Brief Description

Catalan for "we decide", *Decidim* is Barcelona's first digital democracy tool, where citizens of Barcelona can participate in municipality budgeting. 30 million euros of the municipal budget will be subject to deliberation, with the funds being divided between 10 Barcelona districts.

Problems and Purpose

Referred to as a "technopolitical project" [1], *Decidim* is Barcelona's first digital democracy tool aimed to enhance citizen participation and democratic legitimacy. The participatory budgeting (PB) process in Barcelona started in 2020 and is ongoing until 2023, hosted on *Decidim*'s online platform. *Decidim* has its origins in a wider movement aimed to increase political representation and transparency, especially after the election of Ada Colao as city mayor in 2015. Thereafter, there was an initiative in Barcelona's municipal government to improve democratic legitimacy by enhancing the power of technology. Colao is an activist and member of the platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Catalan for Barcelona in Common), aimed to defend social justice and promote anti-corruption measures, particularly in the context and aftermath of the 2008 Eurocrisis [2,3]. With an emphasis on reforming the city's digital and data drive, in addition to creating a positive relationship between the collection of data collection and personal privacy [4], *Decidim* is a manifestation of Colau's initiative to create a positive digital tool enhancing deliberative democracy.

Background History and Context

The Barcelona PB process via an online platform is particularly significant for two reasons. Firstly, Barcelona has been referred to as a "magnet for technology" [5]: standing as the Mobile World Capital until 2023, and the 2014 European Capital of Innovation. Moreover, it has been coined as ideal for start-ups, hosting high tech companies and technology parks. Secondly, the city's Democratic Innovation (DI) strategy is emerging, integrating the two areas of democracy and technology. Whilst PB and e-democracy innovations were historically rarely combined due to PB practitioners favouring the fostering of community building through face-to-face deliberation, e-democracy has emerged partly due to a governance driven approach since the 1990's, in addition to top-down funding opportunities for European participatory processes [6]. Internationally, e-democracy has been adopted by New Zealand, through their Ministry of Justice Consultation Hub, and in France, through the *Parliament et Citoyens* platform [7]. These platforms allow citizens to discuss national interest matters and pose legislative reforms. On the local level, Madrid and Barcelona have implemented e-democracy, and another example is Better Reykjavik.

The launch of Barcelona's participatory democratic platform, *Decidim,* follows Madrid's online participatory platform, *Decide Madrid* (Madrid Decides), a winner of the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award [8]. Both platforms upon their initial development shared the same open code software CONSUL, developed by the City Council of Madrid to support open government and e-democracy. *Decidim*, however, adapted the software to cater to "new needs" [9]. After Barcelona's local elections in May 2015, which saw the removal of a centre-right nationalist party to a leftist grassroots movement, a rewriting of the municipal strategic plan was prompted, and *Decidim Barcelona* was launched. 25,000 signed up in under two months, with 10,860 proposals and 410 meetings. *Decidim* is a development of *Decidim Barcelona,* including a rewrite of the software based on Ruby On Rails technology, whereby any group or organisation can use it without technical requirements. This techno-political initiative follows a movement of increased citizen engagement and representation after the 2007/8 Eurozone economic crisis, particularly after the nation-wide

Indignados 15M movement, which notably led to demonstrations in the largest cities in Spain with the slogans "No nos representan" or, "They do not represent us" [10]. Political movements aimed at increasing social justice, political representation and accountability were witnessed in Spain thereafter, and increasing sentiment for independence in Catalonia, particularly, was present because of a perception of unfair treatment by the Spanish state in fiscal and political terms, especially in the context of the economic crisis [11]. Meanwhile, political movements such as *Podemos* on the national level, and *Barcelona en Comú*, on the local level in Catalonia, were built upon motifs of increased social justice, anti-corruption, and transparency, both with strong links to *Indignados.* This grassroots movement has been referred to as having a "hacker and technopolitics ethos" [12] merging democratic innovation and technology.

However, participatory budgeting is not a new phenomenon in the Spanish context. 2001 saw the first project of PB piloted, and until 2010 Spain had the highest rate of growth of PB in Europe. Political upheavals and changing ideologies resulted in a halt to the development of PB, until 2015, where another shift was witnessed, notably to the left, and PB was thereafter embraced [13]. Nevertheless, the context of PB in Madrid and Barcelona, and the merging of democratic innovation and technology with themes of social justice and transparency, is significant.

There are a number of processes that the site encourages, including elections, strategic planning, collaborative writing of a regulation or norm, design of urban space, and productions of policy plans [14] . Simultaneously, an effort to technologically innovate and legitimise the participatory process is developing, with an overall goal of citizen control over technology. The software is written in open code for transparency, to increase traceable decision-making and monitoring of proposals [15]. Decidim translates to 'We decide', in Catalan, highlighting the emphasis on public control over political decisions, and there are several processes that *Decidim.barcelona* hosts.

