003) and parity in participation (Fraser, 1990; 2023). More recently, feminist-inspired work (Collins, 2017; Wojciechowska, 2019), Marxist political economics (Harting, 2023), critical race studies (Lupien, 2018) and Bourdieusian cultural critiques (Holdo, 2015) have addressed social inclusion and the difficulties popular sectors face participating in local government institutions. Scholars such as Jonathan E. Collins have suggested that, in the absence of more egalitarian structures, it is likely that new participatory spaces just reproduce existing inequities. In other words, privileging the voice and presence of the already well-represented middle classes (Collins, 2021).

With the spread of participatory budgeting and other democratic innovations during the 2000s, the debate has been enriched by new case analyses and survey data (Fung and Wright, 2003; Bryan, 2010; Wampler, 2007; Gaventa and Barrett, 2012; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014). This research suggests that some mechanisms are more effective at popular mobilization and that certain contextual factors seem to enhance more equality in deliberations. Such positive empirical results challenge pure reproductionist perspectives, which maintain that there is little that participatory institutions can do to overcome the difficulties of involving oppressed or marginalized groups. On the other hand, given that improvements to inclusion tend to be small, the transformative capacity of participatory institutions should not be overestimated. As I will argue, popular classes have only tended to appropriate local participatory institutions in significant numbers, under exceptional circumstances. In this article, I examine and discuss these situations.

The analysis focuses on data from distinct forms of citizen assemblies from different municipalities and countries around the world, such as town meetings, participatory budgeting, citizen boards and open forums.¹ The growing evidence makes it possible to conduct a deeper inquiry into the effects of inclusion tools, as well as identifying some of the contextual factors that favor participation. The article provides a detailed review of these conditions in order to develop a realistic view of participatory governance in the context of extremely unequal capitalist polities. In addition, I suggest some avenues for new research aimed at addressing the limitations of common measures.

The article concludes that we should go beyond reproductionism while not falling into the trap of having unrealistic expectations of the transformative power of participatory institutions. Such a perspective is important because it values small gains and advances in political equality while recognizing that improvements have been relatively rare and depend on certain conditions: periods of strong political mobilization, the spread of egalitarian cultural frames and the implementation of organizational inclusion tools. The article addresses these questions in the following three sections. Firstly, I outline the main issues in a critical discussion of the concept of inclusion and its operationalization. Secondly, I describe the effects of the main contextual factors and inclusion procedures. And, finally, I reflect on some gaps in the literature and propose a future research agenda.

¹I refer only to open assemblies, councils and forums, characterized by the self-selection of participants.

Social inclusion or equality? Conceptual debates

Research on participatory democracy often depicts social inclusion as the active political engagement of people from socially and politically oppressed groups. The basic divisions of capitalist societies (class, gender, race and culture) lead to marginalization and expulsion from institutional politics for vast numbers of citizens (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000; Dryzek, 2001). As a result, the oppressed and exploited are often unrepresented in government. Similar dynamics can be observed in other forms of political action such as associationism and political party militance (Schlozman et al., 2012; Caínzos and Voces, 2010). Such imbalances have also been revealed in some state-led participatory institutions (Holdo, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Pape and Lim, 2019; Hertting, 2023). Obviously, the creation of new political opportunities does not automatically break the division of labor that excludes so many people from dominant politics (Bourdieu, 1981).

For the working-classes, those in precarious socioeconomic situations and with low education, the force of exclusionary dynamics is particularly striking (Therborn, 2020). This paper focuses specifically on social class and the political involvement of the working-classes, understood in broad Marxist terms,² and those in situations of socioeconomic precarity.³ Thus, despite recent cycles of mobilization, people in these positions have tended to be much less present in a variety of political activities that are central to capitalist states (Caínzos and Voces, 2010). Furthermore, the lack of working-class people in representative chambers and the decline of trade unions as central actors in state negotiations also appear to have contributed to their absence from institutional processes.⁴

In addressing this problem, studies on participatory democracy have asked if democratic innovations reproduce pre-existing inequities or create new political opportunities for the working-class. If the answer is the former, participatory institutions, such as citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, open forums and citizen boards, just mirror social inequalities. In fact, they may even exacerbate such biases (Lee et al., 2015). However, it has also been established that they can, at times, propitiate new processes that counteract established frameworks, facilitating contributions from new agents and making political engagement more meaningful to subaltern groups (Mansbridge, 1983; Baiocchi, 2003b; Bherer et al., 2016; Lupien, 2018; Holdo, 2020). *Reproductionist* perspectives⁵ stand in opposition to those approaches that highlight the potential for transformation and popular inclusion.

