

# Changing the *status quo* through democratic innovations? Three paradoxes from the Iberian Peninsula

Mudando o *status quo* por meio de inovações democráticas? Três paradoxos da Península Ibérica

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## Abstract

Citizen distrust in mainstream politics has spurred the rise of new democratic processes for citizen participation and deliberation, known as democratic innovations. These innovations are believed to improve democracy by changing the *status quo*. This paper critically examines whether this goal is achieved by focusing on participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies in the Iberian Peninsula. Three paradoxes arise from our reflection, related to the role of elected officials, neutralization of policymaking, and evaluation of outcomes. These paradoxes suggest the need for further studies on how democratic innovations can change the *status quo* and contribute to democratizing our democracies.

**Keywords:** democratic innovations; democracy; status quo; Portugal; Spain.

## Resumo

A desconfiança dos cidadãos nas instituições democráticas tem suscitado preocupações bem como práticas inovadoras em todo o mundo. As Inovações Democráticas (IDs), como o Orçamento Participativo (OP) e as assembleias de cidadãos (ACs), podem catalisar mudanças que, para alguns académicos, desafiam o *status quo*. Este artigo analisa a Península Ibérica, revelando três paradoxos sobre a mudança. Em primeiro lugar, embora as IDs tenham como objetivo mudar o sistema representativo, continuam ligadas aos políticos eleitos. Em segundo lugar, embora narradas como neutras perante o processo de definição de políticas públicas, persistem as lutas pelo poder e as negociações entre grupos de interesse. Em terceiro lugar, embora as organizações internacionais deem ênfase a técnicas replicáveis num processo de experimentação contínua, o conhecimento sobre os resultados das IDs continua limitado.

**Palavras-chave:** inovações democráticas; democracia; status quo; Portugal; Espanha.



## Introduction

Worldwide, the growth of citizen distrust towards politicians poses significant challenges to representative democracy. New concerns have been raised by scholars and international organisations regarding citizen attitudes and a global regression in various indicators. V-Dem's Democracy Report (2024) highlights that the level of democracy in 2023 has regressed to that of 1985, while Freedom House (2024) similarly warns of consecutive declines in global democracy over nearly two decades. There is general consensus on the range of political, institutional, economic, social, environmental, and technological challenges that have driven profound societal transformations worldwide. One of the most concerning outcomes, however, is the dramatic decrease in citizens' perception of democracy's ability to deliver on foundational practices (IDEA, 2023). In Europe, this situation has led to growing citizen dissatisfaction with the political *status quo* and an increasing belief that effective engagement is lacking in public decision-making (EIU, 2023). If democracy is expected to uphold foundational values and rights in member countries, the current state of affairs necessarily raises public concern.<sup>1</sup>

Smith (2021) recently argued that politicians are in a cul-de-sac due to political short-termism amidst growing challenges to democratic decision-making and the sequence of global crises, which have had an unprecedented impact on the legitimacy of elected representatives. Growing citizen mistrust has been fuelled by perceived inaction,

as well as the association of the political class with powerful interest groups, which appear to prevent them from making long-term decisions in favour of short-term gains. Among the most visible consequences, society is becoming polarised between those who defend the *status quo* and the escalation of capital accumulation, and those who advocate for greater citizen participation (Fung, 2020).

Participatory and deliberative practices have gained traction in scholarly debate over the last few decades, and the concept of "democratic innovations" (DIs) proposed by Smith (2009) has enabled a more consistent discussion of a wide range of cases. According to scholars, DIs aim to change the ways in which representative democracies function by complementing mainstream politics and addressing its deficits (Geissel, 2013; Warren, 2017). From this perspective, innovations are considered to improve representative democracy (Newton and Geissel, 2012), as they contribute to reinventing the role of citizens in democratic governance (Elstub and Escobar, 2019). From a more radical viewpoint, the change brought by DIs is believed to challenge the *status quo*. As Wright (2013) asserts, all people should have equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in democratic decision-making, beyond formal political equality. In fact, the author argues that "democracy needs to be empowered in ways which enable people to collectively control their common fate" (Wright, 2010, p. 13).

The potential of DIs to improve democracy and, for some scholars, to challenge the *status quo* allows us to examine their trajectories in the Iberian Peninsula. According

to recent evaluations, while Portugal and Spain experience significant electoral abstention, both maintain high scores on the standards of democratic governance, with the latter performing slightly better than the former (Democracy Index 2023). Interestingly, however, Portugal outperforms Spain in the participatory component assessed by the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem, 2024), whereas Spain achieves a higher rating in the deliberative component. Regarding free participation in civic spaces, the CIVICUS Monitor rates Portugal higher than Spain, citing stronger civic freedoms, particularly evident in recent street protests against institutional racism and global conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Schlipphak and colleagues (2024) recently provided additional insights to understand citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards democracy. While both countries share a common conception of liberal democracy – ensuring, among other things, freedom of speech and pluralism in society – Portugal leans towards a socialist interpretation, expecting democracy to reduce poverty rates and provide support for disadvantaged groups.

