WHO GOVERNS IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY INSTITUTIONS?

A comparative study of the decision-making processes in Three European cases of participatory budgeting

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Abstract

Participatory democracy is in fashion not only in the political realm but in the academic sphere. Despite the growing literature on the topic, an often eluded question when it comes to studying the impact of citizen participation is the issue of power. The discourses of the promoters of participatory institutions on citizens' empowerment and the deepening of democracy are not sufficient to assess who governs these participatory devices. Through an analysis of three cases of participatory budgeting institutions in European cities, the paper enters the black box of participatory decision-making processes. I argue that power relationships in these local bodies are established along three decisive aspects, at the different stages of the decisional cycle: procedures, framing of the discussions and implementation of the decisions. In each of these stages, the influence of elected representatives over decision-making appears overwhelming. I nevertheless conclude that citizens far from being apathetic are both active in the production of their dispossession and in setting up counter-veiling strategies to increase their influence over the decision-making processes. A complex picture is thus drawn of the distribution of power in European participatory institutions.

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Introduction

Participation is on everyone's lips. Politicians, public officials, association leaders, but also a growing number of political scientists praise and push forward the increasing participation of "lay citizens" and civil society in the discussion and production of public policies. Political participation can no longer be reduced to voting in representative elections, it necessarily implies the discussion of the political stakes and aims of public policies. The development of this "participatory imperative" (Blondiaux & Sintomer 2002) is embodied in the creation of new public bodies open to lay citizens and members of civil society organizations. This paper focuses on a specific type of participatory institution at the local level, namely the participatory budgets set up by a growing number of municipalities in Europe. Through the organization of neighbourhood and city assemblies, citizens are invited to deliberate on projects aimed at enhancing the community's welfare. Even if face-to-face political discussions by lay citizens are at the core of these local institutions, citizens not only talk in these public bodies, they also take binding decisions in the allocation of part of the municipal budget. It cannot be assumed from the outset however that decisions are directly taken by lay citizens as the promoters of participatory democracy assert; it has to be assessed empirically.

Most of the research on participatory budgeting (PB henceforth) has until now focused on Brazilian cases, and especially on the precursory example of the city of Porto Alegre. One of the main results – which played a considerable role in the diffusion and popularity of the experience – is that PB in Porto Alegre resulted in a wide "inversion of priorities" with a tremendous boom in terms of socio-economic development (Cabannes, 2003; Baiocchi, 2005). These crucial results were nevertheless nuanced by the evaluation of the power relationships within Brazilian PB assemblies: poor people participate little, speak less and have a smaller influence on decisions than middle-classes and especially the already mobilised actors of civil society (Abers, 2000; Gret and Sintomer, 2002; Nylen 2003). If PB was created in Brazil it soon crossed the ocean and arrived at the end of the 1990s in Europe, which counted about 50 experiences at the end of 2004 (Allegretti and Herzberg, 2005). Little research has until now been led on the application and effects of European PB experiences however. Analyses of French neighbourhood councils – that are relatively comparable – show that the same power mechanisms occur, with the monopoly over the speech taken by middle-classes and especially already politicised actors (Bacqué and Sintomer, 1999; Blondiaux and Lévêque, 1999). Even if little studies have been conducted on their effects, it seems clear already that no such "inversion of priorities" can be noted as in the Brazilian cases, the degree of empowerment of the European participatory institutions being more limited and the discussions being often centred on parochial issues. In a nutshell, much remain to be done to analyse rigorously the impact of the European experiences of participatory budgeting.

An often forgotten or eluded question in the scientific debates about participatory democracy is indeed the issue of power.[2] While local politicians praise the involvement of lay citizens in the making of public policies through discourses about empowerment or the deepening of democracy, it is not clear who governs these participatory devices. This appears all the more paradoxical since the study of power in political science began with research into local government decision-making processes (Dalh, 1961; Bachrach and Barratz, 1970). The use of these classical approaches should allow the decision-making processes of participatory institutions to be understood better. Combining these different approaches on power we ended up with different problematic aspects in the study of participatory bodies; mainly: (1) the problem of procedures, (2) the problem of framing, and (3) the problem of implementation. They will be illustrated through the analysis of three cases of European participatory budgeting, this paper offering an empirical inquiry into the decision-making processes of these local institutions. How far is power shared or reconfigured in participatory governance institutions? Does participation mean power redistribution among a larger range of actors at the local level? Does the inclusion of lay citizens in the decision-making processes of local government create conflict with local political elites? Can citizens only "give their say" or can they effectively monitor the different stages of the policy process?

These crucial questions are answered through a comparative sociological study of three cases of municipal participatory budget, in Seville (Spain), Rome (Italy) and in a suburban city in the periphery of Paris (Morsang-sur-Orge, France). Participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted over two years offer interesting qualitative data to enter the black box of participatory institutions and to evaluate the positive and negative consequences of such reforms. In particular, the comparative approach allows weighting the effect of different institutional settings and cultural contexts on the power relationships and decisions-making processes of participatory budget institutions. The three cases however belong to what has been defined as "the southern systems of local governments[3]" characterised by a rather low functional capacity due to the historical trajectories of these countries marked a Napoleonic centralising tradition. This nevertheless makes the case-studies more comparable as local governments in the three countries broadly share the same competences.

The paper argues that despite the participatory discourses and good will of local politicians, their influence often remains overwhelming in participatory budget assemblies. Their influence can take

[2] Power is defined as necessarily relational, supposing a conflict of interests or values between different groups and individuals solved by the obedience of an actor B to an actor A due the threat of sanctions in case of non-compliance. It is from this perspective analytically distinct from influence, defined as power without obedience, i.e. voluntary compliance. Influence thus appears persuasive – therefore implying discursive interactions – while power is coercive, even if the two are empirically difficulty distinguishable as the subjective perception of the threat of symbolic sanctions in case of non-compliance – i.e. the interiorisation of constraints – is conceptually pretty close to voluntary compliance. The distinction between power and influence is therefore rather a question of means to achieve compliance – threat vs. argumentation.

[3] See Page, E. & Goldsmith M. (Eds.) (1987) Central and Local Government Relations: a Comparative Analysis of West Europeans Unitary States, London: Sage; See as well Reynaert H., Steyvers K., Delwit P., Pilet J.-B., (Eds.) (2005) *Revolution or Renovation? Reforming Local Politics in Europe*, Brugge: Vanden Broele.

different channels given the local and national contexts, be it though the very procedural designs of the institutions (through specific rules, criteria, etc.) or more insidiously through the framing of the discussions, local elites thus using their symbolic power. Citizens are, however, far from being naïve and – aware of the risks of manipulation and cooptation – set up micro-strategies to counter the influence of local political elites and to get an impact on the budgetary decisions in the end.

I. The Participatory Requirement: Giving Power Back to the Citizen

Laws and official reports related to urban policies and decentralisation are full of references to citizen participation. The increased powers of local institutions must be accompanied by the involvement of both associations and lay citizens in the making of public policy. Words such as "participation", "dialogue", "discussion", "consultation" or "partnership" are mushrooming in official documents. All these concepts, even though ambiguous and unclear, are indeed endowed with a strong symbolic power. But what should citizens participate in? In the decision-making process or a consultation phase preceding the actual decisions? Should they "have their say" or actually decide about local affairs and public services? The cases of participatory democracy we researched are supposed to be particularly empowered examples, as they aim at involving citizens in city budget decisions. At the root of participatory budget experience there indeed lies a constant theme of "giving power back to citizens." This rhetoric, however, takes different forms in the three cases studied and was translated in different institutional settings, thus offering different opportunities of influence to the actors.

1. Morsang-sur-Orge: participation between proximity and citizens' empowerment

Morsang-sur-Orge is a typical middle-class suburban city of 19,300, about 20 km south of Paris. The municipality has been governed since 1945 by three female mayors in succession, all members of the Communist party. Despite this historical embeddedness, the Communist Party almost lost the municipal elections of 1995. The closeness of the ballot led the opposition to the courts to call for new elections. After approximately 2 years of legal wrangling, a new partial municipal election was organized in Morsang-sur-Orge at the beginning of 1997 that the Left won much more easily. Even though the difficulties of being re-elected in 1995 could be attributed to the crisis the Communist Party was facing at the time, and to the national political context of a broad domination by the Right, the municipal majority tried to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The development of participatory democracy in Morsang-sur-Orge was, therefore, framed from the beginning as a way of countering the "crisis of representative government" and, as often in the French experiences of citizen participation, of encouraging proximity between elected officials and citizens:

> "The goal was to achieve proximity. […] We feel a political responsibility in questions of lack of interest in politics, of abstention, etc. This is of crucial importance, in my opinion. The commune is the best place to help get things done differently. It is really at this level that proximity can be found. At this level politicians don't have too tough a time. We're not accused [of being corrupt] … even if it is a tough life. But there is a certain honesty, a credibility, there is no overall questioning of local politicians. It is here that we have to make original experiments, to innovate."[4]

The two transition years between 1995 and 1997 allowed the municipal majority to analyse the sources of citizen disaffection, which also had local roots. The list of the Left was therefore largely renewed, with the inclusion, along with traditional party members, of citizens coming from "civil society", i.e. mainly from local associational life.