This antagonism between reproduction and transformative views has had different impacts on the empirical avenues to research. The most common term has probably been inclusion, a concept defined by Young (2000: 23) as the incorporation of “all those affected by [policy] decisions,” offering them “an effective opportunity to express their interests and concerns.” This broad theoretical notion has been materialized into different empirical approaches, which are the focus of this article. For example, Smith (2009) builds on a pragmatic notion concentrating on the properties of institutional design. He proposes that inclusiveness relates to the institutionalization of “effective incentives for participation by citizens from across different social groups” (p. 24) and that attention should focus on giving “institutional inducements [that] motivate engagement [...], ensuring that a particular group is not marginalized” (p. 25). Class inclusion, therefore,

²Based on the work of Wright (1994), which defines working-class as a combination of lack of property, low levels of formal education and low control over production processes.

³The literature includes data based on the level of education, income and rarely uses other indicators of social class. That is why I will use different data as a proxy for social class across the paper. Though I appreciate the value of intersectional approaches, in the present paper I concentrate on inequalities related to social class structure.

⁴Mansbridge (2015) argues that special representation efforts – affirmative action – are justified in the following situations: a history of communicative distrust regarding dominant political groups, a social understanding of the group as “unfit to rule,” a questioning of legitimacy for the absence of people with that profile and growing problems of representation of interests. The author argues that working-class people may suffer the last condition most particularly.

⁵I take this term from Burawoy (2019) who refers to social science approaches that focus mainly on the reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities, paying little attention to how people subvert and fight against them.

requires a meticulous design aimed at enhancing fairness in the selection of participants and in deliberations.

Nevertheless, other authors use the concept of inclusion to refer to equality in the standards of participation, which implies subverting the cultural norms that give primacy to educated men in higher social positions (Young, 2000; Martínez-Palacios & Nicolas-Bach, 2016; Holdo, 2015). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Young, these authors argue that formal institutions are penetrated by a “cultural subtext” (Collins, 2017; Martínez-Palacios, 2017) that is undeterred by legal provisions, even when they are fairly designed. On this basis, cultural standards should be challenged by counter-publics that enhance more egalitarian communication practices and codes, implying the need for cultural battles across the public sphere, civic associations and social movements (Eliasoph, 2013; Martínez-Palacios, 2021; Felicetti and Holdo, 2023).

“Equity” or “parity” in participation is another frequently employed concept (Fraser, 1990; 2023) that also emphasizes the incorporation of previously excluded residents and workers. However, here, the focus is on the “background” and “enabling” conditions of the economy, family and education that make participation more affordable and accessible to all. As Fung and Wright (2003: 23) have argued a “host of background conditions can facilitate or impede the progress of empowered participatory governance”. For example, high literacy levels in Kerala, India, were found to be crucial to women’s active role in participatory planning. Equity in participation “does not require absolute equality. The participants [. . .] enjoy vastly different resources [. . .]. Sometimes, however, they are *on a par sufficient* for deliberative cooperation to be attractive” [emphasis added] (p. 23). What is “on a par sufficient”? This is a matter of research. Going further, Fraser (1990) proposes that systemic social inequalities have to be seriously reduced for participatory parity to emerge.⁶

In sum, radical approaches use a variety of concepts that emphasize different aspects of participation, connecting them with alternative transformative programs. While I use the concepts of inclusion, equality in participation and parity interchangeably throughout this paper, it is important to bear in mind that each can have important theoretical and political implications, which should be discussed (Armstrong and Thompson, 2009). Some authors link inclusiveness to institutional design, others talk of cultural battles against dominant elitist norms, while parity and equality approaches pay special attention to background conditions, redistributive and socialist policies. However, as Michael Sandel (2021) argues, current theoretical perspectives tend to pay more attention to “non-discrimination policies” than to socioeconomic measures. This is reflected in research in this field, which is more inclined to address nondiscrimination inside participatory spaces than to focus on egalitarian social conditions that would encourage participation. Although many authors are eclectic, most have concentrated on inclusiveness from the perspective of design and nondiscrimination, meaning that there has been much less work on the impact of egalitarian cultural codes and redistributive policies, both potential avenues for further research.

Operationalizing inclusion: what does it look like?