This data aligns with the broader picture of democratic innovations (DIs) in the Iberian Peninsula, as we will discuss further below. Both countries have been at the forefront of disseminating new democratic practices over the past couple of decades. Following the so-called third wave of democratisation in Europe during the mid-1970s (Huntington, 1991), the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes paved the way for DIs on a democratic foundation that displays both similarities and differences in various aspects (Fishman,

2011). A critical examination of DIs can deepen our understanding of their contribution to enhancing democracy by transforming representative democracy.

Our aim is to offer a critical perspective on the debate surrounding DIs. However, we do not intend to disparage DIs or undermine their contributions in the two countries. By presenting a critical account of how the potential of DIs to challenge the *status quo* has been harnessed, we integrate international and contextual perspectives to discuss three emerging paradoxes that drive changes in electoral politics, policymaking, and outcomes. To this end, we first outline our theoretical and conceptual framework, including critical reflections on the links between democracy and DIs. In subsequent sections, we examine the dissemination of DIs in the Iberian Peninsula, focusing on their significance, with particular attention to Participatory Budgets and Citizens' Assemblies. By using the Iberian Peninsula as our empirical lens, we aim to provide a broader reflection on the three emerging paradoxes and encourage further debate on DIs in this region and beyond.

## Theoretical framework: democratic innovations

Since the aftermath of the Second World War, citizen participation beyond the ballot box has been a contentious issue in scholarly debate. Schumpeter (1976) and his successors have defended an elitist, or thin, approach

to democracy, arguing that people are essentially driven by self-interest rather than the interests of the community. Therefore, people would prefer a “stealth democracy” as their willingness to participate is conditioned by perceptions of corruption within the representative system (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2004). Notwithstanding this, the election of representatives is regarded as the primary mechanism for ensuring low levels of social conflict and the stability of democratic systems (Sartori, 1987).

In contrast, participatory democrats have argued that people have an interest in engaging with democratic life beyond electoral moments, thus pursuing what Barber defined as “strong democracy” (1984). The concept of citizen participation took centre stage in the late 1960s, as framed by the seminal works of Arnstein (1969) and Pateman (1970), to highlight the inclusion of unheard voices. Viewing participation by those affected by the exercise of power as foundational to democracy (Dahl, 1989), participatory processes should enable underrepresented groups to influence policy and decision-making through the promotion of equality and open engagement (O’Flynn, 2019).

The proliferation of participatory practices soon intersected with another theoretical debate, which placed deliberative democracy at its core. Based on principles of coercion-free communication and free discussion among participants (Habermas, 1992), scholars contend that deliberative democracy is both a normative theory and a political project (Curato et al.,

2019). The operationalisation of deliberative principles has been realised through processes designed to enhance learning, foster opinion change, and develop deliberative skills. In fact, deliberation is seen as giving citizens the opportunity to cultivate thoughtfulness within settings of equality, inclusivity, and mutual respect in democratic systems (Bächtiger and Goldberg, 2020).

Participatory and deliberative democracy thus stand in contrast to minimal conceptions that reduce democracy to competitive arrangements (Schumpeter, 1976). While participatory democracy emphasises the importance of a politically active citizenry and the need to transform power structures, deliberative democracy offers a normative framework for legitimate decision-making based on human rationality (O’Flynn, 2019). Both approaches seek to reform traditional representative institutions by incorporating new voices into policymaking and decision-making processes. As Fishman (2016) observes, inclusionary practices enable marginalised groups to be heard and hold elites accountable, ultimately serving to “deepen democracy and bring it closer to the goal of political equality among citizens” (*ibid.*, p. 304).

The advancement of participatory and deliberative practices has led scholars to describe them as “democratic innovations” (DIs). Smith (2005) identified DIs in a report on fifty-seven practices aimed at addressing the disconnect between the governed and governors in Britain, as well as in other established democracies. Later, Smith (2009) provided a more structured

definition, describing DIs as “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (ibid., p. 1). More recently, Elstub and Escobar (2019) argued that DIs also include processes “new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence” (ibid., p. 11).