In this context, very soon after the elections, the first participatory mechanisms were set up. The municipal majority therefore decided to create eight "neighbourhood councils" (*Comités de Quartier*). This helped institutionalise participation, with local meetings organised almost every month. The main innovation was to grant a financial allocation of about 60,000 Euros to each neighbourhood council for financing local projects. With an allocation of 480,000 Euros per year, neighbourhood councils have to decide on about 20% of the city investment budget (2.7 million Euros in 2004). In this sense, they can be considered as empowered participatory institutions. After its re-election in 2002, the municipality decided to go one step further, with the creation of city-wide thematic workshops. From the very beginning, the aim was framed as a means of countering some forms of parochialism on the part of the citizens that was fostered by the micro-local basis of the neighbourhood councils.

Five thematic workshops were thus created, focusing on the main areas of competence of the city, going from urban planning to schooling policies and environmental issues. Workshops meet all through the year to discuss and propose investment priorities to the Municipal Council on the different subject areas. At the beginning of 2006, participatory democracy in Morsang-sur-Orge was therefore composed of a two-level participatory structure, at both the neighbourhood and city levels. As mentioned earlier, the setting up of a participatory budget is aimed both at countering the crisis of the legitimacy of representative government (and the crisis of political parties attached to it) and increasing the proximity between elected representatives and citizens. This last feature is crucial, as it conducted to the specificity of Morsang-sur-Orge participatory design, where elected representatives participate in the public assemblies and play a central role all along the PB process. Citizen empowerment is nevertheless framed as the goal of the participatory experience, as the webpage defining the city's PB makes clear: "By bringing decisions to the very core of the neighbourhoods, allowing discussion not only about the neighbourhood itself, but about the issues affecting the life of the local community […] the aim was to allow a growing number of Morsang residents to become actors in their own town."[5] From this perspective, citizen involvement in Morsang-sur-Orge in local

[4] Interview with Francis Diener, participatory democracy town councillor, Morsang-sur-Orge, 14.01.2005.
[5] Source: http://www.morsang-sur-orge.fr/dos.php?id=142. My translation.

decision-making processes is claimed by its instigators to be politically significant by offering new channels for citizen empowerment.

2. Rome Municipio XI: deepening democracy through citizen participation

Rome is a city of 2.8 million, which has been divided into 19 districts since 2001, within the framework of Italian administrative decentralization. The 11th district of the city, "Municipio XI", has been working on a participatory budget since 2003. Unlike Morsang-sur-Orge, Rome's Municipio XI does not have a long administrative history. Even though it has existed administratively since the 1970s – it was called "circumscription" at the time – it did not have a high level of autonomy. It took about 10 years of administrative decentralisation, from the beginning of the 1990s to 2001, to reach the current status of the districts of Rome. The first elections in the Rome Municipi took place in 2001, at the same time as all other Italian municipal elections. In Municipio XI, a list of the Left, from the centre-left (Margherita and DS) to the more radical Rifondazione Communista (RC), won with Massimiliano Smeriglio (RC) at its head. Interestingly however, as in Morsang-sur-Orge, the Municipio municipal majority is not only composed of members of political parties, but also of non-professional politicians, coming from "civil society", as is the case of the PB secretary.

The Municipio XI PB experiment began in May 2003. It must be stressed that, unlike the case of Morsang-sur-Orge, the experience was framed as a "participatory budget", in direct reference to the Porto Alegre model. The main principles, which remained for the most part stable afterwards, were settled from the beginning. First, the Municipio was divided into eight zones, called "social neighbourhoods", which were supposed to have historical roots in the territory. Public meetings were thus organized in all the neighbourhoods in order to decide on the local projects to be financed by the Municipio budget. Projects can be presented in the main areas of competence of the Municipio, from urban planning to schooling and cultural policies. The participatory budget assemblies then follow a yearly cycle. The most important stage, generally between February and May, brings together Working Groups in each neighbourhood to work out projects and proposals in the different thematic areas. Proposals are discussed by the citizens, progressively refined and rendered operational in order to make them applicable, and then analyzed by the technical services of the Municipality, who assess whether they fit the competences of the Municipio and its financial capacities. The final aim is to end up with a list of possible priorities in each thematic area, which are then voted on in the next stage of the process. A final assembly is organised to vote on and prioritise the proposals. The participatory process in Municipio XI appears from this perspective more "dry" than in Morsang-sur-Orge and Seville, as it essentially consists of neighbourhood assemblies focusing on a few thematic areas, and therefore not on the global policies of the Municipio as a whole.

The main motivation for the municipal majority to initiate a participatory budget was "above all, to discuss the fact that, if there is something in crisis in today's world, it is democracy itself".[6] The main frame used to justify the development of participatory democracy was therefore one of "the crisis of representative government", and, in this case, it was clearly linked to globalization and the increased complexity of democratic decision-making at all levels of society. This complexity is seen as having detrimental effects in terms of the transparency and accountability of democratic decision-making. Participatory democracy is understood, in contrast, as a way of giving visible decision-making power to citizens, considered as the sole holders of democratic legitimacy. The first article of the PB constitution quite clearly states: "Participatory budgeting could be defined as a decision process that consists of the opening up of the institutional machinery to the effective and direct participation of the population in decision-making on the purposes and distribution of public investment."[7] PB in Rome Municipio XI is therefore seen as a way of giving power back to citizens; consequently, elected representatives do not participate in the process and leave a large room to civil society organisations within the assemblies.

3. Seville: "taking over the State"

Seville is a city of 700,000 inhabitants, and constitutes the largest experiment in municipal participatory budgeting in Europe. It has been governed since May 2003 by a centre-left municipal majority, through an alliance between the PSOE (the Socialist Party) and *Izquierda Unida* (the former Communist Party). The PB was part of the alliance programme to be developed after the elections and was carried out from the end of 2003 onwards. From a historical point of view, Seville is half way between the situations of Morsang-sur-Orge and Rome Municipio XI. Although its administrative structure comes from the 19th century, the Franco regime which ended in 1975 constituted an important break in the autonomy of Spanish local governments. Institutions of local government have undergone marked transformations since the Franco era, when they functioned primarily as instruments of the central government. It was not until 1985 that the fundamental re-organization and democratization of Spanish local administration was completed with the Basic Law on Local Government. This increased autonomy allowed local governments to set up the first citizen participation institutions, at both district and city levels, particularly involving associations and civil society actors. These participative bodies remained, however, essentially informative and consultative until 2003. With the victory of the Left in the Municipal elections of May 2003, a new dynamism was given to participatory mechanisms in Seville.

Seville PB relies on three administrative levels: the neighbourhood, the district and the city as a whole. Three participatory assemblies correspond to these three tiers: (1) Zone Assemblies; (2) District

[6] Interview with Luciano Ummarino, Rome, 09/01/2005.
[7] www.municipiopartecipato.it/introduzione.asp. My translation.

Councils; and (3) the City Council. The participatory process really starts in February, with the organization of preparatory meetings in all the neighbourhoods of the city, where delegates for the "*Autoreglamento*" Commission are elected – this commission being in charge of the drafting of the "*Autoreglamento*" (i.e. the constitution) of the process for the year. Once the "*Autoreglamento*" adopted, the discussion of the proposals can actually start. This central part of the participatory budget cycle takes place in the zone assemblies, which are the fundamental decision-making body of the PB process. They are open to all the zone residents over 16 years of age. They meet for a few sessions, between April and June, to decide which proposals and projects to put forward for the zone, the district and the city. Once the list of proposals is established for the different thematic areas under discussion it is voted on in an open assembly. Decisions are indeed taken through voting in the Seville participatory budget. Zone assemblies also elect delegates, who represent the assembly at the district and city councils. The District and City Councils' role is to evaluate and rank all the proposals voted on by the zone assemblies that affect the district and city as a whole. Their main function is to apply the "social justice" criteria established by the "*Autoreglamento*", i.e. to evaluate to what extent the proposals voted on fit some objective and subjective criteria of social justice. The selection of the proposals follows a very sophisticated process, defined by the term "weighted vote" which will be analysed in details later on. Once the proposals have been ranked at district and city levels, a final list of investments, programmes and activities is established. This list constitutes a participatory budget proposal that is presented at the Municipal Council, to be incorporated into the global city budget. Once the budget has been approved by the Municipal Council, a last institutional body is set up, the "Monitoring Commission." Composed of all the District and City Councils delegates, its main function is to follow up, control and monitor the enactment of the participatory budget proposals voted on by the Municipal Council. The Seville PB decision-making process appears extremely procedural and formal, thus allowing for an egalitarian process to take place. The very design of the participatory bodies of the city, being very complex, was aimed at ensuring both transparency and power sharing.

In Seville, the PB is understood by its instigators as a compromise between representative and direct democracy through the granting of binding decision-making power to the citizens. Paula Garvin, Citizen Participation Secretary in the municipal majority, and *Izquierda Unida* leader in Andalusia, feels in this regard directly indebted to the Porto Alegre experiment:

> "So when I heard about the Porto Alegre proposals and it was as if I had seen the light. I said, 'it's a way of giving power back to the people, telling them: 'take over the State.' The State has been taken over; it is a process where the people take over the power of its legitimate representative, i.e. the State. That is to say, what I'm asking people to do is to cooperate with me to promote the common good, against private interests. According to me, participatory democracy is a mix of direct and representative democracy; combining both things.[8]"

[8] Interview with Paula Garvin, conducted by Carsten Herzberg, Seville, March 2005.