When it comes to measuring the concept of inclusion/equality in participation as a dependent variable, research tends to translate it into distinct dimensions and empirical manifestations. Most studies are based on a conceptualization into dual dimensions, such as disaggregation of composition/deliberation, or presence/voice (Smith, 2009; Ganuza and Francés, 2012; García-Espín, 2024). Radical democratic theories also work with this duality even if it is difficult to wholly separate them in practice (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). This binary perspective replicates a quite

⁶For this author, “political economy enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally” (p. 65). Thus, attention to socioeconomic conditions is as important as cultural recognition.

artificial division of body and soul in Western social science (Mau, 2023), but it can be useful as a conceptual and analytic tool to guide research.

In the literature, presence is commonly understood as in-person attendance at assemblies, meetings and virtual events. However, it also comprises the process by which one becomes recognized as a member of the community of participants as well as the obstacles to participation that arise from various social circumstances (Verba et al., 1995). How has empirical research measured this dimension? Firstly, many studies have operationalized inclusion as the quantitative presence of significant numbers of citizens from disadvantaged class sectors. While these studies do not usually require a descriptive representation, meaning that assemblies mirror the population as a whole (Mansbridge, 2015), they do compare the population of participants with the rest of society to account for any significant imbalances (Baiocchi, 2003a; Ganuza and Francés, 2012; Font et al., 2021; Su, 2017; Pape and Lim, 2019). In addition, the socioeconomic characteristics of participants are compared to previous events and rates of engagement in local institutions and other political activities, such as involvement in political parties (Verba et al., 1995; Caínzos and Voces, 2010).

Some research on presence has also analyzed participation on the basis of geographic area and social class – comparing wealthy and impoverished areas. For example, Baiocchi (2003a) found that commitment to Porto Alegre’s participatory budget process was stronger in economically disadvantaged districts than their wealthier counterparts. While Wampler (2007) and Fung (2001) came to similar conclusions in their study of participatory budgeting and citizen boards, they understand inclusive presence as the mobilization of associative leaders residing in or linked to deprived areas, regardless of their individual characteristics. On this basis, inclusion is interpreted as a collective process, where community ties and relationships are more important than the individual class position of members (De Graaf et al., 2015).

From the perspective of these studies, significant involvement of citizens from exploited and oppressed social groups occurs when two criteria are met. Firstly, there is a quantitative improvement in participation rates in comparison with the whole population or with attendance at typical institutional spaces, be they advisory councils, public audiences or political parties. Secondly, qualitative improvements in participation occur when individuals from these social groups feel more motivated to engage and face fewer difficulties or barriers to doing so. Egalitarian participatory practices, as such, are understood to increase mobilization rates and improve perceptions of the opportunities available.

Voice, the second dimension of inclusion, is conceived as perceptions of equality in exchanges and debates. In other words, complete integration in significant discussions and decision-making processes and the full consideration of ones’ arguments and claims (Gastil, 1993; Young, 2000). Voice equality, therefore, elevates the status of membership acquired through presence to full recognition as a member. Research uses a variety of indicators that consider how participants perceive their own contributions to debates and responses to their claims and demands. For example, in a study on participatory budgeting in Spain, Ganuza and Francés (2012) found that there were almost no differences in the perceptions of voice equality between people with university-level and primary-level educations; it was high in both groups.

Other indicators of voice equality have focused on the access of the working-classes and other marginalized social groups to delegation posts and decision-making bodies (i.e., the possibilities of becoming spokesperson) and the influence they wield in the final approval of measures. An emblematic case in this respect comes from Hernández-Medina’s (2010) work on Sao Paulo’s participatory budgeting process. The author showed that quotas for marginalized groups were an effective way to incorporate people into delegation bodies (i.e., prioritization commissions), where they could defend their proposals. The study found that the number of delegates increased and that relevant measures affecting them were approved. In this sense, voice inclusion was the result of both symbolic recognition and new possibilities for leadership.

Deliberative equality is also enhanced when participants perceive that the barriers to participating in discussions have been reduced, increasing their sense of being recognized as full members and competent citizens. In this respect, I have studied that some inclusion measures make people feel safe, informed, competent and skilled (García-Espín, 2024). Furthermore, the recognition afforded these groups by public officials can be improved through training and the provision of clear instructions (Martínez-Palacios, 2017). From this perspective, inclusion implies improved skills and better resources for fuller participation and a new sense of agency in the political sphere (Pollock III, 1983).

Based on the operationalization of social inclusion into these forms, which cover a variety of indicators related to equality in presence and voice, and the available evidence, we can tentatively answer with a provisional ‘yes, in some aspects’ to the initial question (Can democratic innovations incorporate those who have been historically excluded?). Various studies have identified increases in the rates of popular participation, and stronger commitment among individuals from economically disadvantaged communities and among those with lower levels of formal education. Furthermore, some research on participatory budgeting and local assemblies has found that equality in deliberations is feasible. This, however, tends to happen in specific (and rather rare) circumstances, which I cover in the following section.