Beauvais and Warren (2019) have underscored the potential of DIs to supplement rather than replace democratic institutions outside electoral arrangements. By doing so, DIs can address the malaise of democracy (Newton and Geissel, 2012) by tackling the growing disengagement from traditional avenues of political participation (Elstub et al., 2021). Warren (2017) echoes this point, noting that democratic deficits – gaps between democratic ideals and political system performance – must be addressed through innovative arrangements. Such deficits highlight issues such as empowering inclusion, fostering deliberative opinion-formation, and enabling collective decision-making. Through DIs, citizens can build political trust and engagement, which, in turn, enhances the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Dryzek and Hendriks, 2020).

On a more radical note, DIs have the potential to transform power relations and challenge the *status quo* by uniting progressive ideals against the injustices of capitalism (Wright, 2013). Cumulative effects arise from the empowerment of activists and communities

with equal access to collective decision-making on matters of public interest in collaboration with the state (Wright, 2010). The increase in social power through democratised power relations can erode dominant power structures and counteract human oppression. As Wright emphasises, DIs represent Real Utopias as long as they can transcend capitalism through an imagination-driven pragmatism capable of redesigning social institutions. “What can be worked out are the core organising principles of alternatives to existing institutions, the principles that would guide the pragmatic trial-and-error task of institution-building” (Wright, 2010, p. 6).

In this vein, along with those who emphasise governance-driven approaches (Warren and Mansbridge, 2013), scholars have highlighted the leading role of organised civil society in innovating democracy. According to della Porta and Felicetti (2022), civil society organisations and progressive movements are promoting experimental approaches, often involving institutional actors in their implementation and/or in policy uptake. Other scholars argue that social movements play a crucial role in shaping the scope of participation and deliberation (Elstub et al., 2021) and in ensuring political commitment by exerting pressure on democratic institutions (Mulvad et al., 2021). Thus, DIs demonstrate their capacity to foster the sharing of knowledge and skills between citizens and the state from the bottom-up, thereby creating opportunities to incorporate radical democratic demands into institutional spaces of participation.

## Critical accounts of democratic innovations

Alongside enthusiasm for their potential, DIs are not immune to criticism. The early stages of participatory budgeting (PB), one of the most well-known democratic innovations worldwide, showcased the belief that citizen empowerment could change the status quo of existing democratic systems. Championed by the Workers' Party in Brazil, PBs were a central component of the Real Utopias Project at the turn of the century, placing social justice at the heart of institutional reforms (Fung and Wright, 2003; Avritzer, 2006). Nevertheless, several concerns arose as international organisations began to intercept and endorse the potential of this democratic innovation to support new models of governance in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dagnino, 2004). Criticism converged around the attempt to foster citizen trust in political institutions while disregarding democratic deficits and instead emphasising the need to address widespread electoral disaffection. As Ganuza and Baiocchi (2012) observed, PBs have often fallen short of promoting real social mobilisation, institutional innovation, and active citizen involvement. As a result, they have lagged behind their goals of change and demonstrated significant malleability to political forces.

While international organisations such as the OECD (2001) and the European Commission (EC, 2001) argued that democratic institutions depended on increasing degrees of active involvement from the governed,

citizen contributions have often been diluted among market and not-for-profit stakeholders (Bailey and Pill, 2011). Several scholars have warned that behind the banners of citizen participation lay attempts to obscure private interests (Hoppe, 2011) and reduce decision-makers' accountability (Hajer, 2003). Concerns have also been raised about the manipulation of participatory processes by political and economic elites seeking to compensate for the inadequacies of the global market (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). As exemplified by Falanga (2018), alter-globalist voices and activists have called for substantive reform of mainstream politics, yet the past few decades have witnessed a shift that raises concerns about the co-optation of progressive narratives by global actors.

Similarly, the spread of deliberative processes has attracted both scholarly interest and scepticism. In recent years, a "new deliberative wave" has been celebrated by the OECD (2020) amidst the proliferation of practices, particularly citizens' assemblies (CAs). As Elstub and colleagues (2021) note, "citizens' assemblies tend to have a 'larger' number of participants (typically 100), a 'longer' duration, and be connected, in some tangible way, to established political institutions" (ibid., p. 2). This type of mini-public is increasingly associated with public debates on the climate and ecological crises (Dryzek, 2022). By bringing together diverse voices, CAs are believed to facilitate the consideration of long-term and legitimate solutions while representing the interests of those on the margins of decision-making (Dryzek, 2010).