The aims of the experiment were thus political from the very beginning. In this case, the participatory budget councillor explicitly refers to "giving power back to the people" and even "taking over the State", in a rather Marxist phraseology. Three main goals can be analytically distinguished, even though they are intrinsically linked: (1) the inclusion of groups and individuals who are generally under-represented or excluded from political decision-making processes; (2) the promotion of social justice by favouring the "redistribution of resources between zones, social groups and genders, focusing as a priority on redistribution towards the most disadvantaged"[9]; and (3) the civic education of citizens though "popular education in processes of shared responsibility where citizens, technicians and political representatives can learn".[10] As in other Spanish experiments in municipal participatory budgeting like Cordoba, the emphasis on social justice and redistribution towards the most disadvantaged seems central in Seville. This appears as a direct import of the Latin American model, and especially of the Porto Alegre paradigm, where the redistribution of power and resources towards the poor was one of the core aims and achievements of the participatory budget.

II. Decision-making Processes in European Participatory Budget Institutions: A Micro-Sociological Perspective

While for the promoters of participatory democracy the aim might be "to give power back to citizens", the decision-making processes and the actual power granted to these local public bodies are nevertheless more nuanced in practice, as they institutionalised different participatory designs to implement these intentions and thus offered different opportunities to the actors. Three main features appear central to the understanding of the decision-making processes of participatory budget institutions: (1) the question of procedures: what kind of institutions are set up to allow and restrict citizens' decision-making power; (2) the question of framing: how are decisions taken, i.e. through vote or consensus (arrived at by discussion); (3) the question of implementation: under what conditions do the actual decisions of the participatory bodies become public policies? Each case study embodies a good illustration of these problems and difficulties affecting the autonomy of citizens' decision-making power in participatory arenas. Furthermore, in the European cases of participatory budgeting the local assemblies do not have a direct legal existence;[11] the decisions taken in the public assemblies must be enacted by the municipality to become public policies. A joint decision-making process is thus created, where local representatives and citizens participating in public assemblies

[9] Autoreglamento 2006 de los Presupuestos Participativos de Sevilla, First Title, Statement of Principles, p. 2. See https//www.participacionciudadana.sevilla.org/PRESUPUESTOS/documentos/Autorreglam2006.pdf
[10] Ibid.
[11] The situation is a bit different in the French case as the law on "proximity democracy" has made the creation of neighbourhood councils compulsory in all cities over 80 000 inhabitants since February 2002. As a city of about 20 000 inhabitants, Morsang-sur-Orge does not fall under such an obligation however, and created its first neighbourhood councils in 1998.

work together. The question then becomes: who is granted more power? Are local representatives just enacting decisions arrived at in public assemblies or are they framing or even modifying them? In a word, beyond the official discourse on "giving the power back to citizens", who governs in participatory democracy institutions? Through our ethnographic studies in the three cases we followed, we were able to reconstruct the actual decision-making processes of these institutions from a micro-sociological perspective. The answer to the question "who governs?" appears from this perspective as balanced, since a multiplicity of actors intervene, discuss and bargain together at the local level.

1. The problem of procedures: between political party programs and citizen autonomy

One of the clearest ways elected officials can limit the autonomy of the PB process is in the procedural design they set up in the first place. The case of Seville PB is pretty telling from this perspective. Some procedures were set up to ensure a minimal control of the municipal majority over the participatory decision-making process. As mentioned earlier, in Seville one of the main tasks of the PB District and City Councils is to evaluate and rank all the voted proposals of the zone assemblies that affect the districts and city as a whole. Their main function is therefore to apply the social justice criteria established by the "*Autoreglamento*". The selection of the proposals follows a very sophisticated process, defined by the term "weighted vote". First, proposals are voted in the zone assemblies. An initial ranking of the proposals is thus established according to the number of votes they received. Then, the District and City Councils evaluate and rank them following the criteria established by the "*Autoreglamento*". There are two types of social justice criteria, objective and subjective. The objective ones attribute points to the proposals according to statistical data about the population affected, the socio-economic situation of the area targeted by the proposal, etc. The aim is "to give more to those who have less" following a form of territorial and social affirmative action. The subjective criteria, discussed in the district and city assemblies, evaluate the ability of the proposals to foster multiculturalism, tolerance, social justice, gender equality, communication among divided communities, the development of a participatory citizenry, etc. Delegates have to allocate points to the proposals according to how far they fit these social justice criteria. They therefore have to argue and convince each other, to arrive at an agreement about how many points to give. These micro-decisions are generally taken by consensus, even if sometimes when disagreement is too sharp and time short the participants have decided to average the individual grades allocated by each participant, thus opting for an aggregative mechanism.

The social justice criteria reflect the clear aim of the Municipality of fostering social justice. More precisely, these criteria give substance to what is meant by social justice. In this context, social justice means giving more – more attention and resources – to those who have less. There is thus an underlying political content in these social justice criteria, which is far from random. Behind the

political concepts a more classical political struggle has indeed taken place. The social justice criteria are part of the *Autoreglamento* of Seville PB. This kind of constitution or "rules of the game" of the participatory process, even if discussed every year with the citizens, was mostly shaped in the first year of the process, at the end of 2003. The idea of creating social justice criteria was insidiously pushed forward by Izquierda Unida, the political party at the origin of the Seville participatory process. At that time the party was indeed divided between the reformers and the orthodox. The latter were sceptical about the participatory budget and afraid to lose the political benefits of their participation in the municipal government by letting "lay citizens" decide instead of the party and of the application of its program. Letting people decide through the PB therefore meant giving up trying to apply the political program they had been elected for. The dilemma was simple: how to apply one's political program while letting people decide in the framework of a participatory process without depriving the latter of its radical political meaning. The social justice criteria appeared to be a way to filter proposals, to influence and frame them indirectly, not by their formulation like in Morsang-sur-Orge, but by their ranking. Social justice criteria thus appeared to IU members as an indirect way of implementing their political program.

Although social justice criteria are seen as a way of filtering and orienting the proposals made by the citizens, it happens indirectly. The application of the criteria is indeed under the control of the district and city delegates, elected in the zone assemblies. Most of the time these delegates are members of residents' organisations, local associations – the very powerful Spanish "*movimento vecinal*" organised along different associations – and also members of political parties, usually of the left (PSOE and IU). They are therefore seen as politicised actors, able to rank the proposals according to the initial spirit of the social justice criteria created by *Izquierda Unida*. The election of delegates is also a way of mobilising the local civil society and including it in the participatory process. We will see in the next section how harmful the absence of local civil society in the participatory institutions can be in the case of Morsang-sur-Orge. Local civil society thus has its say in the decision-making process of Seville participatory budget, even if the most important decisions – which proposal actually becomes a public policy – still depends on zone assemblies and the number of votes received by the proposals.The decision, in Sevilla, to include local civil society was also informed and influenced by another Andalusian participatory budget experience, that of the city of Cordoba. Ruled by an IU mayor, Cordoba launched a participatory budget a few years before Sevilla, but the experience collapsed due to the opposition of the local civil society – mainly the "*movimento vicinal*" – that felt excluded from the process and as such to be the main victim of the institutionalisation of participatory democracy. By including lay citizens in the production of public policies, the municipality was thus stopping a tradition of associative democracy and of large involvement of associations in the municipal decisions. To avoid such an opposition, the initiators of Seville participatory budget thus imagined both a system of delegates – the municipality thus offering implicitly opportunities of influence to local associations – and the creation of "motor groups", small groups based on voluntary

participation in charge of the organisation and dynamism of the participatory process and of the mobilisation of the population. The decision-making power appears from this perspective to be shared in Seville participatory governance institutions between lay citizens who submit and vote on the proposals; "active citizens", i.e. politicised actors often members of political parties or associations who constitute most of the delegates, and who discuss and apply the social justice criteria; and the elected representatives who both shaped the process at the beginning, by creating social justice criteria among other things, and enact the decisions by incorporating them into the municipal budget. From this perspective a real joint decision-making process seems to be taking place in Seville. It is, however, circumscribed to the few areas included in the participatory budget – mainly sport, youth policies, gender policies and local urban projects – which represent only a small portion of the municipal budget (about 18 million Euros have been allocated for 2004, for instance). It can be said that in Seville citizens decide a lot, but on very few issues and with little money.

The problem of procedures is, in some sense, also present in Morsang-sur-Orge PB, as it was designed to allow for the participation of elected officials in all the assemblies. In this case a procedural issue became a problem of framing, the presence of local politicians in the assemblies largely shaping the type of decisions taken in the end.