When does inclusion happen? The factors and conditions influencing participation

On the basis of the indicators discussed in the previous section, research points to several conditions that improve the participation of class-excluded groups: special efforts at targeted mobilization, inclusion tools and struggles over the political subject. Let’s examine each of these in detail.

Targeted mobilization

Efforts at mobilization relate to actions by political parties, associations and social movements aimed at encouraging the involvement of working-class and economically disadvantaged citizens in local participatory processes. These actions create an environment or context that reduces obstacles and makes participation more appealing in terms of both presence and voice. Furthermore, mobilization activities work as incentives that reach out to the disenfranchised and actively solicit their participation (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). This type of strategy also includes “targeted mobilization” initiatives that focus on reaching specific sectors of the community (Matthews, 2001), to increase individuals’ and collectives’ motivation to participate by convincing them that involvement can be useful.

In this sense, the literature stresses the role of political parties and, particularly, of left-wing and radical left parties (Navarro, 1999; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2020; Holdo, 2024). Two examples are helpful to show how this works. Regarding the classic study on participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, during the 1990s, the popularity of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) was critical to enhancing inclusiveness in district assemblies (Baiocchi, 2003a; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2020). As neighborhood associations had limited mobilization capacity, the local government decided to increase the number of assemblies and allow individual neighbors to participate, circumventing the intermediary authority of the associations. The popularity of the PT boosted social inclusiveness in all phases of the process. Goldfrank and Schneider (2003) observe that the participatory budgeting process contributed to the consolidation of the party’s strongholds among working-class people and an expansion of the electoral base among the middle classes. Thus, longstanding (and new) positive attitudes toward the governing party were relevant to understanding the impressive rates of participation among economically disadvantaged groups and those with lower levels of educational attainment (Baiocchi, 2003a).

However, according to Baiocchi, the success of Porto Alegre’s assemblies in improving the presence of popular sectors was not only the result of an exceptional sympathy for the incumbent

party. He argues that the first editions were decisive in generating a climate of trust. Baiocchi calls this the “success equation,” namely, the rapid implementation of a large number of proposals during the initial phases so that people could see tangible results. The parallel execution of other redistributive measures also increased investment in impoverished areas. Furthermore, the “open assembly” format made these outcomes possible while avoiding the habitual image of patronage and clientelism associated with traditional associations. Thus, inclusion was not just the result of the PT’s popularity, but also a consequence of an atmosphere of mobilization and increased confidence in local participatory processes, which, in turn, drove redistributive policies benefiting poorer areas.⁷

A comparable situation was observed in Venezuela’s *consejos comunales* (community councils) during the 2000s (Hetland, 2014), when people were recruited into assemblies, in part, due to their sympathies for the ruling party. In other examples of participatory assemblies, party mobilization has also been relevant, though in a less biased form. In the Spanish Basque Country, political parties encourage their supporters to take part in the meetings and citizen boards of *concejos abiertos* (town meetings), though they have no formal role in these institutions (García-Espín, 2021).

In other contexts, more egalitarian participation has come from associations and social movements taking a more active role. In Bologna, Italy, in the late 1970s, local politics was deeply divided: on one side, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its left-wing allies and, on the other, the Christian Democracy party and its coalition of Church-based and charity organizations. When the first participatory councils and district assemblies were created, labor unions, cultural groups, neighborhood associations and youth organizations started to take part, either to support or to challenge local policies. The process not only drew in PCI’s traditional allies but also weak sympathizers and other left-wing groups, based on a common opposition to the conservative bloc (Navarro, 1999). The activation of the working-class and other popular sectors was, therefore, connected to this reticular mobilization of associations, following Gramsci’s idea of a popular “civil society.”

The use of mobilization strategies by political parties and associations seems to be fundamental to promoting inclusion in open assemblies and to overcoming the material and informational constraints that impact people’s participation. These organizations increase awareness, encourage their members and sympathizers to participate, distribute information, ask civic organizations to contact their associates and neighbors and use their privileged access to the media to disseminate the call. These strategies create an atmosphere that increases people’s perception that participation can be useful and, therefore, motivate involvement (presence). Accordingly, new expectations, direct contact by organizations and the climate of mobilization generates “biographical availability” (McAdam, 1986), even when material restrictions are difficult to surmount (Baiocchi, 2003b).