However, while deliberative mini-publics have been praised as Real Utopias, following PBs (Gastil and Wright, 2018), radical democrats have long challenged the foundational idea that citizens can formulate reasoned opinions and arguments based on personal values, which would provide neutral grounds for democratic development (Mouffe, 2000). Habermasian ideals are criticised for being incapable of addressing everyday politics (Shapiro, 2017) and for placing consensus at the centre of political concerns, thereby suppressing conflict and perpetuating dominant views (Curato et al., 2019). Additional criticisms relate to the extent of inclusion within CAs and whether they tend to over-represent specific social groups, such as highly educated and already politically engaged individuals (Pilet Jean-Benoît et al., 2022). Similar to PBs, further concerns arise regarding the power citizens have to directly influence policy or law, as CAs typically adopt consultative approaches and often operate within short timeframes (Williamson and Barrat, 2022). This can exacerbate technocratic tendencies and “cherry-picking” practices. The circulation of global policy scripts further intensifies concerns about the role of international organisations (Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012; Voß and Amelung, 2016). Even deliberative democrats acknowledge that the field’s success may have come at the expense of its critical edge (Ercan and Dryzek, 2015).

Given the contrast between the normative aspirations of DIs and the criticisms arising from their implementation, we present below our perspective on the Iberian Peninsula.

## Democratic innovations in Portugal and Spain

At the beginning of the 21st century, Portugal and Spain embarked on their journey with participatory budgeting (PB), which quickly became one of the most widespread practices in the region. More recently, deliberative mini-publics have also gained traction, promoting ideas of high-quality communication and opinion change within relatively small samples of citizens. In Spain, Citizens’ Assemblies (CAs) have been implemented at local and regional levels, particularly in Euskadi and Catalunya. In contrast, Portugal has seen more limited adoption, with the Lisbon city council taking the lead in formalising this type of democratic innovation. This was followed by the more recent climate assembly held in 2024 in Vila Franca de Xira, a small city within the metropolitan area of Lisbon.

### Democratic innovations in Portugal

After four decades of authoritarian rule, Portugal inaugurated the “third wave of democratisation” in Europe in 1974 (Huntington, 1991). The “Carnation Revolution” was a bloodless military coup supported by an unprecedented mass mobilisation that opposed the authoritarian regime and its colonialist policies (Varela et al., 2015). The so-called “Ongoing Revolutionary Process” (PREC) was established by the Armed Forces



Movement (“Movimento das Forças Armadas”, MFA) with the assistance of communist groups until November 1975, when a counter-coup established a Western liberal democracy (Costa Pinto, 2006). During the PREC, a participatory ethos in society underpinned emblematic practices of participation, ranging from neighbourhood commissions delivering welfare services to housing occupations by poorly housed people, from new labour unions to the self-management of factories (Lima Santos et al., 1976). Movements took to the streets and demanded democratic rights that had long been repressed, instilling new enthusiasm for democratic participation (Ramos Pinto, 2013).

As the PREC came to an end, the new Constitution, issued in 1976, included an explicit reference to representative, semi-direct, and participatory democracy.<sup>3</sup> Some laws have been issued to promote citizen participation and, although there is no legal obligation, the country serves as an example of efforts to foster participatory practices against a significant decline in political engagement since the 1980s (Costa Pinto et al., 2013; Fishman and Cabral, 2016). According to Magalhães (2005), participation beyond the ballot box has been scarcely utilised, contrasting with the levels of mass mobilisation during the democratic transition. Socio-economic cleavages are frequently cited as a key explanatory factor, with citizens from poorer backgrounds tending to participate less (Cancela and Magalhães, 2020). These cleavages particularly affect undereducated individuals, compounded

by low wages and/or high unemployment, especially among the youth (Sloam, 2016), though ratings have improved in recent years (Schlipphak et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, Portugal has experimented with DIs in an attempt to open democratic governance to civil society (OECD, 2023), with the dissemination of PBs serving as a case in point, as illustrated by Falanga and Lüchmann (2020). Inspired by Brazilian PBs, the first PBs were introduced in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area in the early 2000s, historically aligning with goals of good governance and, in particular, the recovery of citizen trust in democratic institutions and elected officials. As Bogo and Falanga (2024) recently noted, four main historical stages can be identified: the first dominated by the influence of Brazilian practices, early supported by the communist party; the second marked by the primacy of co-productive approaches pioneered by the Lisbon city council; the third characterised by PB’s expansion across the country; and the fourth highlighting territorial and thematic diversification. Notably, the high number of PBs implemented by local authorities has been complemented by attempts to scale innovations across multiple levels of governance.