2. The problem of framing: Deliberation as a way of hindering citizen autonomy

Another way of limiting the autonomy of the PB assemblies is by influencing the discussions in such a way that citizens cannot make up their minds by themselves. While deliberation should be an effective method of reaching better decisions, it sometimes appears as a way for powerful actors – those with better discursive skills – to influence and frame the debate. This problem seems to be overwhelming in Morsang-sur-Orge, where elected representatives participate at all stages of the PB process. In both neighbourhood councils and thematic workshops, decisions are indeed taken through discussion, and are generally considered to have been taken "by consensus." An excerpt from a scene that took place in a neighbourhood committee is pretty clear from this perspective:

> After an hour of discussions about the attribution of the financial portfolio of the neighbourhood council, Ségolène, a new participant in the assembly, asked: "But how does it work for deciding? Shall we vote?" The local councillor presiding the meeting answered: "No, it's by consensus." A regular participant, Agnès, apparently upset about the direction taken by the discussion that night, added however: "I remember, three years ago, concerning rue de l'Avenir … At a certain meeting no decision had been taken, and at the following one, two months later, we were just deciding which side of the pavement should be rehabilitated." She thus implied that decisions were not always taken in the neighbourhood councils but in some other arenas, probably by the elected representatives themselves. Jean-Michel, the local councillor had therefore to make things clear: "There won't be any forced decision ["decisions aux forceps"]. It will be decided collectively, in search for the public interest."[12]

[12] Notes of observation. Buisson neighbourhood council, Morsang-sur-Orge, 22.02.2006.

This excerpt shows pretty clearly that the lack of official definition of the decision-making process and procedures of the participatory bodies can create problems, especially as consensus is largely a matter of power relationships. Over my ethnographic study I never observed however any vote in a participatory assembly. It can therefore be considered that decisions are taken by consensus, i.e. that decisions are taken after a reasoned exchange of arguments where every participant has the chance to express his/her views and when no more objection is voiced the agreed position is considered to be the decisions of the assembly.[13] Consensus does not appear magically however. It has to be created and constructed through discussion and often implies power relationships in the framing of the debate.[14]

In this regard, the local representatives participating in the public meetings play an important role in the framing of the discussions and in defining what is thinkable or not, what kind of proposals can be voiced and thus what decisions are actually taken. In Morsang-sur-Orge, the debates are moderated by members of the municipal majority, there are really few conflicts and the discussions are highly framed by the local representatives. If the participatory institution is indirectly controlled by the municipality, then it would only represent a legitimizing window-dressing institution, which allows the same decisions to be taken through other channels. An example from the discussions of one of the Neighbourhood Councils is very telling from this point of view:

> The debate about the allocation of the neighbourhood budget started at the beginning of the meeting, when Francis Diener [the Citizen Participation Secretary] referred to the activities of the "Urban projects Workshop" – the "*Atelier voierie*." He started: "last year, 50% of the municipal budget was used to improve safety (through road signals, speed bumps, *etc*.), but not to improve the quality of the roads and pavements … It was a choice, a question of priority. But we have to decide what we would like to do this year. We have to talk about it." His framing of the debate was even clearer, when he then said: "Given the traffic circulation plan of the Agglomeration Community, we have to make certain choices … it is a matter of coherence. We have to make pavements, roads, or a mixture of both." He therefore largely framed and oriented the choices of the inhabitants, implying that there were no alternatives for the allocation of the financial share.
>
> Later, the question of the allocation of the neighbourhood budget was tackled even more directly. Françoise, a woman in her early 50s, member of the Municipal majority, the usual moderator of the group, spoke on behalf of the organizing board of the neighbourhood council and explained that there were some "objective needs" in the neighbourhood; these needs being essentially seen in terms of roads and pavements. By objective needs, she meant that certain roads and pavements were so damaged that everybody would agree on the need to rebuild them. The debate on the

[13] Consensus can therefore be distinguished analytically from unanimity, which requires that all the participants to a decision *vote* for the same motion or position. Each member having a ballot thus possess a form of right of veto on the decision, as the decision will be taken if and only if everybody agrees. The main difference between consensus and unanimity is therefore the practice of voting. On this point see Jane Mansbridge (1980) *Beyond Adversary Democracy,* New York: Basic Books, p. 32 and p. 252-269

[14] Jane Mansbridge offered enlightening empirical insights on the power relationships underlying the practice of consensus: "In a consensual system, the minority is, in a sense, eliminated. After it agrees to go along, it leaves no trace. Its objections go unrecorded. Indeed, if those in the minority are intimidated, cannot give their reasons convincingly, or do not care enough to make a scene, they may never voice their objections." Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy, op. cit.,* p. 170.

> allocation of the budget remained thereafter within the limits defined by the moderator and the members of the municipality. The only alternative proposals that were voiced were about which street or which part of the pavement to rebuild. At some point, another elderly woman, Louise, who seemed to disagree, said *sotto voce* to her neighbour: "That ought to come under the municipality's budget [*i.e.*, not the neighbourhood council budget]." Although she disagreed with the use of the neighbourhood budget for pavements, she nevertheless did not voice her opposition publicly.
>
> At some point, the moderator – Françoise – started to realize that the organizing board had perhaps over-influenced the decision about the financial allocation, and expressed some kind of remorse: "This [the idea of the pavement] was just an idea we had. But maybe you have other ideas, other wishes. This is a discussion." Nobody answered and a long silence followed, broken up after a few seconds by private conversations. After a few minutes of confusion, Françoise tried to bring order back to the meeting, and said: "So, what shall we do about the neighbourhood budget?" Louise answered: "Exactly as you said!" The moderator seemed apparently embarrassed with this answer, as she realized how she had influenced the debate and therefore the decision. She said, confused: "I don't know … [*i.e.*, it is not my role to decide]" After a few minutes of confusion, Isabelle, a woman in her late 30s, a member of a PTA in the local school, made a proposal: "what about the kindergarten?" [*i.e.*, what about improving it?] The moderator answered immediately: "We shouldn't have eyes bigger than our stomachs." [*i.e.*, it is too expensive; we cannot afford that, *etc*.] The only alternative proposal was thus rejected, *a priori*, not after a collective discussion of the assembly, but arbitrarily by the moderator, who considered it too ambitious. A little later, once the decision about the use of the financial allocation had already been made, a man said: "It is pity that all the money from the council always goes to pavements." He did not seem to agree with the choice made for the use of the budget, but did not voice his disagreement when the decision was taken, as though the decision had already been taken.[15]

This excerpt shows that the way the debate was organized on this issue did not help the public to voice criticisms and propose alternative projects. A consensus emerged on the decision to take (the attribution of the budget was not decided by vote); but this consensus has been created by excluding all alternative proposals and by framing the debate in such a way that only a minimalist solution, decided beforehand by the organizing board, could be agreed upon. By defining what is thinkable or not, what is possible to propose or not, the members of the municipality hinder the autonomy, and therefore the empowerment, of Morsang-sur-Orge participatory institutions. It comes as no surprise then that, in the first seven years of their existence, most of the funds of the neighbourhood councils have been directed towards the rehabilitation of the pavements, rather than to more innovative projects. The scene from this neighbourhood council budget decision mentioned earlier, far from being idiosyncratic, is pretty representative of the way decisions are taken in Morsang-sur-Orge assemblies.

It seems that the participation of the elected representatives in the assemblies is both symbolically and effectively impeding the autonomy of the citizens within the participatory bodies. Their presence embodies indeed the need to avoid that the citizens decide alone, thus symbolically expressing the implicit doubts of the elected representatives and the citizens themselves about the capacity of the latter to decide. Then, practically, as granted an important symbolic capital and democratic legitimacy,

[15] Observation report in Morsang-sur-Orge, Neighbourhood Committee Langevin, 21.01.2005.

as well as some political resources led to their stock of past political activism and experiences, the elected representatives are those who speak more, more often and longer. They are also those who are able and feel legitimate enough to generalise or politicise the discussion. The behaviour of the elected representatives clearly frames and influence citizens' behaviour in return, confining them in a spectator or passive role.

This lack of autonomy and empowerment of Morsang-sur-Orge participatory bodies can be attributed to two different factors. On the one hand, the town councillors did not modify their traditional practices rooted in a history of power delegation. Even if full of good will and nice intentions, Morsang-sur-Orge elected representatives seem to fear the participatory budget escape their control. Local representatives present themselves as the sole holders of the common good, facing individuals only moved by their private interests. Political representatives have always been understood as the embodiment of the general interest The participation of the members of the municipal majority in these public meetings has in this regard no other function than the framing of the discussions to be sure that the common good – the "general interest" in the French civic culture – will be defended against local corporatism. The participatory democracy secretary is very clear from this perspective: "The investment choices made by the citizens were pretty much those we [town representatives] would have done. And it was really reassuring for us. I was among those who were a bit scared at first, and who would have framed and controlled the process a little more, so that they won't be any trouble. So it's true, at the beginning these public meetings, were moderated, organised and controlled by the town representatives.[16]" The situation did not evolve drastically since then. In the French civic culture, the local level has been traditionally associated with special interests, corporatism, clientelism and eventually corruption (Rosanvallon, 2004 & 2006). In some regards, local representatives reproduce towards the citizens' active at the micro-local level the criticisms of corporatism addressed by the central state to them. As granted a democratic legitimacy elected representatives can always use a "Nimby" argument to disqualify incompetent citizens. The presence of local politicians in the participatory assemblies is however a rather uncommon practice in comparison with most European cases of participatory budgeting, as will be seen in the cases of Seville and Rome. This is reinforced by the very procedural design – decisions taken by consensus – that let them influence discussions a great deal.