Fraser (1990) argues that this conjunctural activation of working-classes is essential to demonstrate that greater popular participation is viable and convenient and that people can have a prominent say in local politics. However, the importance of targeted mobilization shows that participatory spaces are quite dependent on left-wing parties, their strategies, political projects and allied associations. In addition, the empirical evidence suggests that higher levels of popular mobilization are usually ephemeral, circumscribed to short periods of time and sensitive to protest and electoral cycles (Hirschman, 2002). Therefore, the question of stability and the possibility of more sustained involvement (Bryan, 2010) still needs further investigation.

⁷Boulding and Wampler (2010) found that most Brazilian municipalities operating participatory budgeting did not achieve significant changes in social wellbeing, but only “small gains in combating the worst poverty”. This finding highlights the exceptional achievements in Porto Alegre.

Table 1. Frequently used inclusion tools

Purpose	Outcomes (enhanced...)	Specific tools
(1) Symbolic recognition measures	Voice Presence	Weighting on delegation bodies Quotas with a minimum number of seats Safe commissions Drawing lots of citizens to complement self-selection Multidisciplinary teams
(2) Administrative recognition measures	Voice Presence	Training public officials Intelligible procedures and information Centrality of participation in public agencies
(3) Covering gaps in information and skills	Voice	Meetings and conferences on the functioning of public administration Administrative support for design proposals Public speaking and debate courses Training for overcoming fear of public speaking
(4) New contacts	Presence	Trained facilitators with special knowledge of neighborhoods and sectorial problems Mapping of entities and meeting places Digital tools for voting and information
(5) Equal intervention in deliberations	Voice	Trained facilitators Accessible and amenable language Translators
(6) Engaging topics	Presence	Evaluating the interest of issues Considering people's manifest interests Selecting issues that have a mobilizing effect
(7) Material redistribution measures	Presence Voice	Free public transportation Paid work leaves in urgent situations Childcare support Social justice labels for proposals

Source: own elaboration.

Institutional design tools

Specialized studies have also focused on the “design choices” or institutional mechanisms that enhance the presence and voice of working-classes and economically disadvantaged sectors in the context of participatory spaces (Clark, 2018). Inclusion tools are defined as design measures and organizational procedures that broaden participation and create institutional incentives so that previously excluded citizens feel more eager to engage and voice their claims (Smith, 2009; Martínez-Palacios, 2017; García-Espín, 2024). In this respect, empirical research has identified a wide variety of tools that can be classified according to their purposes and effects. Table 1 provides a summary.

Firstly, inclusion tools can enhance the symbolic recognition in the context of assemblies or participatory processes. These measures can diversify the social class profile of participants and can improve their authority. In this respect, instruments like weighting participation on delegation bodies can reduce the number of votes certain groups need to become delegates or spokespersons. Hernández-Medina (2010), for example, found that quotas for participatory budgeting delegation bodies increased the involvement of delegates from such backgrounds (presence) and improved their sense of authority and value as well as making them feel more comfortable defending their proposals (voice). Setting quotas for a minimum number of seats allotted to certain groups (Isaac and Heller, 2003) and the creation of special boards or “safe commissions” can make people feel more secure when speaking (Meléndez and Martínez-Cosío, 2019). Multidisciplinary teams or boards with people from a variety of backgrounds (occupational or skill-based) can be also effective (García-Espín, 2024). These instruments increase the public recognition for collectives that have been historically disenfranchised. However, we know little about the social

legitimization of these measures, the perceptions of participants and whether they feel questioned or experience paternalism (Armstrong and Thompson, 2009).

Secondly, design tools intended to promote administrative recognition can be another form of symbolic empowerment that promote the voice of working-class people. On the one hand, frontline public officials can be trained to explain issues properly and to disseminate intelligible information (Martínez-Palacios, 2017). On the other hand, public agencies can be reorganized so that popular demands acquire greater centrality. An example of this was Porto Alegre’s “budget and planning office”, whose participatory budgeting process was positioned at the center of local public administration and above all municipal departments (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2020). The centrality of participatory structures created awareness and recognition of popular demands.

Thirdly, many institutions implement actions to increase the dissemination of skills, information and knowledge regarding administrative processes (Fung, 2001; Fung and Wright, 2003; Talpin, 2012). For example, in Bello Horizonte, Brazil, the *Paulo Freire Institute* for popular education was contracted to train participatory budgeting delegates at all territorial and sectorial levels (Cabannes and Lipietz, 2018). Along the same lines, in Basque town meetings, regional and local administrations provide informational, legal and administrative support to help assembly participants design projects, formulate proposals and meet legal requirements (García-Espín, 2024). Other examples include the provision of courses on public speaking and how to present proposals or demands to local administrations (Martínez-Palacios, 2017). These measures are essential to enhance voice.