Framed as instruments of good governance, decision-makers from both, left and right, wing political parties have been drawn to the potential of PBs. However, according to Falanga (2018), the political all-encompassing ethos of these practices has exhibited trends of depoliticisation, confirming



limited impact on state reforms. Allegretti and Dias (2019) similarly argue that most PBs have been one-off practices with limited influence on the Portuguese political landscape. A heavy reliance on political will and electoral cycles has undermined the robustness of PBs, rendering them a volatile practice (Alves and Allegretti, 2012). Another critical feature of Portuguese PBs has been the withdrawal of self-organised civil society, echoing early findings from Southern Europe on the detachment of movements from these processes (Font et al., 2014). In light of these challenges, the outbreak of the pandemic has had meaningful and still unpredictable effects on PBs. The transition from in-person to online modes of participation, combined with limited adaptation within public administration during the early stages of the pandemic, reduced their relevance in the country (Falanga and Allegretti, 2021), which still lags behind the records of the mid-2010s.

In Lisbon, the discontinuation of the PB programme by the new centre-right executive elected in 2021, following nearly 15 years of centre-left governance, was succeeded by the launch of the country's first-ever CA promoted by a public authority. At the time of writing, the city council has facilitated three CAs, with randomised samples of around 50 citizens. Each edition has addressed distinct political issues, including climate change in 2022, the "15-minute city" model in 2023, and the local welfare state in 2024.<sup>4</sup> While we have not found information about other CAs of this nature in the country, an exception is the recent local CA

focused on the climate and ecological crisis in the small city of Vila Franca de Xira, within the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon. This CA followed a similar structure to the Lisbon model, with around 50 citizens recruited to deliberate over a two-day session.<sup>5</sup>

## Democratic innovations in Spain

Like Portugal, Spain underwent a political transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime in the mid-1970s. Local political participation was championed by progressive political parties as a hallmark of this new historical phase. The 1978 Constitution and the 1985 regulatory frameworks for local governance reflected the renewed participatory ethos in the country. As early as 1979, Cordoba, in southern Spain, approved the first-ever local regulation for citizen participation under the communist party's governance. Urban associations and advisory councils established there have since served as models for other Spanish cities (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023). Participatory principles and mechanisms have spread across multiple levels of governance over the past decades, although predominantly at the local level. More recently, participatory and deliberative processes have also emerged at regional and national levels, such as the national citizens' assembly (CA) on the climate crisis and the regional participatory budgeting (PB) initiative in Valencia, implemented between 2021 and 2023.

DIs in Spain have sought to strengthen the connection between local politics and mainstream governance by creating new public spaces for citizen voices to gain legitimacy in policymaking and decision-making. Advisory Councils proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s as political parties sought broader support from civil society. In this context, local associations were viewed as complementary to electoral mechanisms, addressing governance challenges while facilitating citizen access to government (Navarro, 1999). However, scholars observed that the connections between these associations and decision-making processes became increasingly tenuous (Blanco, 2009; Sarasa and Guiu, 2001). Civil servants also noted that associations were no longer the ideal channel for linking governments with civil society (Alguacil, 2003). As a result, new participatory mechanisms emerged in the past two decades. Like Portugal, Spain introduced its first PBs in the early 2000s, which garnered interest among politicians and practitioners while sparking conflicts between associations and administrations (Ganuza et al., 2014). PBs, which allowed citizens to allocate a portion of public budgets, were seen as bridging the gap left by associations between administrations and broader society. They were also widely regarded as more transparent decision-making tools, offering potential to revitalise politics in the country (Aguilar, 2004).

In contrast to Advisory Councils, which adopt consultative approaches, PBs have been perceived as a tangible means to curb clientelism and patronage in public debate and

associations (Moruno, 2003; Aguilar, 2004). However, criticisms have also arisen. Simplified procedures and the increased use of digital solutions are believed to have diminished PBs' influence on public budgets (Mérida, 2022; Martínez Wilfred, 2023; Francés et al., 2024). Scholars have warned that PBs' capacity to impact public budgets has declined significantly and is now largely insignificant (Ganuza and Francés, 2012). Consequently, doubts persist about whether PBs can still transform political relationships (Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017).

Today, Spain's participatory landscape features Advisory Councils across all levels, while PBs remain prominent, particularly at the local level. Barcelona leads in Advisory Councils compared to cities like Madrid (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023). Municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants often implement Advisory Councils backed by hierarchical structures that adopt consultative approaches, leaving their political influence ambiguous (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023). Meanwhile, digital platforms expanded significantly in municipal governments between 2015 and 2019 (Mérida, 2022). Unlike Portugal, Spain has increasingly invested in the digitalisation of DIs. The well-known platform Decidim in Barcelona has been a driving force behind the growth of digital PBs in Spanish municipalities (Borge et al., 2023), though it often limits public debates to small-scale infrastructure projects (Francés et al., 2024).