The other reason why elected representatives can play such a central role in the participatory institutions is connected with the weakness of the local civil society. As underlined by some political scientists (Fung and Wright, 2003) the countervailing power guaranteed by some critical social movements is a crucial element in the autonomy of the participatory bodies towards their instigators, in this case the municipality. The dynamic functions of control, criticism and innovation played by certain associations and social movements in the most successful experiences of participatory

[16] Interview with Francis Diener, *op. cit.*

budgeting like in Porto Alegre is pretty clear from this perspective. In Morsang-sur-Orge, the associative terrain is hardly critical at all of the municipality and is not fully involved in the participatory assemblies. This is mainly due to the local domination of the Communist Party (and its sister organisations at the local level, like the CGT, the residents associations, the *Secours Populaire*), which hinders any lively and autonomous civil society from blooming. The absence of these critical elements thus prevents citizens from playing a bigger part in the decision-making process.

The problem of framing is much less central in the two other cases, as the elected officials do not participate directly in the discussions. Framing does not only occur when elected representatives speak however. Other powerful actors can influence the decisions. In the Rome Municipio XI PB, where discussion plays an important role in the construction of the investment proposals, some skilful citizens, accustomed to speaking and arguing in public, can frame the discussion in such a way as to influence the final decision. Framing does not mean the same thing however when it comes from elected officials, granted a strong symbolic legitimacy, and when it comes from skilful citizens themselves. To avoid such problems, Seville PB initiators decided to limit the role of discussion in the decision-making process as much as possible. Proposals are written, made individually by citizens, and hardly discussed at all. This system allows the emergence of a high number of reflexive and constructive proposals, but it also reduces the discursive and collective process of constructing and formulating proposals. Proposals are not the product of a collective deliberation but of individual ideas and projects. Decisions in Seville participatory bodies are therefore taken by voting, which avoids the framing and influence of the elected representatives we observed in Morsang-sur-Orge.

3. The problem of implementation: autonomy vs. power

The decision-making process of a participatory institution does not stop at decisions for this or that investment however. It is also a matter of implementing citizens' decisions, which can sometimes become problematic, as in the Roman case. The implementation of PB decisions suffers both external and internal constraints, connected with the actual power relationships between the different political parties forming the municipal and communal majority. Firstly, the autonomy of the Municipi, in Rome and in the other major Italian cities, is limited. The budget of the Municipio is a proposal made to the Commune of Rome that has to be agreed on and accepted by the central communal council. The budget of the Municipio is therefore the result of political bargaining between the municipal majority and the central commune of Rome. Some decisions accepted within the framework of the participatory budget can therefore not find any ex-post funding, as the commune has the power to refuse or reject part of the proposed Municipio budget. Then, internally, the integration of the participatory budget proposals within the actual Municipio budget proposal is also a matter of power relationships and bargaining between the members of the municipal majority. The municipal majority is in fact

composed of a variety of left-wing political parties. The participatory budget was mainly promoted by *Rifondazione Communista*, in particular the mayor and the PB councillor. The other parties appeared much more sceptical throughout the process and, as in Seville, were afraid to be unable to apply the political program they had been elected for. If, as initially planned, 20% of the Municipio budget had been devoted to the implementation of citizens' decisions, little financial room for manoeuvre would have been left to the municipal majority. Without a strong political will to implement it, a participatory budget is therefore often blocked by politicians' power relationships.

Most of the participants to Municipio XI participatory bodies thus complained about the lack of implementation of the participatory budget decisions. It is indeed a recurrent litany in the participatory assemblies. People complain about the length of realisation of the decisions, and sometimes even doubt about their actual implementation. Once, in a neighbourhood assembly, Gianni, a regular participant from the beginning of the process, was very clear from this perspective:

> "The problem with the participatory budget is the lack of political will of the municipal majority. This project started pretty well in the first year, there were a lot of people, 150 here, almost 500 in San Paolo [one of the neighbourhoods] mobilised by the residents association … but it didn't work. […] We were supposed to make this forum, this assembly at the Municipio level, to hierarchies the priorities, to see which ones were the most important ones. But this meeting never took place. It was Ummarino and Smeriglio who did that on their own … Because there are huge divisions in the majority on this issue ... *Margherita* and DS are not backing it up … So that in the end everything was blocked. The projects that were voted were not realised, apart from this beautiful youth social centre … so that people lose patience, they don't trust the process anymore, so they don't come back. Look how many we're tonight! And it's also a problem of autonomy of the Municipio. Its budget has to be agreed by the commune, so that everything is more complicated, slow, etc."[17]

As this participant highlights, the power relationships inside the municipal majority did not allow the most enthusiastic promoters of the participatory budget to implement citizens' decisions. The youth social centre evoked by Gianni is indeed one of the main investments realised through the participatory budget in the Municipio XI since 2003. It was highly publicised by the municipality – and especially the participatory budget administration – as an achievement of citizens' participation. The fact that this decision was achieved – whereas others are still in the midst of complex administrative decisions – is not random however. It is linked to two main factors. First, youth policies is under the administration of a member of *Rifundazione Communista* Municipio councillor; as a political ally of the promoters of participatory democracy, he therefore tried to support citizens' decisions by including them directly in his administration budget. Second, and most importantly, the fast achievement of this youth social centre is due to the origins of the Municipio resources. As in most other European countries, Italian cities (and it is true also of Rome's Municipi) resources come from both transfers from the State and direct resources coming mainly from local taxes. In the case of youth policies, most of the funding comes from the State, and a specific law (law n. 285/97 for "the

[17] Intervention in Roma 70 neighbourhood assembly, working group n.3, Rome, 03.03.2006.

promotion of the rights and opportunities of youth and adolescence"), that the Municipio can access directly without passing through the central commune. By presenting projects decided within the framework of the participatory budget to this State agency, the Municipio thus manage to receive new modes of funding. It is obliviously much more complicated when it comes to public parks, urban projects or public transportation that still depends partly of the approval of the commune.

In a nutshell, the Roman case shows that apart from citizens' autonomy in their investment decisions in the participatory bodies, a decision-making process is also a matter of implementation of the decisions. The situation in Rome is all the more complicated that the participatory budget is confronted to both internal and external constraints, with both the lack of autonomy and competences of the Municipio itself, which makes the implementation of citizens decisions of the negotiations between the Municipio and the commune, and the internal divisions of the municipal majority, which blocked the implementation of many decisions.

The question of implementation, even if central and often questioned by the citizens themselves who criticise the incredible length of time separating public decisions from action, is not always as problematic as in Rome Municipio XI however. In Morsang-sur-Orge, for instance, the massive involvement of the elected representatives in the participatory process constitutes a form of warranty that the decisions will be implemented. And they are indeed, even if sometimes after a few years. French communes are indeed more autonomous than Italian Municipi (there is no higher tier to negotiate with apart from the State), and the municipal majority is, in the case of Morsang-sur-Orge much more united, especially due to the local domination of the Communist Party. Decisions taken by the neighbourhood councils with their financial portfolio are incorporated into the municipal budget after the approval of the Municipal Council. The latter has no legal obligation to do so, but as the main promoter of participatory democracy in Morsang-sur-Orge, the municipal majority is supposed to respect the decisions taken by the neighbourhood council. Since their creation in 1998, it does not seem that any decision taken by the neighbourhood councils with their financial portfolios has ever been rejected. The decisions arising from the use of the financial portfolios are therefore joint decisions of the neighbourhood councils and the Municipal Council. In Seville, the question of implementation seems to lie in between the two previous cases. Spanish communes have only to deal with the State and, in the realm of their competences, they are relatively autonomous. But internally, as mentioned earlier, the Seville municipal majority is largely divided on the question of the participatory budget. This has resulted in the limitation of the areas of decisions to those controlled by *Izquierda Unida,* and the impossibility of dealing with some other important areas of competence. Even in the areas controlled by IU, it still requires constant bargaining from the town councillors to get citizens decisions incorporated into the commune budget. To avoid the problem of implementation however, Seville PB is doted of an important institution, namely the monitoring commission, whose task is to evaluate the implementation of past decisions.

There is therefore a tradeoff between autonomy and implementation. Participatory institutions that are less autonomous, where local politicians participate and play an active role, have greater chances of seeing their decisions implemented. But one might wonder what is the point of organizing a PB if the most powerful actors remain the elected representatives? This might strengthen rather than diminish the citizens' cynicism towards politics. On the contrary, more autonomous bodies, where citizens can decide freely, face important problems of implementation, as local politicians are not always ready to apply decisions they might disagree with.

III. Citizens' Agency: Accepting Deprivation and Setting up Counter-Veiling Strategies

The detailed scrutiny of the decision-making processes of these three participatory budget experiences could easily leave an impression of wide power deprivation of the citizens. Far from the incantatory discourses praising "citizens' empowerment" it seems that elected representatives fear that citizens actually "take over the State." As holders of the common good and democratic legitimacy, elected representatives want to keep the supremacy over municipal decision-making processes. This picture remains however incomplete. Far from being completely apathetic, it seems that there is still some room for citizens' agency within participatory governance institutions. First, citizens are both convinced that elected representatives set up participatory bodies "to get votes" and that the "real decisions are taken elsewhere." Despite these radical criticisms of participatory processes, some citizens keep on participating[18], thus granting them a form of support through their involvement.[19] Aware of the difficulties to become effectively empowered, citizens therefore try to set up micro-strategies to increase their potential influence in the municipal decision-making process. They nevertheless play as well an active role in their own deprivation by legitimatizing elected officials domination through discourses on the larger competence and knowledge of the latter.