Fourthly, the design of participatory institutions can include measures to make direct contact and consult with groups of citizens that are usually excluded from local government. In this respect, the use of digital tools for voting and information (Dajer, 2023),⁸ and the hiring of trained facilitators is a classic measure in assembly-based settings (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2020; Pape and Lerner, 2016; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023). Facilitators contact key associative figures in working-class neighborhoods (Matthews, 2001; De Graaf et al., 2015), develop campaigns, canvass and disseminate strategies through mass media, social networks and mailings. They use their knowledge of the field (neighborhoods or associative sectors) to make new contacts and stimulate involvement.

Fifthly, expert facilitation teams can also be decisive in boosting egalitarian exchanges in meetings, thereby helping people to develop their demands (voice). Facilitators have been described as “discursive stewards” (Escobar, 2019), responsible for mediating interventions from people who feel less comfortable with certain debating norms. They can use storytelling, accessible language, summarizing, paraphrasing, humor and time-outs as instruments to make conversations more engaging. In multilingual communities, participatory forums have also incorporated translators (Meléndez & Martínez-Cosío, 2019). These professionals can try to minimize the negative effects of cultural inequities, especially when assemblies involve experts and public officials who make discussions bureaucratic and technical (Collins, 2021). Facilitators can counterbalance this type of dominance, increasing the value of other forms of discourse (Black, 2008).

Sixthly, inclusion approaches usually aim to ensure the careful consideration of the issues submitted for deliberation to promote a broader composition of participants (presence). Scholars have argued that in cases of participatory budgeting (Pape and Lim, 2019) and in other local assemblies (Chhotray, 2004), the topics put forward for deliberation are frequently of little interest or relevance to people in economically disadvantaged areas or citizens from exploited groups. Chhotray maintains that some local development assemblies in India were not attractive for poor farmers and workers because land tenure was off the agenda. In contrast, Mansbridge (1983) showed that the composition of assemblies tended to be more balanced when the topics under

⁸As Dajer (2023) and Borge et al. (2023) observe, while digital tools do tend to increase the number of participants, it is not clear that they mobilize more people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

deliberation were those that affected working-class families, such as modifications to the public-school budget. While it may be difficult to determine which topics will engage citizens, they clearly play a key role in mobilizing or disincentivizing participation (Pape and Lim, 2019).

Finally, some inclusion tools focus on the distribution of material resources among participants and communities, including guarantees for economic redistribution to working-class and poorer areas.⁹ Though there is a scarcity of research on the distribution of material assets and its impacts on popular mobilization, there are cases of education assemblies in the USA (Nuamah, 2021) and participatory budgeting (Pape and Lerner, 2016) where, for example, free public transportation is made available. In Basque town meetings, board members have a legal right to paid work leave if they have to attend to administrative responsibilities during working hours (García-Espín, 2024). However, the most frequent material incentives are the establishment of “social justice labels” for proposals from poor communities. This type of tool favors the approval of such demands and gives them additional points in final ballots or decision-making (Isaac and Heller, 2003; Wampler, 2007; Talpin, 2012), contributing to urban economic redistribution. Social justice labels, as such, reinforce the mobilization strategies described in section 4.1.

In sum, design tools activate redistributive processes and transfer small proportions of symbolic and economic goods, making presence more appealing and voice participation more conducive. These tools work as incentives that can enhance participation and voice. Most studies have focused on symbolic goods such as information, training and public recognition, while material inputs such as work leave and social justice labels have received less attention. In addition, instruments such as hiring facilitators and giving participants support to navigate local bureaucracy have been proven to be useful for generating greater parity in meeting deliberations. However, sometimes such interventions do not question the dominant discursive norms, leaving technical and bureaucratic codes unchallenged (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). More research on countervailing measures, their capacity to erode elitist dynamics and midterm effects, would be welcome.

A cultural climate of popular mobilization

The final factor relates to the existence of a specific cultural climate that is critical to understanding why the involvement of popular classes increases at certain times. The creation of such a climate tends to be driven by the cultural and communicative strategies of social movements and organizations that broaden the political subject through debate on who has the right and the duty to take part in politics (Felicetti and Holdo, 2023). These strategies generally materialize in political campaigns, propaganda, communication activities in the media and events aimed at generating public discussion and new cultural representations. The development of this climate helps to open up participatory activities to previously sidelined popular classes, allowing them to engage in different political spaces, including those at state level.