The dominant role of Advisory Councils stems from a political context of waning citizen participation, weakened connections between

citizens, associations, and governments, and the limited investment achieved through PBs. Deliberative processes in Spain have grown in parallel with the global spread of deliberative mini-publics (OECD, 2020) and the indignados movement's hacker activism (Ganuza and Ramos, 2024). Since 2021, when the first state-level CA on climate change took place – modelled on France's Convention Citoyenne – 11 CAs have been implemented at various territorial levels, primarily in Catalunya and Euskadi. The success of CAs in Spain should not be attributed solely to the international resonance of good practices. They also appeal to an alleged epistemic superiority, reflecting the country's strong deliberative democratic tradition (V-DEM, 2024). Participants are invited to deliberate and formulate recommendations based on empirical evidence, enhancing their understanding of contentious political issues. However, like PBs, CAs often lack robust links to mainstream politics, making it challenging to communicate outcomes to the broader public and establish an effective feedback loop.

## Changing the *status quo* in the Iberian Peninsula?

DIs are considered to offer a remedy to the current crisis and emerging deficits of democracy (Newton and Geissel, 2012; Geissel, 2013; Warren, 2017). By injecting new players and ideas into democratic governance, DIs

can enhance democratic values and structures (Smith, 2009; Elstub and Escobar, 2019). Some scholars take a more radical view, arguing that DIs have the potential to alter the *status quo* (Wright, 2010; 2012). Deepening democracy, and potentially changing it, encapsulates the main goal of DIs. However, understanding the existing *status quo* is critical. In this context, we examine DIs in Portugal and Spain, developing our argument around three emerging paradoxes, which are explored in the following sections.

At the outset, the two neighbouring countries share both similarities and differences, set against the relatively short time since the establishment of their democratic regimes in the mid-1970s (Costa Lobo et al., 2016). Key differences emerge in the manner of their transitions from authoritarianism. Portugal's transition relied on the exceptional convergence of military forces and mass mobilisation, culminating in the unprecedented "revolutionary" moment for citizen engagement in the late 1970s. While democracy was being actively shaped both on the streets and within institutions, the establishment of a Western liberal democracy ultimately solidified Portuguese democracy, even as political participation rates saw a decline (Costa Pinto, 2006). In Spain, the transition to democracy was more negotiation-based, occurring through the "ruptura pactada" (agreed break), a process involving negotiations between elites and opposition forces (Costa Lobo et al., 2016).

As Fishman (2011) suggests, these differing paths to transition led to significant differences in democratic practices. On

one hand, Portugal has shown a stronger commitment to deepening democracy, linked to the inclusionary ethos of its social revolution. Fishman highlights the role today of "powerless actors" in shaping the country's political agenda and influencing some policy-making processes (Fishman, 2011: 234). Interestingly, data on Portugal indicate an inclination towards a socialist conception of democracy (Schlipphak et al., 2024), alongside a vibrant civic space and participatory values (V-DEM, 2024). In contrast, Spain's transition resulted from political negotiations among state actors, leading to less public recognition of marginal voices in the political arena. Data on Spain shows higher ratings for democratic governance and deliberation (EIU, 2023; V-DEM, 2024), with the country acknowledged as a solid liberal democracy, though it fares less well in fostering citizens' capacity for free participation.

It is in this context that DIs have flourished in both countries. Participatory budgeting (PB) practices emerged in the early 2000s, inspired by Brazil and the World Social Forums. In Portugal, the number of such initiatives peaked in subsequent years, reflecting strong participatory values, but declined after the pandemic (Falanga and LÜchmann, 2020; Bogo and Falanga, 2023). In contrast, local PBs continue to be a trend in Spain (Francés et al., 2024), despite criticisms about their limited impact on public administrations and policymaking. The recent growth of citizens' assemblies (CAs) in OECD countries has had different effects in the Iberian Peninsula. While

Portugal lags behind the international pace of experimentation (Falanga, 2023), Spain has embraced CAs as multi-level practices across local, regional, and national levels. Much like PBs, CAs aim to transform the political system and improve democracy through the inclusion of citizens in decision-making (Smith, 2009).

While PBs originated in the Global South, addressing power structures through redistributive politics (Arnstein, 1969; Pateman, 1970), mini-publics have emerged from the Global North with an emphasis on reaching consensus around contentious political issues (Dryzek and Hendricks, 2020; Elstub et al., 2021). This aligns with Fishman's (2011) view of the legacy of Portugal's social revolution, which may foster a stronger inclination to include the voices of the powerless and increase the permeability of institutional power holders to their claims – principles central to PBs (Fung and Wright, 2003; Avritzer, 2006). For mini-publics, Spain's commitment to deliberative democracy, fuelled by the indignados movement (Nez and Ganuza, 2018; Flesher Fominaya and Feenstra, 2023; Ganuza and Ramos, 2024), may explain the higher diffusion of CAs there compared to Portugal. Nonetheless, Spain continues to host a greater number of PBs, even as Portugal had higher ratings in the 2010s.