Participatory budgeting is one of the key initiatives, and was introduced in 2020. The case is ongoing, and follows a wider initiative of increased citizen engagement and representation.

Organising, Supporting, Funding

Decidim.barcelona was developed with a number of private and public funders, including the Open University of Catalonia, and Barcelona-based developers Codegram and aLabs [16]. It has also received funding from the European Regional Development Fund. The coding software used is Ruby On Rails, which allows any individual, group or organisation to access the coding, which is open-source and is available on GitHub under an AGPL 3.0 License. *Decidim* is being used not only in multiple municipalities in Spain, but also internationally in countries such as Mexico, Italy, and France [17].

On the *Decidim.barcelona* online platform, there are four key participatory *spaces:* processes; assemblies; consultations; and initiatives. Processes are a space where one can create, activate and deactivate different participation tools, e.g. hosting an election process or set up PB. Assemblies offer a user the chance to define groups/collectives that meet intermittently, listing meetings and locations. Consultations see the organization of referendums and discussion and debate on a given topic and subsequent voting system. Initiatives allow a user to launch citizen proposals in a collaborative way by gaining support or collecting results of discussions or debates [18]. The *components* section allows different user actions e.g. proposals, voting, support, amendments, results, accountability, surveys, and sortition. Participants can navigate, create, vote, support, sign, comments, endorse, follow, sign up, and share specific proposals or content. Participants can register either as an individual or a collective, or alternatively as a user group. The architecture for *Decidim* is described as "modular, scalable, easy to configure, and integrated with other tools or apps" [19].

Districte	Import		Districte	Import
Ciutat Vella	3,4 M €		Gràcia	2,4 M €
Eixample	3 M €		Horta-Guinardó	3,2 M €
Sants-Montjuïc	3,6 M €		Nou Barris	3,6 M €
Les Corts	2 M €		Sant Andreu	3 M €
Sarrià-Sant Gervasi	2,2 M €		Sant Martí	3,6 M €

Figure 1: Allocations of funds per district. (decidim.org)

For the PB process, 30 million euros was divided between ten districts, as shown in Figure 1.

Participant Selection

The initial stage of the 2020-2023 participatory budgeting is open to any person whether or not they reside in Barcelona. This is for proposals put forward for investment in relation to renovation, construction of small facilities, urban renewal, infrastructure, and technological applications/infrastructure. The second stage requires users to be over 14 and officially residing in the city. They can choose which projects are a priority, and can choose between two and ten projects on the *Decidim.barcelona* platform. Moreover, in order to gain investment from a proposal, residents must meet 5 the requirements of five key areas:

1. Rehabilitation, refurbishment, extension, improvement or technological endowment of public facilities

2. Small equipment construction

3. Development and improvement of public spaces

4. Infrastructures and street furniture

5. Technological applications or infrastructures. [20]

Ultimately, the first two phase result in thirty projects being staged for each district. The third stage sees the projects being defined, and the final voting stage sees those over 14 who officially live in the city being able to access the list of projects which could be developed in each district between 2020-2023.

Methods and Tools Used

Participatory Budgeting (PB) was the method used for this deliberative democratic exercise. PB was first trialled in Porto Alegre, Brazil, whereby local citizens were given the option to decide how their local budget was spent. PB in Spain has a rich history with different eras: Ganuza and Francés (2018) state how the changing nature of PB Spain coincided with the varying political landscape, decided by municipal elections. Moreover, the electoral map in Spain did not encourage major changes over time. The majority of PB schemes were initiated by progressive local governments, nevertheless Conservative governments had also initiated PB in the mid 2000's in Málaga, Castellón, and Logroño. Historically, PB schemes in Spain were only present in municipalities, but never in large cities. This changed, however, during 2015-2019, whereby for the first time PB appeared in large cities such as Madrid, Valencia, Zaragoza and Barcelona, the four largest cities in Spain. This change has been explained by the increasing use of technology over the course of the new millennium [13].

The combination of technology and PB on sites such as *Decidim*, is a relatively new phenomenon. PB in Barcelona therefore aims to facilitate the use of technology to allocate municipal budgets to areas prioritised by local citizens. PB in Barcelona, as set out by the Barcelona municipal government, is constructed as a wider strategy of Democratic Innovation (DI). There are six key goals of the DI strategy:

1. Designing and developing digital environments for PB

2. Leading DI on a regional and international scale

3. Standardising and promoting participatory research and development processes

4. Researching changes that ICT created in areas of participatory democracy

5. Proving open access to the participatory democratic processes

6. Developing technologies for communication, collaboration and internal participation in the City Council. [21]

What Went On: Deliberation, Decisions, and Public Interaction

The PB process followed a timeline and structure as follows:

February 3- 22 May 2020: Discussion and project presentation phase.