In this sense, associations and collectives can promote discourses based on the ideal of equality and fairness through media campaigns, public statements and the promotion of discussions that disseminate non-elitist “cultural frames” (Gamson, 1992; Polletta, 2002). They can also conduct media campaigns that position politics as a non-exclusive space that popular sectors can (and should) occupy and dispute. This type of cultural atmosphere has an impact on local participatory institutions; it triggers a culture of participation (Bryan, 2010) that complements the organizational activity described in section 4.1 and section 4.2, as well as encouraging the activation of citizens from popular classes that feel called upon to raise their demands.

The research on Basque town meetings, mentioned earlier, illustrates how a cultural climate conducive to mobilization can lead to changes in political meaning and the incorporation of new subjects (García-Espín, 2021). During the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain

⁹The distinction between symbolic and material or economic goods is difficult to sustain theoretically but it is useful to distinguish resources such as time, availability and money from others such as prestige and symbolic value.

(1975–1982), young participants in rural town meetings began to create associations to promote a broader participatory subject in these assemblies. The aim was to include all adult residents, women, working-class people and other wage workers. Even though there had been no legal impediment to the participation of these groups, younger residents wanted to expand the dominant body of members, which was habitually composed of professionally qualified men and head-of-family farmers. Young residents took advantage of external political events and the cultural climate of mobilization – the political momentum after the Transition – to encourage a more plural composition of assemblies. This atmosphere encouraged many working-class citizens to become involved in the everyday work of rural town meetings.

Similarly, the civil rights mobilization during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States created a cultural climate that made black people from working-class and impoverished backgrounds feel compelled to take an active political role and participate in associations and protests (Piven and Cloward, 1979). This cultural environment meant that, in many local cases, administrations were obliged to create participatory institutions (citizen boards) dedicated to discussing welfare and housing measures with the new associations and popular leaders. This situation shaped more egalitarian policy discussions, at least temporarily and compared to the previous status quo.

It can be argued, therefore, that social movements can promote cultural frames that expand the meaning and breath of citizenship (Jiménez-Sánchez and García-Espín, 2023; Bua and Bussu, 2023; Felicetti and Holdo, 2023), suggesting that people from previously excluded sectors take a participatory stance. This cultural and symbolic atmosphere can also affect state-led and local participatory institutions, opening up the traditional body of participants and contributors. A vibrant political environment – based on more egalitarian discourses in the public sphere – has the capacity to trigger micro-processes of inclusion that create more egalitarian political spaces in terms of presence and voice. However, the strength of inclusion processes is highly dependent on external sociopolitical events and the broader political climate promoted by social movements and spread by the mass media; just as it can become more progressive, it can also draw back (Hirschman, 2002) or become more elitist. More research on the role of social movements and media would advance our knowledge of how egalitarian cultural frames are spread, become established or even reversed.

A future research agenda

The evidence reviewed for this article shows that it is possible to improve political inclusion through local participatory institutions, especially when comparing outcomes to earlier rates of participation (Hertting, 2023). In certain circumstances, working-class people and economically disadvantaged sectors find participatory institutions useful and they take part in greater numbers and with a more prominent voice. However, numerous studies also suggest that gains in political equality tend to be small and that structural change is much rarer (Baiocchi, 2003b; Isaac and Heller, 2003).

Based on the positive outcomes identified by the research, it is clear that a purely reproductionist diagnosis – participatory institutions can do no more than adapt to sociopolitical inequities – is problematic. At the same time, a transformative view is probably overly idealistic. Generally speaking, in capitalist-dominated local polities, achievements in popular inclusion have been limited and temporary. Nevertheless, the literature does suggest that there are still grounds to continue exploring the specific tools and conditions that encourage people from popular classes to take more prominent roles. My conclusion, as such, is that the glass is neither half full nor half empty. Rather, I argue that it is necessary to examine more thoroughly the specific conditions (factors) and mechanisms that lead to more egalitarian political processes for the working-classes and for those in precarious situations (Harting, 2023). Research based on the idea that participatory democracy can (and should) address inequities still represents a vibrant field with

much to interrogate (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2014). In this respect, more comparative research with larger sample sizes is needed to examine the hypothesis that democratic innovations can foster more egalitarian political processes, at least in terms of presence and voice. There are, however, other aspects of participatory equality that future studies should consider.