1. When citizens do not feel competent: Legitimizing dispossession in Morsang-sur-Orge

The symbol of citizens' empowerment in these participatory institutions is the possibility to decide part of the distribution of the municipal budget. It seems however that sometimes citizens do not care so much about this financial aspect, their participation being motivated by other incentives.

[18] Some however decide to exit. Most of the participatory institutions are marked by a rather high turnover rate. The case of a participant in Seville participatory budget, Fausto, with whom I managed to create a good relationship despite he stopped participating in the middle of my fieldwork, is pretty interesting. Disappointed by the limits of the participatory budget he just decided to exit. In an interview he told me pretty straightforwardly: "I thought we would do the revolution and I found myself talking about pavements! This was not possible."[18] One way to get agency back is merely to opt for the exit option, to stop participating.

[19] It can indeed be considered that the mere presence in these local institutions represent in itself a form of support to the citizens participation mechanisms and to the municipality itself. Following Goffman, it can be said that the voluntary participation to an interaction always represents a form of commitment (Goffman, 1967).

Surprisingly, whereas they should be "glad and honoured" to get some power back through such participatory procedures, it seems that citizens do not care so much about the attribution of the neighbourhood portfolio in Morsang-sur-Orge. Very often no proposal at all emanates from the citizens, and it falls to the municipal services – generally the "citizenship" administration, in charge of the process – to make proposals or to push some participants to voice ideas. An excerpt from a neighbourhood council is pretty telling about the lack of commitment of the participants towards innovative public investments through their financial envelope:

> The last issue to be discussed was the attribution of the neighbourhood committee financial envelope for 2006. As no clear proposal or project had been pointed out by the participants, Marie, the head of the "citizenship" municipal service, asked Raphael, a technician of the municipality: "According to you, what would be the more useful investment for the neighbourhood?" Raphael answered that the pavements of two streets were especially damaged, one of them being used a lot by the kids going to the junior high school. Even if Raphael was just giving his opinion, the lack of alternative proposals made his two ideas the alternative for the envelope. Marie said: "It could be an idea for your envelope." It therefore appeared pretty clearly, despite the lack of enthusiasm of the participants, that the envelope would go for the pavements. Raphael asked: "To which street is going your priority? The most used or the most urgent one?" Murielle added: "As apparently you don't have any other project, shall we decide tonight which street we want to make?" Nadine, a regular participant, was the only one to voice her preference: "I would rather go for A. France street, as given the rehabilitation project around the junior high school, the other street will be rehabilitated by the municipality anyway, while A. France street will never be done." Marie added: "As you want, anyway it's you who decide." The participants, as expressed by Nadine here, set up strategies to get as much money and public works they can in there neighbourhoods, by choosing projects that would not be financed by the city otherwise. Marie summed up this laborious discussion: "I restate the idea: You would prefer, if I understood properly, to rehabilitate A. France street, as it will be difficult to convince the thematic workshop [in charge of the urban investment budget of the city and especially of the pavements] that it is a priority street, as it is not used that much." Raphael added: "we can try [the technical services] to put the rest of the money to be able to do the whole street at least." Marie concluded: "Did I understand properly? Does everybody agree? It is what you want?" Nobody answered apart from Nadine who voiced a convinced: "Yes!" It appeared clearly however that there was a lack of imagination and innovation of the participants in terms of attribution of the financial envelope.[20]

Why people care so little about the attribution of the financial envelope, supposed to embody their empowerment? Why no original and innovative policy proposals are voiced by the citizens? Different explanations can be evoked. First, given the lack of competences and autonomy of the French communes, the neighbourhood councils can only "manage scarcity." Citizens can decide about pavements, roads, public parks or street cleaning, but not on important political issues, that could affect their lives more deeply. In this regard they appear closed up at the local level, dealing with local and parochial issues. Then, an alternative explanation is that people who participate do not come to take binding policy decisions, but rather to "create social links", to "know ones' neighbours", "to

[20] Notes of observation. Wallon neighbourhood council, Morsang-sur-Orge, 23.02.2006.

know what's going on in the city", i.e. the most common motives evoked in interviews to justify their participation. Far from my initial expectations, citizens do not participate to take decisions. Citizens did not really ask to become local policy advisors, and most of them just do not participate for that. Often, in the neighbourhood councils' discussions, regular participants evoke the possibility to reform the participatory design, and "to go over the financial logic", that is "closing down the discussions to material and day to day issues." Whereas for the municipality – and the political scientists – the financial aspect of the participatory budget is what makes it an interesting institution, for citizens it is eventually the financial aspect that impedes the participatory process to take off.

Whereas some people – as some members of the municipal majority told me "off records" – feared the unreasonableness of the citizens, their lack of competence and therefore the expression of ambitious and unfinanciable proposals, the precise contrary happened. Citizens hardly managed to make innovative proposals apart from the rehabilitation of roads and pavements, generally close to where they live. In this regard, the large influence of the elected representatives on the decision-making processes of the participatory bodies of Morsang-sur-Orge come both from their fears to see "interested", "egoistic" or parochial decisions taken – as they embody the common good – and from the inability of the citizens to voice innovative local projects or even the absence of any proposal at all. The lack of ambitions of citizens participating in local institutions is often justified by their own lack of competence, especially in comparison with elected officials seen as experts of the territory. Christian for instance, is convinced that the aim of the citizens' participation is not to decide – which falls to competent people able to take technical decisions – but to bring a little "added value", an opinion, coming from practical knowledge: "Personally I couldn't live with a decision that I took and that created problems … Just because I'm not a professional in this area. The municipality has politicians to take decisions, it has technical services, able to give the direction of what has to be decided … Then the neighbourhood can be informed, bring its little added value, to say this or that, but the core shouldn't be debated. It's a matter of security. And we don't have the competence for that.[21]"

Elected representatives, magically invested with democratic legitimacy (Bourdieu 1991), thus appear necessarily competent and knowledgeable to the citizens. Some are nevertheless aware to censure themselves, to limit their own capacities, as highlights Patrick, another participant in Morsang-sur-Orge participatory bodies: "Perhaps we self-censure ourselves. Perhaps we self-limit ourselves. But do we have the formation for that [to decide]? Do we have the competence? We can doubt about it. We don't have the competence, the formation, to go over our little problems, to think about local projects eventually. […] We don't have the will because we don't feel capable to do it … so it does limit, yes, we limit ourselves."[22] Citizens appear from this perspective to be the actors of their own domination,

[21] Interview with Christian L., Morsang-sur-Orge, 17.11.2005.

[22] Patrick M., intervention in the documentary "Participatory Democracy: Utopia or Necessity?", realised by the municipality. Morsang-sur-Orge, January 2006.

by interiorising their own incompetence. Being socialised in an environment where citizens are passive and where delegation of power is the norm, they easily play the role of apathetic and incompetent citizens.[23] In this regard, power and domination do not exist in the air or in the social structure *per se*, they are actualised in the very interactions lived by the actors. The behaviour of the elected representatives in the participatory assemblies, who try to keep the grip on the decision-making process by framing the discussion or convincing the audience through their cultural and discursive skills, is from this perspective performative: convinced that the citizens could be parochial or unreasonable they manage to convince them they are incompetent, unable to decide over important public issues. Power therefore lies in the interactions between elected representatives and the citizens. In return, these unequal relationships have effects on the actors' dispositions. As a participant said once in a "citizens' meeting" in Morsang-sur-Orge: "The problem is that we are not ready in our heads. It's much easier to delegate. We are not used to decide."[24] Sometimes however, in certain specific situations, citizens are able to influence decisions as well and to show a great deal of agency by setting up counter-veiling strategies.