An in-depth analysis of the role of DIs is thus necessary to assess their impact in both countries. The following sections will critically explore whether these democratic innovations have influenced electoral politics, policymaking, and tangible outcomes.

### First paradox: democratic innovations and electoral politics

The first paradox arises from the change in the status quo concerning electoral politics. While there is a tendency among elected officials and scholars to present innovations as solutions to the deficits of representative democracy (Warren, 2017), the idea of putting democracy on hold and fixing problems through participatory and deliberative practices is misleading. In Portugal, scholars have noted that PBs heavily rely on political will and, as a result, electoral cycles have made them volatile practices (Alves and Allegretti, 2012). A similar trend has been found in Spain (Font and Blanco, 2005; Francés et al., 2024; Nebot and Pires, 2021). Although both countries show solid democratic governance, people's distrust in democratic institutions makes it unlikely for DIs to reverse the situation from "outside" the system. In fact, DIs heavily depend on electoral cycles and on how electoral politics can utilise them.

We believe that as long as DIs are presented as practices emerging from outside, and as long as they are narrated as all-encompassing solutions to specific socio-political conditions, little change can occur in electoral politics. PBs and CAs are necessarily intertwined with, if not controlled by, legitimately elected political representatives. If DIs are expected to change politics within representative democratic systems, democracy – with its strengths and weaknesses – should not be seen as a standalone. PBs and CAs are

part of political party competition, and by acknowledging their dependency rather than pretending their autonomy, efforts should be made to relieve political party pressures in favour of a solid commitment to embed and regulate these practices within public institutions. Otherwise, and here lies the first paradox, the risk is that by claiming change, DIs leave democratic deficits and idiosyncrasies untouched, thus becoming a catch-all, redolent call for the status quo (Oleart, 2024).

### Second paradox: democratic innovations and policymaking

The second paradox is connected to changes in policymaking. The historical shift towards goals of good governance in the early 2000s has made DIs particularly inclined to incorporate the narrative of a neutral terrain for the dialectic between public powers and emerging counterpowers (Fung and Wright, 2003). In some cases, emphasis on citizen participation was purposely framed as neutral to keep political forces at the margins of citizens' contributions through different arrangements (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Hajer, 2003). By highlighting the need to incorporate contestation (Mouffe, 2000), the ongoing reflection on whether organised civil society can play a role in defining new and disruptive political agendas within DIs is key to understanding the potential for change (della Porta and Felicetti, 2022). Regarding deliberative mini-publics, the support provided by grassroots groups and movements is seen

as a symptom of an ongoing critical reflection on the potential role that deliberation can play with organised civil society (Smith, 2021; Dryzek, 2022).

The emphasis on recovering citizen trust in political institutions in Portugal has fuelled the idea of citizen participation and deliberation through neutral engines (Falanga, 2018). In Spain, scholars have criticised the ways PBs' structures have not only been simplified to be more easily adapted to different contexts, but also distanced from centres of political power (Ganuza and Francés, 2012; Baiocchi and Ganuza, 2017). By and large, attempts to separate the administrative sphere from DIs have been largely documented as disastrous: large planning strategies have been sidelined for being considered too difficult to implement, which has downgraded DIs to mere tools of (non) political governance. Therefore, this second paradox emerges from purposefully decoupling DIs from state reforms, which narrows their scope to single and siloed practices, maintains DIs at the margin of policymaking processes, and reduces their potential for change. As Leal (2010) put it, "[...] once purged of all the threatening elements, participation could be re-engineered as an instrument that could play a role within the status quo, rather than one that defied it" (ibidem, 95).

### Third paradox: democratic innovations and results

The third paradox regards the change pursued by DIs in achieving substantive results. The global success of DIs has been built on the circulation of new principles and the reproduction of arrangements often supported by toolkits, roadmaps, and guidelines,

fuelled by a sort of experimentation mantra. However, scholars warn that success can come at a high price, as the risks of losing the potential for democratisation are just around the corner (de Sousa Santos, 1998). The spread and standardisation of practices has overlooked the necessity of a solid feedback loop from institutions by giving the stage to one-off practices that have often left political problems and structural inequalities untouched (OECD, 2023). From a critical perspective, the spread of all-inclusive packs with specific recommendations on their implementation has been one of the most impactful neoliberal strategies in this domain (Chavez, 2008).