Firstly, most empirical work has studied participants' social positions on the basis of variables such as income and education, as is reflected throughout this paper. These variables frequently work as proxies for social class. I would suggest adding other social class categories to clarify the relationships between political, social and economic domination. Social class is also connected to resources such as free time, energy and cultural background as well as qualitative dimensions such as prestige, public recognition and self-perceptions of value and personal competence (Walsh et al., 2004; Lamont, 2009). Political participation is extremely sensitive to the skills that are valued in each historical moment and how these shape the dominant division of political labor. Thus, research that explores new class variables should prove illuminating because recent social transformations such as the devaluation of manual work in Western countries, the "proletarianization" of some service jobs (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002) and the growing associationism among working women, may have caused a significant shift in the body of participants from popular classes. Studies with large sample sizes, such as those conducted by Ganuza and Francés (2012) or Bryan (2010) and based on a broad range of class-related variables are key to this future research agenda. Also, the implications of different theoretical notions – inclusion, inclusiveness and parity – should be discussed more in-depth (Armstrong and Thompson, 2009).

There are also three identifiable blind spots in our knowledge of the factors that explain greater parity of participation. Firstly, when does it happen? Targeted mobilization seems to be fundamental. However, closer attention needs to be paid to the extent that mobilization by political parties and associations can be sustained over time or depend on electoral and protest cycles (Hirschman, 2002). By reducing the perception of barriers and increasing motivation and the attractiveness of involvement, these mobilizations and their associated strategies have been critical to growing social inclusion (presence) and more equality in deliberation (voice). However, how can these efforts be more durable and less dependent on peak moments of contention and polarization?

Secondly, there is still room for studies that explore institutional and organizational design from an egalitarian perspective. There is now an extensive catalog of inclusion instruments (tools) that can encourage the involvement of residents and shape deliberation dynamics. Section 4.2 has examined these tools. Institutional design is essential to the redistribution of symbolic goods (new information, skills, knowledge of public administration, public recognition and authority), though other material incentives such as paid work leave, reductions in working hours and childcare support have not been fully examined as instruments that can create more parity.

Thirdly, the cultural atmosphere is also relevant to broaden the political subject. Future research should also investigate the spread of egalitarian cultural frames and the role of social movements and mass media in creating a cultural climate that is conducive to participation. Protest actions can have a "pre-figurative character" (Jiménez-Sánchez and García-Espín, 2023) that may have an influence on conceptions of politics, the political subject and the knowledge of repertoires of action. Mass media also play a role in communicating an image of local politics as a space for all or a restricted arena. Media discourses and images feed the democratic culture that ultimately structure participatory events. Therefore, future research should explore these agents and their capacities to create a more egalitarian and mobilizing cultural environment.

There are two additional concerns that future studies should reflect on: the long-term effects of inclusive participatory institutions and their combination with other redistributive policies, in the context of social justice approaches. Can inclusive participatory spaces counterbalance the strict division of labor that leads people with professional qualifications and the middle-to-higher classes to dominate political decision-making? Are egalitarian participatory institutions the equivalent of midterm political levelers? What are the long-term impacts on political culture?

Some data suggests that working-class people living in cities with an ambitious participatory program are more trusting of their neighbors’ capacities to contribute to local processes (García-Espín, 2022). Therefore, it is legitimate to inquire if participatory institutions can create midterm effects on the political culture or if, in the end, they are merely innocuous.

It is clear, however, that pro-egalitarian participatory projects do not end everyday barriers to involvement, such as long working hours, rigid domestic responsibilities, lack of free time and lack of integration into community networks (Parvin, 2021). Forthcoming studies should examine the impact of parallel redistributive and production measures such as labor regulations, reductions of worktime, measures aimed at work-life balance and other socioeconomic policies that make participation more accessible (Fraser, 1990). Is it possible to theorize and reconstruct the links between social-structural change and community participation? Can we identify cases that contribute to this theoretical endeavor?

The research agenda on participatory institutions, social equality and enhancing contexts is now ample and varied. However, there is much to consider just by looking beyond the two closed theoretical poles of pure reproductionism or naive transformativism. This paper has argued that scholars and practitioners cannot just assume that political inequities are there, as if they were impossible to challenge, even though empirical results suggest a cautious approach is necessary.

This paper has identified several conditions and enabling tools that connect participatory democracy to improvements in equality of participation. The mobilization of associations, political parties and social movements are crucial factors, as is the promotion of egalitarian cultural frames and design choices. These conditions are manifest in numerous examples and countries across the world, giving them significant credibility and empirical foundation. However, much more work is needed to better understand the relationships between social class structures, political domination and the impact of the projects that participatory democracy inspires.

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