This phase saw the discussion and collections of projects, where participants could present investment projects through face-to-face spaces, including sectorial or territorial meetings, mobile participation points in public space, and through *Decidim*'s online platform. Each person could submit a maximum of three investment projects.

May 25 2020 - March 18 2021 (Interrupted due to the pandemic): Municipal technical assessment phase of projects

This phase saw previous projects submitted being subject to technical assessment, to ensure they meet requirements and were technically feasible. In order to gain investment from a proposal, residents had to meet 5 the requirements of five key areas:

1. Rehabilitation, refurbishment, extension, improvement or technological endowment of public facilities

2. Small equipment construction

3. Development and improvement of public spaces

4. Infrastructures and street furniture

5. Technological applications or infrastructures. [22]

In addition, proposals must:

• Be understandable and technically feasible

• Be economically quantifiable and meet economic thresholds

• Respect existing legal framework

• Be within the scope of municipal action

• Be of general interest and be linked to at least one axis of the Barcelona PAM (Plan de Action Municipal/Municipal Action Plan)

• Be committed to having a scope of influence in a district

• Be a finalist project beginning its execution in the current mandate

• Be a sustainable project environmentally

• Exist within the framework of current policies, programs, plans, approved urban projects or agreements signed by Barcelona City Council

• Exist within individual and collective rights central to democratic values and human rights

• Not link or condition their execution to a specific provider. [23]

*March 22- March 25 202*1: *Phase of support or prioritisation of projects by citizens so that they can move to the concretion and voting stage*

Once technical requirements were passed, viable projects were able to receive "supports" from neighbours. Providing one obtained a user account on *Decidim.barcelona*, is 14 years or over and registered in Barcelona, one could support a minimum of 2 projects and a maximum of 10 without territorial limitation. The 20 projects in each district that garnered the most supports, (once the territorial distribution criteria has been applied, ensuring balance between districts), proceeded to the final phases.

April 6 - May 7 2021: Project completion/concretion phase between citizens and municipal staff

Individualised meetings were held in this period to specify the investment projects, in addition to the projects being worked on by citizens and the municipal staff within the scope of the project. This phase aimed to specify in detail the project development and cost, whilst guaranteeing the person/entity presenting the project could work with the municipal professionals to develop the project. Technical visions were also shared with the public, with detailed information of each project resulting from this phase.

June 10 - June 20 2021: Final voting phase of the projects by citizens

In this phase, citizens could choose the projects that will be executed in each district. Providing one met the aforementioned criteria, participants could vote for projects in a maximum of 2 districts of the city, one where they are registered and one of their choice.

June - July 2021: Information and communication phase of the projects to be executed

Results of the participatory process are reported in this phase. This "information task" is carried out

through the spaces and participation bodies of the city considered appropriate in addition to

Decidim online.

September 2021: Project monitoring and execution phase

This phase sees the developments of the commitments established during the process. The Impulse

Committee, with one per district, are in charge of monitoring the execution [24].

Influence, Outcomes and Effects

As the case is ongoing and has been disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic, information regarding

budgets and schedules has been subject to change. For example, the initial budget of 75 million

euros was reduced to 30 million, and as the process was delayed, the initiative of the projects will

focus only on the period 2022-2023. Councillor for Citizens Rights and Participation, Marc Serra,

stated that the pandemic caused budgetary adjustments, but insisted that those projects with

significant support that do not win would not be ignored, and the municipal government would take

into account these initiatives and look into other ways of potentially financing them [25].

The latest update given by the Barcelona municipal government in April 2021, stated that of the 822

proposals which reached the prioritisation phase, 204 were successful. The next phase in June will

see the final voting take place, and will occur both online on *Decidim*, with an additional two face-

to-face support points per district. The types of project that attracted the most support were school

facilities and public space: of the 47 833 "supports" by citizens in the prioritisation phase, a quarter

of the proposals, equating to 50 projects, were directly related to investments in school equipments

and environments, followed by physical development of streets (37 projects), support to projects for

green spaces (24 projects), mobility and cycling networks (21 projects), children's place spaces (14

projects), and improvement of public space (13 projects). Barcelona's local government

additionally stated that the Sants-Montjüic neighbourhood was the most mobilised, resulting in 10

004 supports. This was followed by L'Eixample with 8299 supports, and Sant Martí with 7872

supports. Moreover, since the PB process began in 2020, 44000 more people signed up, to a total of

80 500 [26].