The expansion of both PBs and CAs worldwide, and in the Iberian Peninsula, has rapidly followed the international conversion of emancipatory practices into role models (Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012; Voß and Amelung, 2016). The consequences have affected, among other things, a clear understanding of DIs' results. In Portugal, several PBs are publicly charged with unfulfilled promises, and decreasing interest in these practices seems to be the legacy of a political culture that has lagged in accountability in this realm (Falanga, 2018). In Spain, scholars have long cautioned about political agents and elites filtering and cherry-picking the outcomes of participatory processes (Font et al., 2018). The distance of DIs from the day-to-day work of elected and public officials has generated a growing gap between what citizens propose and what the administration is able or willing to execute. In a similar vein, the epistemic capacity of those who participate in CAs is often discredited, and the quality of proposals is publicly criticised (Ganuza et al., 2014). The maintenance of large extents of political discretion reveals a

disproportionate attention paid to techniques at the expense of integration within democratic systems. This third paradox sheds light on the perpetuated call for standardised practices in a never-ending loop of experimentation that obscures DIs' results.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to offer an overview of DIs' contribution to changing the *status quo*, focusing on PBs and CAs in the Iberian Peninsula. In the last few decades, the two countries have been acknowledged for experimenting with democratic innovations, particularly with the growth of PBs since the early 2000s and the recent global wave of CAs, especially evident in Spain. Inspired by Wright's evocative call for Real Utopias to advance alternatives to the status quo, we discuss three emerging paradoxes.

If the *status quo* refers to the competitive rules of electoral politics, change is likely to destabilise the regime, potentially undermining visions of democratic improvement (Newton and Geissel, 2012). A critical look at change reveals, however, that DIs maintain substantive degrees of control from elected representatives, which contrasts with narratives of DIs as outsiders to the political party system. Therefore, the first emerging paradox refers to the dependency of DIs on electoral politics: while presenting them as outsiders to political party competition, DIs maintain a strong relationship with the vicissitudes of elected representatives. A second meaning that might be attached to the *status quo* is more related to democratic policymaking and governance more broadly. If

change is expected to unleash new democratic functioning, a critical analysis should not underestimate the strong linkages between DIs and multiple actors. This vision contrasts with ideas of DIs as neutral terrains for participation and rather brings back the vision of politicised practices that rely on struggles for power. Therefore, the second paradox engenders the neutralisation of the political dialectic within DIs in favour of a narrowed scope within policymaking, as documented by scholars since the global expansion of good governance goals at the expense of social justice-oriented practices. A third way to understand the *status quo* concerns the results of DIs. Asking how DIs develop their results against what seems a never-ending process of experimentation offers little evidence on the capacity to deliver democratic outputs. Therefore, the third paradox concerns the gold rush to international framings that reproduce a disproportionate attention to inward-looking approaches to DIs, as opposed to a realistic assessment of their results within democratic systems.

These three paradoxes build on the scholarly debate on DIs and do not intend to disparage these practices in Portugal and Spain. Rather, we believe that a critical discussion of conceptions of the *status quo* that are expected to be addressed and changed through DIs is a contribution to understanding how to deepen democracy. However, this paper has its own limitations, which can hopefully be overcome in future investigations. In terms of theory, further progress is needed on a more precise conceptual foundation of change through DIs in democratic regimes. Future research may unfold a comparative analysis of specific cases in both countries, as well as expand the geographical scope to other regions.



Finally, investigation into emerging relevant topics would certainly offer a more granular understanding of the current state of play. In particular, the different roles played by digital tools in the two countries may trace promising pathways of analysis about change.

We believe that DIs should be understood as necessarily and inherently expressions of the democracy we have, with its weaknesses and strengths, on the same

ground as electoral politics. If DIs are expected to contribute to solving our problems, there is no future in getting rid of politics and transforming potentially emancipatory practices into neutral and consensus-oriented engines. In contrast, DIs should be mainstreamed within the policymaking processes and given the chance to consolidate their role within our democracies.

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## Notes

- (1) More information on the Treaty on European Union available here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).
- (2) More information at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>.
- (3) The right to participation is grounded in the Portuguese Constitution, having been safeguarded throughout following constitutional revisions in 1982, 1989, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2005.
- (4) More information at: <https://cidadania.lisboa.pt/participacao/conselho-de-cidadaos>.
- (5) More information at: <https://www.cm-vfxira.pt/viver/ambiente/acao-climatica/assembleia-de-cidadaos-para-o-clima-2024>.

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