2. Setting up counter-veiling strategies

Citizens active in participatory bodies do not always satisfy themselves with the limited role that is generally devoted to them however. Some of them want to have a bigger say in the decisions and thus set up micro-strategies, using tricks and small windows of opportunities let open by the procedure or the participatory process itself. It might not be enough to control the decision-making process overall, but it still plays a role in counter-balancing the dominant position of the elected representatives and all the structural obstacles citizen participation faces. The example of a participant from Morsang-sur-Orge, Christian, is pretty telling from this perspective. He first participated in reaction to a personal trouble linked with the rehabilitation of his street that had been decided in the neighbourhood council. The rehabilitation project planned to reduce the number of parking lots in the street. Affected by the project as well as the other residents of the street, Christian decided to participate in the neighbourhood council to try to modify or at least improve the project, and to get the rehabilitation of the pavements of the street included in the urban plan. He thus discovered progressively how the participatory process worked in Morsang-sur-Orge and thus how he should act to reach his goals. One of his first reactions, was that "the rules of game were not fair": "They try to give people the maximum opportunities to participate, but they [the elected representatives] make clear from the beginning that there is no money and that anyway the number of parking lots cannot change as it has been decided that cars will park on the road. So in the end there is no discussion. They are

[23] These conclusions are close to those of Nina Eliasoph on the "culture of apathy" existing in the American polity. See Nina Eliasoph (1998) *Avoiding Politics, How Americans produce apathy in everyday life,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[24] "Citizens' meeting", Morsang-sur-Orge, 18.10.2005.

participative as long as citizens make proposals that go in the direction of the municipality, then they will say 'the citizens have decided, bla, bla, bla.' But when you propose something that they don't agree with … I really think that the elected officials are not really sincere, they don't tell us everything.[25]" These impressions were largely drawn from the negative reactions he received at his first participation at a neighbourhood council, where he did not express himself appropriately:

> The main issue on the agenda of the meeting was the evaluation of the new organisation of the traffic near the local school. Every one was giving his/her opinion on the issue at stake, and it was Christian's turn to speak: "Kids security is very important, we all agree on that, but you have to know that this make things complicated for residents on a daily basis. It's not Bayreuth, ok, it's not unliveable, but it's complicated on a daily basis … For instance, I cannot park my car in front of my house anymore, as all the parking lots are taken by parents bringing their kids to school. And the pavements are really in a dire strait … maybe we could also invest in that." Defending openly the interest of a group, the residents of his street affected by the reorganisation of the traffic, he was sanctioned for not having respected the ruling public grammar, which makes of "kids' security" the highest value. Specific or group interests appear too particularistic and therefore antagonistic with the common good at the core of Morsang-sur-Orge public grammar. The remarks of Lucien, a regular participant of the neighbourhood committee were pretty clear from this perspective: "the problem is that now everybody has 2 or 3 cars, and we cannot ask the municipality to build a landing strip for everyone to park in front of his house … I don't target anybody, but …" These arguments were taken up by the local representative participating in the meeting: "At some point we need to decide what we want. Do we want comfort for the residents or security for the kids? I thought we agreed on the idea to give the priority to kids over cars …"[26]

The personal request – even if supposed to embody the interests of the residents of a whole street – was therefore rejected as inappropriate. Kids' security having been qualified since years as a priority by the neighbourhood council and the municipality at large, any argument trying to balance the policies directed towards this goal appeared suspect, biased and self-interested to the regular participants of the participatory institutions. As a newcomer, Christian could probably not know it, especially as his own request appeared absolutely legitimate to him and his neighbours. He thus committed a pretty oblivious grammatical mistake and was sanctioned for that, being ridiculed (the requests was caricatured, qualifying the lack of parking lots as requesting the creation of a "landing strip") by a regular participant reproaching people to give to much important to cars. His first request being rejected within the neighbourhood council he decided to set up an alternative strategy to achieve his goals. He stopped complaining about the rehabilitation of his street in the neighbourhood council and expressed his claims in another arena, the thematic workshop in charge of the urban projects of the city: "At the next meeting [of the neighbourhood council] we won't ask anything about our pavements. […] We are going to try to create as little tensions as possible about this issue in the neighbourhood council, and it might be the best way to achieve it. […] I heard some people want to

[25] Interview with Christian L., Morsang-sur-Orge, 17.11.2005.
[26] Observation notes. Neighbourhood council Langevin, Morsang-sur-Orge, 04.11.2005.

invest the neighbourhood portfolio in the embellishment of the neighbourhood … fair enough. Putting flowers, repainting, this is anyway pretty interesting. […] This idea [of the embellishment of the neighbourhood] is useful for me … if I want to make the municipality responsible beside the neighbourhood portfolio, I need to emphasize the need to use the portfolio differently. By not asking it, it is probably the best way to get it. [Smiling] The best way to get something is seldom a straight line …" Christian therefore participated in the thematic workshops devoted to urban projects, where he presented his arguments in a different way than at the neighbourhood council, and got much better results:

> "I speak in the name of the residents of Texel street, where the pavement is really in a bad shape. I have to tell you that people in the street don't understand, as it is really a strategic street … a lot of kids going to the school take it … so if we say that kids' security is the priority it would appear normal to rehabilitate it. And then you have a lot of public services around: the post office, the kindergarten, the House of Childhood, etc. These pavements are really used a lot. So we don't understand … pavements of desert streets are rehabilitated, and this one that appears so evident is not!" The town councillor in charge of urbanism issues answered him immediately: "Yes, it's true. We could put the pavement of this street on the list of priorities for 2006. We will have to discuss it collectively with the criteria and stuff, *but all this seems valid*. [27]"

This excerpt is paradigmatic of the importance of the form and modality of speech much more than its actual content, which appears rather trivial. The claim – rejected in the first meeting – was reframed for the second one integrating the ruling grammatical norms of the assembly. Christian – in this second excerpt – increased immediately the generality of his discourse, invoking a highly legitimizing generalised other in Morsang-sur-Orge public meetings: « the kids. » Christian demodalised his speech, speaking more as a "we" than as an "I", he invoked the risk created by the existent situation and the frequentation of the pavement to justify his proposal. Expressing himself in a proper way, following the grammatical rules of the assembly, his argument was accepted ("all this seems valid") and the proposal integrated in the list of the potential investments of the 2006 budget, while it had been merely rejected at the first session. Aware of the influence of the elected representatives on the decision-making process, Christian had to frame his claim in concordance with the municipality goals, i.e. the promotion of non-motorised transportation (hence the pavements for pedestrians) and the security of the kids (hence the quality of the pavements to avoid that kids going to school walk on the road). While Christian had, at first, presented his claim as a resident-interested one, he then justified it using a common good frame fitting the municipality political orientations. By playing on a two-layered participatory process, Christian was able to both promote his claim while not ruining his reputation in the neighbourhood, as he was then able to praise the investment in the neighbourhood's

[27] Observation notes. Meeting of the workshop "pedestrians, bikes, cars", Morsang-sur-Orge, 12.12.2005.

embellishment. His strategy also allowed increasing the amount of funds devoted to the neighbourhood as a whole.

This is indeed a rather common strategy from the participants in the cases I studied to try to maximize the funds attributed to their neighbourhood. In general, proposals that imply little investments or funds are simply put on the side, to choose on the contrary more expensive and ambitious proposals. In Rome for instance, in the framework of the 2006 participatory budget cycle, an inter-neighbourhood assembly was created, aimed at producing proposals for the Municipio as a whole, to be then directly translated into the Municipio budget. The participants had therefore to agree through discussion on which proposal to choose. I followed the discussions of the working group dealing with cultural policies and, until the last moment, participants hesitated between the creation of a new public library in the Municipio and the organisation of a big event to discover the Municipio archaeological patrimony. The dilemma was solved when one of the participants voiced a decisive argument: "I think we should go for the library, simply because it implies more money. What we're doing is a participatory *budget* [he insisted on this word], so it has to be hard investments, not just a single event. It has to be important choices that will remain over time. And we have to try to get as much money as possible from the Municipio." The argument about the maximisation of funds to be decided by the citizens appeared decisive, as it convinced the other participants, who agreed on the library project. Citizens therefore try to maximize the resources attributed to them. They elaborate strategies to counter the will of some elected representatives to restrict their autonomy and to circumscribe their choices to insignificant details. In this regard, some citizens thus try to fulfil the potential of participatory democracy.

The counter-veiling strategies set up by lay citizens are not only aimed at countering the power of the elected representatives, but also to overcome the limited competence or sometimes political will of the local government. Often, in the participatory budget assemblies, citizens tried to push for the realization of projects that were outside the competences of the Municipio but mattered a lot to them. In the first year, in Rome, in Garbatella assembly, the participants voted for the realisation of an "electromagnetic monitoring" of the neighbourhood, to evaluate how much their neighbourhood was suffering from a sanitary point of view of the electromagnetic emissions coming from antennas, satellites, cell phones, etc. present on the territory.[28] Citizens' mobilisation through the participatory budget can therefore allow improving the precaution principle by pushing local administrations to realise controls and monitoring that were in this case only optional from a legal perspective.[29] Similar examples could be given in the cases of Morsang-sur-Orge or Seville, of citizens' mobilisation on the installation in the city of 3rd generation cell phones antennas or the rehabilitation of an old electric plant. Health issues, the protection of the environment or the precaution principle, even if not under

[28] The monitoring was about to be realised at the beginning of April 2006.

[29] Law of the 22.02. n. 36-Legge quadro sulla protezione dalle esposizioni a campi elettrici, magnetici ed elettromagnetici (G.U., parte I, n. 55, del 7 marzo 2001), article 8-6.

the direct responsibility of local government in the three studied cases, are important issues for the citizens who organize themselves through the participatory budgets to overcome their lack of power and affect decisions or at least realize control and monitoring campaigns. PB assemblies can sometimes function as local mobilization forums, allowing anonymous citizens to act collectively for a political cause.