Analysis and Lessons Learned

As the current PB case is ongoing, the lessons learned will develop after some time. Nevertheless,

this particular combination of technology and deliberative democracy aims to foster wider DI goals.

In order to analyse this PB case, the DI framework laid out by Smith (2013) is applicable, whereby

an institution is designed to deepen citizen participation in political decision making [27]. DI is two-

fold in its approach, firstly engaging citizens rather than stakeholders or corporations. Secondly, it

builds on the institutionalisation of participation e.g. "democratic devices that provides citizens with

a formal role in policy, legislative or constitutional decision making" (Smith 2013, p.2). Moreover,

horizontal interactions aim to encourage a pluralism of perspectives, and benefit considered

judgment. Thus the horizontal aspect of *Decidim* due to its inherently interactive nature, is

beneficial for the goals of DI. Moreover, the aspect of horizontal engagement is particularly

appropriate, given how interactivity is increased through this manifestation of e-democracy.

In addition, the definition of PB provided by Trechsel *et.al.* (2003) coincides with *Decidim'*s PB,

whereby online communication *enables* citizens to hold those with power to account for their

actions in the public realm. Techniques could include: increasing transparency of political

processes; enhancing involvement of citizens; and improving the quality of opinion formed by

opening new spaces of deliberation [28]. Moreover, the *Decidim* PB case encourages Mouffe's

(1999) *antagonistic pluralism*, whereby opposing views are encouraged through public deliberation [29]. In this sense, opposition is encouraged and expressed through an institution. However, a digital divide between Barcelona's districts has also been reported [5], resulting in unequal internet access and usage. This echoes the definition coined by Peña-Lopez (2011) of a *digerati* and *goverati*, whereby the elite section of society benefits from the technological innovations due to its privileged position in access to online participation. Moreover, tensions between marginalized and emancipated groups could translate into "clusters" of participation, whereby societal power structures are translated into a "network of networks" [30]. Moreover, the PB process in Barcelona has been criticised due to encouraging projects and neighbourhoods to compete with each other [31]. This echoes Loader & Mercea (2011) in their analysis of e-democracy, stating how social media amplifies already existing power relations, rather than changing the nature of democracy itself [32]. Whilst their analysis was limited to social media rather than e-democracy specifically, their argument that the outcomes of the changing relationship between democracy/social media are unknown, is applicable, given that the e-democracy is a relatively recent phenomenon, particularly in the Barcelona case. Nevertheless, it is also plausible that even if the process does encourage neighbourhoods to compete with each other, a form of Mouffe's antagonistic pluralism is achieved. This is because it encourages a diversity of proposals and thus perspectives, especially given that participants can vote out of their own districts.

Moreover, *Decidim* aims to counter issues of unequal power structures manifesting through access to the internet by hosting face-to-face sessions in addition to online participation, and it has been argued that the digital divide, whilst evident in society, was not translated into *Decidim's* participation or final outcomes of 2016 proposals and subsequent actions. However, data would need to be collected of the current PB case in order to make a more cohesive analysis. It is noteworthy, however, that the majority of deliberation *is* occurring online, and this could potentially be problematic, given findings by Baek *et.al. (*2011) that online deliberation over-represents young,

male, and white users, in addition to generating negative emotions and being less likely to result in consensus [33]. However, the *n* sample in this study was small (105), and conducted nationally the United States. Thus it would be interesting to conduct a similar local study in the Barcelona case.

Finally, the "rank and select" function on *Decidim*'s PB process has been criticised, whereby the council sets a budget, and proposals are ordered in ranking. Optional selection starts at the top, and ends when the budget is not enough to cover the next ranked proposal. If there is a generous budget, this is not problematic, however on a lesser budget, top-ranked proposals are costly and would negatively effect the proposals ranked underneath them [7]. This criticism was voiced in 2019, however, before the current PB process, thus when the process is finished another analysis should be conducted to address these issues if they are still ongoing.

Ultimately, the main positive takeaway of *Decidim*'s PB process is one of horizontal interactivity. It illustrates an interesting overall development of PB, from "humble beginnings" in Porto Alegre, Brazil [34], to other South American states with limited internet access, whereby the consensus that face-to-face deliberation was preferred over remote technological ones was developed. Moreover, technological tools traditionally had low degrees of interactivity and required heavy financial investment for little return [6]. In contrast, the current development of online participations tools such as *Decidim* are increasing horizontal engagement which is a fundamental tenet of DI. Perhaps the most illustrative evidence of *Decidim*'s success is the *spread* of the platform: it is used worldwide in 41 cities, 20 regions, and 24 organisations. It is increasingly evident, therefore, that the embrace of e-democracy and techno politics is not confined to the realms of Spain's localities.

Word Count: 3484

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