Citizens therefore do not appear completely apathetic and dominated in participatory governance institutions. If they do not care so much about influencing local decisions, it might simply be that they do not consider them as important issues. When on the contrary they point out potential sanitary or environmental risks they can mobilise through the participatory institutions to get their say and at least reach a certain control over decisions that are not in the local government competences. When they think it is worth, citizens can set up micro counter-veiling strategies, which might not always be successful however. These micro-strategies can be understood as forms of what Michel de Certeau calls "poaching" ["*braconnage*"]. In his epistemological enterprise, Certeau tries to assess that parallel to the disciplinary techniques and procedures, social sciences should as well focus on the practical ways people try to resist to them. Through their daily practices and habits, lay people divert processes of domination and manage to create havens of rest and tranquillity:

> "S'il est vrai que partout s'étend et se précise le quadrillage de la 'surveillance', il est d'autant plus urgent de déceler comment une société entière ne s'y réduit pas ; quelles procédures populaires (elles aussi 'minuscules' et quotidiennes) jouent avec les mécanismes de la discipline et ne s'y conforment que pour les tourner ; enfin quelles 'manières de faire' forment la contrepartie, du côté des consommateurs (ou 'dominés' ?), des procédés muets qui organisent la mise en ordre sociopolitique.[30]"

Tactics are the strategies and arts of the underdogs, who always have to use ruse and 'coups', "poaching" in Certeau's jargon, to face their lack of power and organization. Embedded in daily practices, this un-conscious knowledge forms a practical sense or a popular ratio, mobilized in micro-processes of resistance, worth scrutinizing in political arenas. James Scott (1990) shows for instance how citizens, in peasant societies, well aware of the rules of the game and of their own domination, used insidious resistance strategies to divert the rules and recall themselves their rejection of them. He thus quotes an Ethiopian proverb at the beginning of his book: "when the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts."

Going back to PBs, it has been assessed that citizens set up such micro-strategies of resistance to increase their overall power over the decision-making processes. Those weapons of the weak might not be sufficient to counter the powerful influence of local politicians and above all structural forces or global actors. They nevertheless balance – at the margin – a domination that is not passively accepted by the actors.

[30] Michel de Certeau (1980) *L'invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire,* Paris: Folio, p. XL.

Conclusion: PB complex decision-making processes

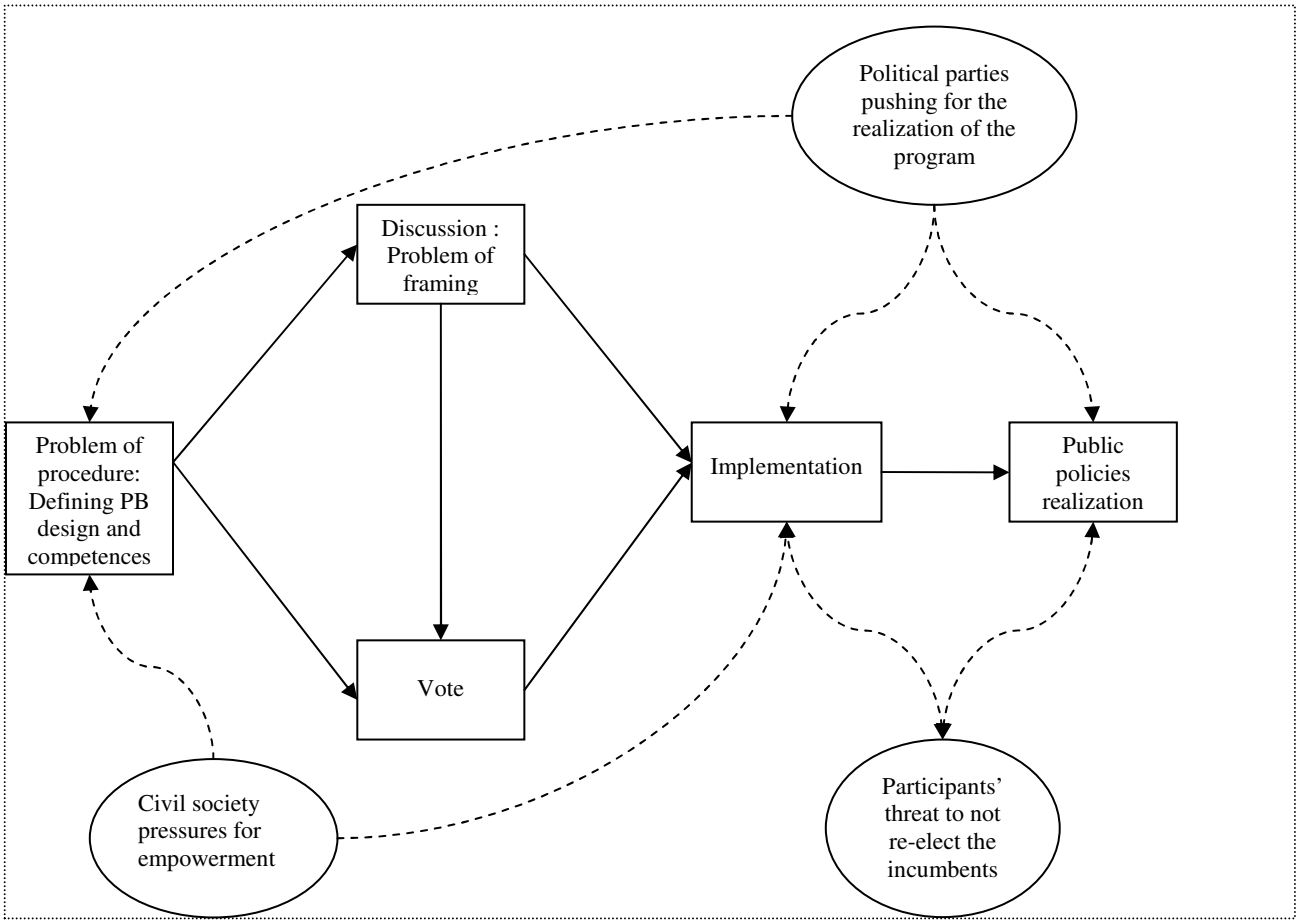
As shown in fig.1, PB decision-making processes are complex, as they involve a multiplicity of actors, with a broad range of conflicting interests. Each stage of the decision-making process represents a challenge, a negotiation of the order between elected officials, municipal experts, social movements' organizations, association and lay citizens. As we shown in this paper however, the power of elected officials remains overwhelming at all the stages of the process. The institutional design in the first place, by defining the competences and attributions of participatory institutions, plays a decisive role from this perspective. It is decided quasi-unilaterally by elected representatives, in their will to "give power back to citizens." Most of the time social or educational services remain therefore outside the realm of PB decision-making power, citizens having mostly to discuss hard investments plans mostly in direct link with urban planning and management. If elected officials keep the decisive voice in designing participatory institutions, they nevertheless have to endure and take into account contradictory claims coming from both civil society and political parties. On the one hand, civil society organizations press local governments to create participatory institutions as empowered as possible. They might therefore be included in the design of the process as in the Sevillan case. On the other, the political parties part of the municipal majority fear that the creation of participatory bodies will restrain their room of manoeuvre and their ability to implement the program they have been elected for (this type of discourses were present in all cases). The result of this negotiation process is the PB procedural design.

The second step in this complex decision-making process is the actual collective choice procedures of the PB institutions. As we saw, some are more deliberative (Morsang-sur-Orge case), decisions being taken essentially by consensus, others more aggregative, voting being the final step of the process (Rome and even more Sevilla cases). We emphasized the problems linked to consensual decision-making processes, especially when public officials play an active role in them. Given the asymmetries in terms of linguistic and political resources between the actors, discussion could sometimes be interpreted as forms of manipulation (See Bobbio, 2006). Aware of these risks, Roman and Sevillan city representatives do not participate in the PB public discussions, leaving therefore a greater autonomy to the participatory bodies. The presence or absence of local politicians in the PB institutions is not however the mere result of their political will, but more broadly of the political culture in which the institutions are embedded. In France, a country marked a long history of centralization and a very general and universal definition of the common good – in terms of "general interest" – public officials are supposed to embody the general interest and to limit the risks of an overt parochialism. Italy and Spain, less afraid of the "corporatism" of the local level greater autonomy and trust are granted to the participatory institutions and therefore the citizens.

The presence or absence of elected officials in the PB assemblies has a decisive impact at the next stage of the process, when it comes to implementing PB decisions. Our research illustrates a dilemma between autonomy and power at the heart of citizens' involvement in public decision-making. It seems that the highest the autonomy the lower the impact on public policies: when highly autonomy like in Rome Municipio XI or Sevilla, elected officials select the projects they want to realize, reject others, and therefore keep the last word on public decisions. They do so in taking into account the pressures coming from civil society, lay citizens and political parties. On the contrary, when little autonomous, like in Morsang-sur-Orge, PB decisions seem to translate into public decision almost automatically into public investments – elected officials respecting decisions taken collectively as they had a decisive influence on them.

In a word, even if different patters have been distinguished, it seems that the overall picture remains that of the centrality of public officials, and political will at all stages of the process. One of the clearest sign of this phenomenon is the absence of "reorientation of the priorities" effects, public policies remaining largely identical, as the final decision-makers did not change. Far from the initial intentions to give power back to citizens, it seems that local politicians fear to lose their power and remain convinced of the limited competences of the lay citizens. The introduction of PB increases the complexity of local governments' decision-making processes, making it probably more democratic but also less transparent, at odds with one of its first objective.

Figure 1. Participatory budgets decision-making Process



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